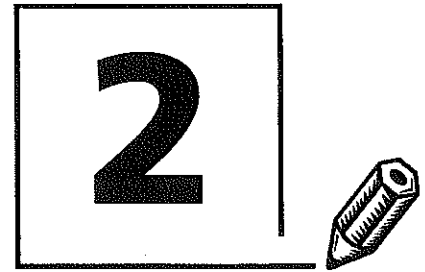


# Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Ann Fullerton



**A**dolescence is a period in which we separate from childhood attachments and roles and acquire adult ones instead (Blos, 1979). The upheavals and intensity of these years are testimony to how difficult this transition is for all of us. During the teen years we lose our childhood view of our parents as all-nurturing or all-powerful protectors. The loss of this view leaves a void, and adolescents can feel stranded and defenseless until they form their own adult identities. As a result, teenagers can experience intense vulnerability, isolation, and loss (Wexler, 1991). In response, teens often develop an intense attachment to their peer group. They also begin the work of building a new self-identity and in the process become very self-focused for a period of time. Lastly, teens begin to find their sense of direction for adult life, trying on various adult roles and worldviews (Ingersoll, 1989).

This rocky road is the *normal* course of adolescence, shared by higher functioning students with autism and their peers alike. In this chapter firsthand accounts and insights from parents and teachers are used to explore two aspects of adolescence: peer relationships and the development of a new self-awareness and self-identity. The goal of this chapter is to reflect on what young persons with autism *and their peers* are experiencing.

## PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Peer relationships reach their height of importance during early and middle adolescence.

Although adults sometimes view teens' intense ties to their peer group as negative, the peer group serves an important role in the transition to adult social roles. It provides a protective setting in which to establish independence from parents and begin to formulate one's own values (Johnson, 1981). In time, however, the teen establishes independence from the peer group as well, as early love relationships are formed. These set the stage for later intimate and adult relationships (Selman, 1980). It is in the midst of these new peer relationships and social interactions that teens develop new levels of social knowledge, perspective taking, social awareness, and social competence.

One's ability to see another person's perspective is a socio-cognitive ability that develops over time. Young children are not aware that others have perspectives and thoughts that are different from their own. In the early elementary years, children are able to understand that others view a physical object differently, but they have little awareness that others also view situations and experiences differently.

Later, during older childhood and early adolescence, one gradually realizes that others *do* have their own thoughts and feelings. At first, however, one assumes that the feelings and values of others are the same as one's own. This perception is the basis for teens' certainty that any doubts or criticisms they have about themselves are shared by an invisible audience of others. Particular activities or possessions become all-important to the teen at this stage

because "everybody's doing it" or "everybody has one" (Elkind, 1978).

In older childhood one also begins to think of one's relationships with friends as extending beyond immediate needs, as valuable for the sake of the relationship itself. Friendship behavior becomes reciprocal; friends take turns, they make deals, they depend on a sense of fair play, and they can see the friendship extending into the future (Selman, 1980).

Then, in middle and late adolescence, reciprocity evolves into mutual collaboration (Selman, 1980). Older teens are able to reconcile their needs and the needs of others. The adolescents recognize not only that they have multiple emotions, but also that others also have multiple emotions and that those emotions may differ from their own. This new insight is often learned in the context of a friendship (Selman, 1980).

Along with the experiences and insights gained through peers, by young adulthood the individual has also experienced a variety of other social contexts with adults (e.g., work). Thus, the young adult becomes increasingly aware of the complex nature of social interactions and social roles (Selman, 1980).

By young adulthood our social competence, or ability to analyze and respond to complex social settings, has matured to an amazing level (Eisenberg & Harris, 1984). There are several social cognitive skills that people possess and use in social situations:

First, the individual's social competence is dependent upon the ability to decode the setting. That is, the individual must be able to accurately identify the critical cues in a social setting. Second, the individual must decide which, from among many alternative behaviors, is the most effective and appropriate response. Third, the individual must translate that decision into an actual, smooth behavior. At the same time, the individual receives subtle feedback from others in the social setting to indicate how adequate or appropriate their response was. Lastly, the individual must be able to recognize and interpret this feedback correctly and then know how to adjust their behavior in response to the

feedback. . . . (Dodge et al., 1986, quoted in Ingersoll, 1989, p. 245)

## STUDENTS WITH AUTISM'S EXPERIENCES WITH PEERS

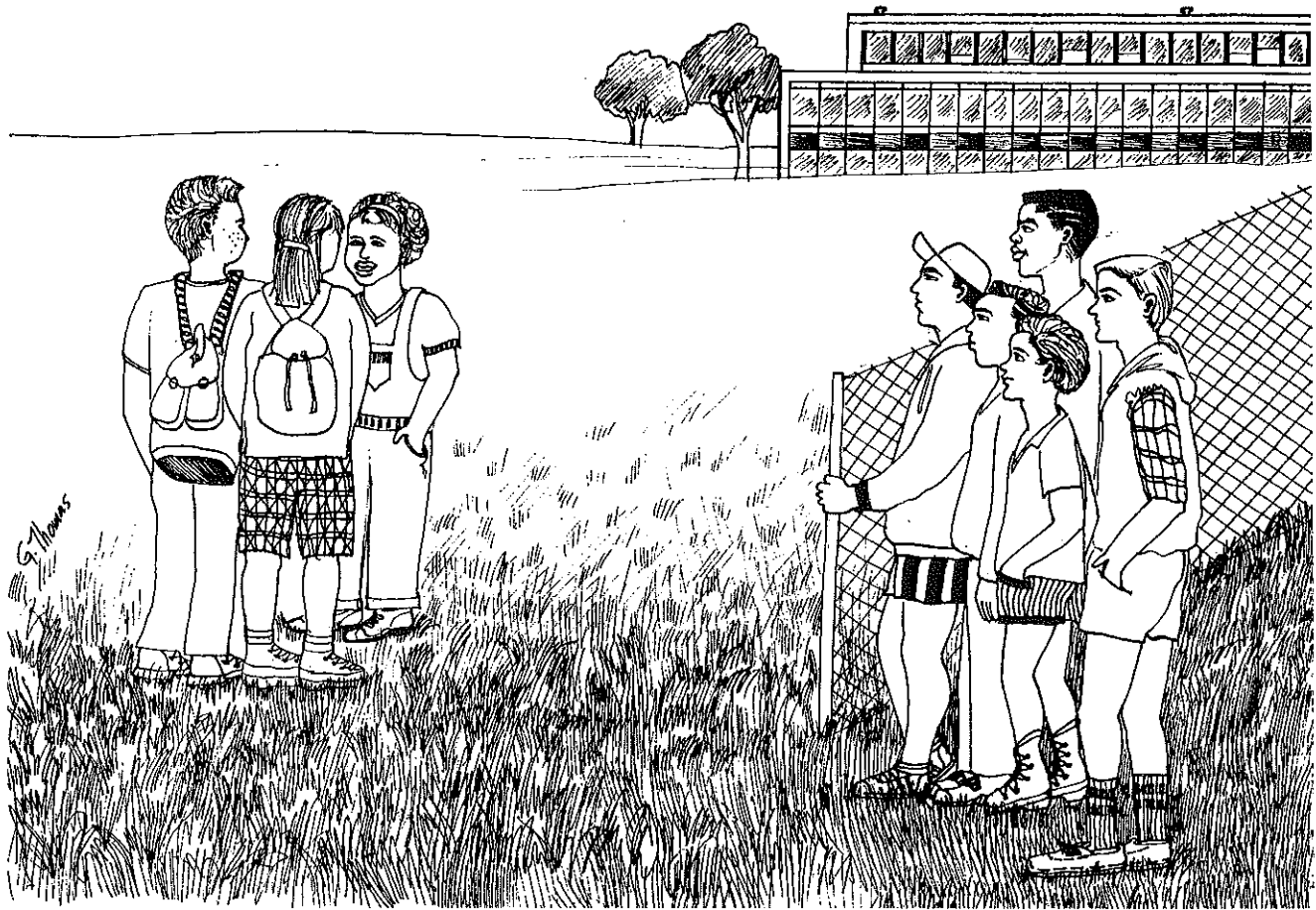
It is important to fully appreciate the importance of peer relationships and the social maturation that occurs during adolescence because it can help us understand

- what students with autism's peers are experiencing.
- what students with autism are experiencing.
- what students with autism are trying to understand and become a part of.
- why students with autism may experience an increasing gap between themselves and their peers during the adolescent years.

Within the new friendships and peer groups of the teen years, the format and context for social interaction change. The format for social interaction includes the words, gestures, and body language of social interchange. The context for social interaction is what people are "doing" together or the hidden rules that govern a social setting.

In late childhood the format and context for social interaction are fairly clear and concrete. Kids play games, engage in activities, "do stuff" together. But in adolescence the format and context for social interaction becomes much more vague and abstract (Figure 2.1). Teens spend more time sitting or standing around and talking, "hanging out," watching "what's happening." When these unspoken rules for how to interact become more subtle and unobservable, the teen with autism may have a difficult time knowing that the rules have changed and understanding the new rules.

In addition, the language used in conversation among teenagers becomes more sophisticated. The use of slang increases, and students start to understand and use sarcasm and cynicism. Teenagers with autism may miscommunicate with their peers because they take the phrases



**FIGURE 2.1.** During adolescence the context of social interaction changes.

they hear their peers use and try to use them literally or in the wrong context. This can lead to being teased and rejected.

Teenage peer groups are by nature clannish. Individual teens are often insecure about their acceptance within the group and worried that they are not just like their peers and thus won't "belong." At the same time, teens' cognitive and language abilities are rapidly developing and they seek opportunities to try them out. Thus individual teens may ostracize outsiders who are different in sophisticated and subtle ways in an effort to impress their group. They may be too vulnerable themselves to be willing to associate with someone who is different.

As teens form more sophisticated relationships, they attain a new level of social contextual knowledge and awareness of social cues. Such social competence is the specific area that the student with autism finds most challenging. Miscommunications with peers may occur right at the time that the teen with autism has become keenly interested in new kinds of social relationships. As a result, these miscommunications are especially painful. In this manner, the gap between students with autism and their peers can widen.

Several examples of misinterpretations both by students with autism and by their peers during the teen years are provided below. These

examples illustrate what can happen in a high school setting but do not, however, help one anticipate a specific situation. How a particular student with autism will view a social situation and how peers will react will be unique to those involved.

These examples are best understood from two standpoints: first, that the student with autism is actively trying to interpret a situation and take part in it based on that interpretation, and second, that teachers must step back and try to figure out how the student with autism is interpreting a situation in order to understand the student's behavior (see Chapter 5).

#### ► EXAMPLE 1:

*Peers misinterpret a student with autism's strategies for coping with the noise and movement in the school hallways (Figure 2.2).*

Susan Moreno (1991), the mother of a higher functioning woman with autism, describes a conversation she had with her daughter's high school classmates. Susan was explaining to the group that her daughter Beth needed friendship.

One of the peers commented, "You tell us that she wants our friendship, but when I say 'Hi!' to her in the halls, she doesn't even look up or answer me. I don't call that very friendly. I think *you* just want her to have friends." I quickly explained that my daughter wasn't replying to this girl in the halls because of the noise and fast movement around her, making the halls a very difficult and even frightening place. My daughter probably didn't see or hear the girl because she was focused on navigating the hall to get to her next class. This explanation was accepted with a little skepticism and then a lot of relief by the peer. (Moreno, 1991, p. 10)

#### ► EXAMPLE 2:

*Students with autism observe friendships among their peers, form their own definition of friendship based on what they see, and then act on it.*

What is a friend? When one sees two people interacting, one may infer that the two people are friends based on how they respond to each other. But one does not know with absolute certainty that the two people are friends. One knows that there exist private aspects of the relationship one cannot see. It is this hidden aspect that determines whether the two people see each other as friends or not.

Students with autism may adopt a fairly concrete definition of friendship based on actions they can see. For example, the student with autism might think something like, "Friends are two people who sit and talk together several times a week at school. Friends also have lunch together in the cafeteria and do things on the weekend." Although these activities may be an important part of a friendship, they do not in and of themselves define a series of interactions as growing into a friendship.

However, if students with autism have different definitions of friendship, then they may misinterpret the actions of their peers. Thus, when peers have lunch with them once or twice at school, the students with autism may consider them to be their friends. When the students with autism then ask the peers to do more activities together than the peers are ready to, the peers may avoid them.

It is at this point that students with autism may become confused. In their minds, the peers were their friends and thus they continue to act upon that assumption. But based on an incomplete understanding of the subtleties of how friendships develop, students with autism may persist and not recognize social cues such as



FIGURE 2.2. High school hallways may be difficult to navigate.

the peers signaling that they are not interested in friendship at this time.

### ► EXAMPLE 3:

*The student with autism is not aware of non-verbal social cues used by a clique that send a message to others on the school grounds that "this is our space" (Figure 2.3).*

Imagine for a moment that a social scientist from another planet is looking down from a space ship and observing the school grounds of an elementary, middle, and high school. In all three settings the scientist observes students by themselves and in groups. Without knowledge of the unwritten social rules in operation at these three different stages of development, the scientist may see the three situations as essentially the same.

It can be difficult for a student with autism to also recognize that the rules have changed as they and their peers move into early and late adolescence. Whereas in grade school it was okay to walk up and join various games going on, in junior high and even more so in high school, the rules have changed. At these ages, when a clique of students are standing around one does not walk up and join them or walk through their loosely formed circle. If it's a gang, one does not even walk too near their "turf." To do so might be interpreted as a challenge.

To further complicate matters, this rule might apply to some groups one encounters but not to others. For example, it's okay to join the meetings of the computer club at any time. Thus, one also has to know the nature of a group's association and purpose. High school students with autism can have difficulty recognizing a group's signals and learning these unwritten rules.

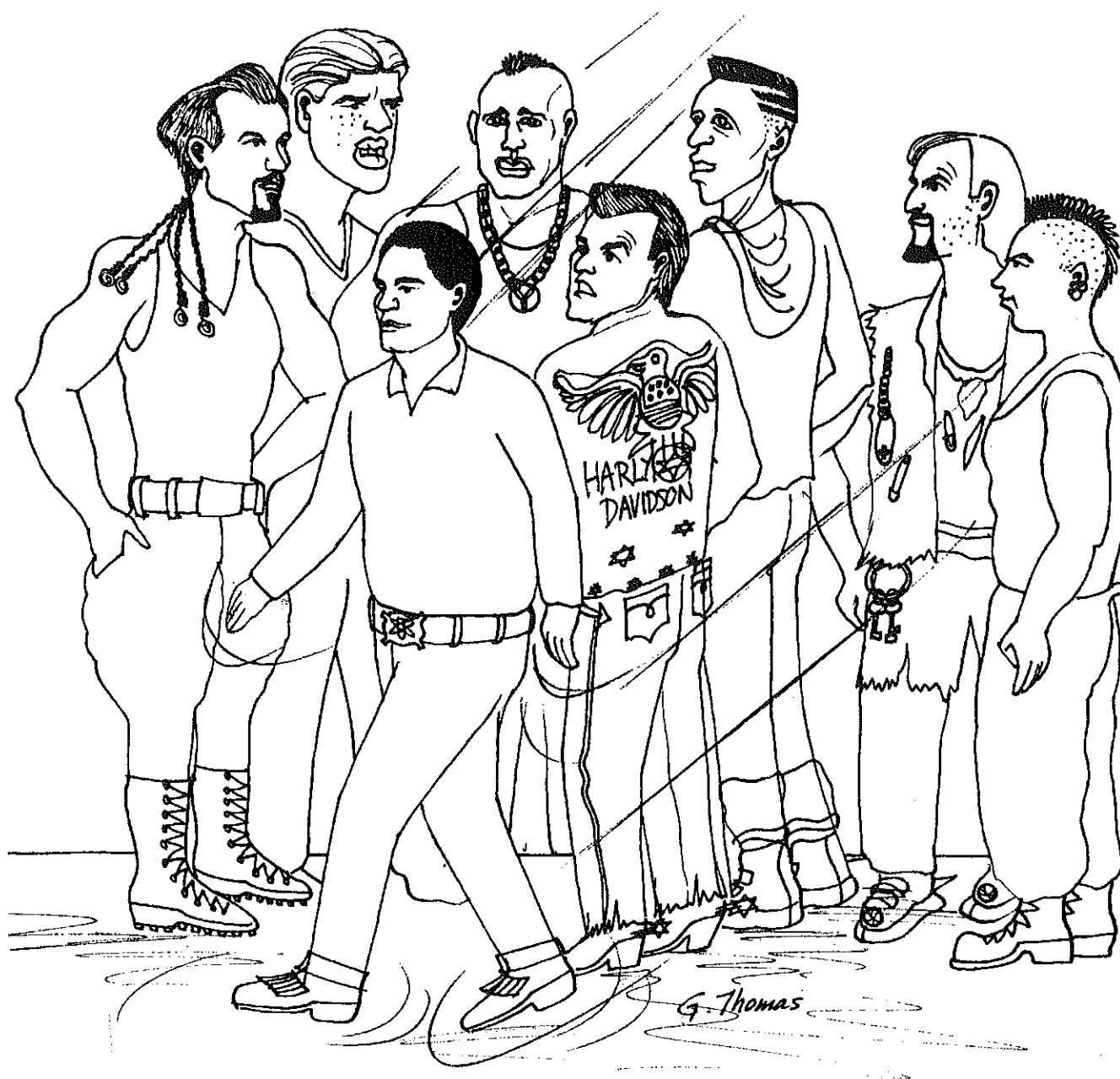
### ► EXAMPLE 4:

*Students with autism attempt to emulate peers they admire but misinterpret the reason for their peers' behaviors and do not know when to engage in the behavior.*

A high school student with autism saw girls whom she admired wearing different outfits. She thought that they were changing their outfits several times during the day. She told her mother she needed to have two or three outfits for each day of school. Her family had recently emigrated, and the mother was not aware that this was not customary, so she helped her daughter prepare and pack the clothes for each day.

Teachers became aware of what the student was doing when she was late for class because she was trying to change her outfit between classes. The student had been doing this with great effort for several weeks. It was hard for the student to explain why she was doing this; in her mind she thought she was being like her peers. But like any teenager, she was reluctant to discuss this with adults. She just wanted to be left alone to continue to do what was by now in her mind very important for her success with her peers.

Another female student noticed that male students were socially included and accepted by other male students when they told jokes with sexual content. She began telling such jokes herself but did so at the wrong time, such as in mixed groups of boys and girls and when adults were present. She did not recognize that her peers engaged in "locker room" talk only with particular same-sex friends and only when adults were absent. As a result, she was laughed at by her peers. Because she didn't understand *why* they were laughing, she continued to tell jokes at the wrong time and to the wrong people.



**FIGURE 2.3.** It may be difficult to recognize the nonverbal social cues of groups.

These examples are very different, but they have in common the fact that the young adults with autism are trying to make sense of the social world of their peers. Teens with autism have difficulty recognizing the social cues and

learning the unwritten social rules that govern their peers' behaviors.

In discussing friendship, one young woman said, "I'd like people to be my friend. Other adults have lost their innocence, but I still have

mine. If they will give me their sophistication, I will give them back their innocence. I have something to offer as a friend" (personal communication, 1993).

## EMOTIONS, STRESS, AND ANXIETY DURING ADOLESCENCE

The emotional upheavals of adolescence can be very difficult for the young person with autism. The young adult with autism may have to cope with the changes adolescence brings without the opportunities for peer group discussion and support utilized by others at this life stage (Dewey & Everard, 1974). With increased awareness of one's differences in social situations and repeated lack of success in forming friendships, a young person can be vulnerable to depression (Wing, 1981, 1992). Some persons will clearly express their sadness. But depression may manifest itself in ways that are hard to detect, such as a decreased desire for social contact and increased adherence to certain routines and solitary interests (Wing, 1981, 1992).

Many persons with autism report that social situations can be very stressful and confusing. Because of their intellectual strengths, more is expected of higher functioning persons with autism than persons with more obvious challenges (Wing, 1992). The effort to avoid doing the wrong thing in social situations, particularly when one is not sure what the wrong thing would be, can be highly stressful. For example, one young man explained that "as a general rule, the more 'normal' [my] behavior appears, the more guarded and anxious [I am] . . ." (Cesaroni & Garber, 1991, p. 309).

In addition to such situational anxiety, some persons with autism experience a physiologically based, constant, exhausting anxiety (Bemporad, 1979; Rumsey, Duara, Grady, Rapoport, Margolin, Rapoport, & Cutler, 1985; Grandin, 1992). Temple Grandin experienced this with the onset of puberty. Temple said that it "was like a constant feeling of stage fright. . . . Just imagine how you felt when you did something really anxiety provoking, such as your first public speak-

ing engagement. Now just imagine if you felt that way most of the time for no reason. . . . It was like my brain was running at 200 miles an hour, instead of 60 miles an hour . . ." (Grandin, 1992, p. 111).

As noted in Chapter 1, Temple's anxiety led her to invent a "squeeze machine" at age 18. The machine allows its users to control the amount of pressure they apply to the sides of the body by pulling on a lever. For Temple and others, the deep pressure provided by the squeeze machine can be very calming. Grandin (1992) and others also report that strenuous exercise can reduce anxiety. Other strategies Grandin has used are to fixate on an intense activity or to withdraw and try to minimize outside stimulation (Grandin, 1992).

For some persons, medication can also be beneficial in reducing anxiety. However, persons with autism can be extremely sensitive to the effects of medication, and it is critical that a physician knowledgeable about autism help determine the proper medication and dosage level (Grandin, 1992; McDonnell, 1993). Another useful strategy is to learn relaxation techniques. Groden and her associates (Cautela & Groden, 1978; Harrington, Samdperil, Groden, & Groden, 1991) have developed relaxation and imagery programs for persons with autism to use to reduce stress (see Resources at the end of this book). Many autism specialists agree that learning to use relaxation techniques and to recognize when one needs to use them is very important for many persons with autism.

Generally, autism specialists (Mesibov, 1992) and persons with autism themselves (Horner, 1993; Sinclair, 1992) do not find traditional psychotherapy aimed at gaining psychological insight to be effective for most persons with autism. Psychotherapy can even be deleterious if the persons with autism are made to feel that they are somehow at fault and not cooperating. Individual work with a therapist who is experienced with autism and that focuses on gaining understanding of social situations and events in the person's life can be very useful. Small groups of persons with autism that combine social support, practice in social situations, and explanations of social situations have



also been helpful (Kilman & Negri-Shoultz, 1987; Mesibov, 1992).

## DEVELOPING AN ADULT IDENTITY

The adolescent experiences such major physical and mental changes along with new social roles and demands that there is no way to avoid the question "Who am I?" As adolescents mature, their answers to this question become more multifaceted and include concrete as well as abstract descriptions (Montmayer & Eisen, 1977). Older children will describe themselves via what they do. Older adolescents will also describe what they think, feel, and value (Montemayor & Eisen, 1977). Developing self-awareness and then using it to develop a personal identity has been considered to be the single most important psychological turning point in our lives (Erikson, 1968). At some point during our adolescent years we put a moratorium on everything else and focus on this transformation of our identity; it takes a lot of work.

At the same time adolescents undergo a profound shift in their ability to think about the world (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Rather than being tied to concrete reality, the adolescents' conceptual world expands to encompass abstract reality and abstract possibility (Ingersoll, 1989) (see Figure 2.4). They are able to use increasingly sophisticated and efficient strategies to solve problems because they can now formulate and test out a hypothesis. Whereas the child is incapable of handling ambiguities or exceptions to the rules, the adolescent may become fascinated by them (Ingersoll, 1989). They will argue solely for the sake of testing out the limits of their newfound cognitive abilities. Often as they acquire this new ability to think about what "might be," they go through a period of being highly idealistic and are frustrated with the restrictions adults place on the possibilities for social change (Ingersoll, 1989).

## THE HIGHER FUNCTIONING ADOLESCENT WITH AUTISM

Higher functioning young adults with autism also grapple with forming an adult worldview and self-identity. Their cognitive capacity to think about more complex information is also increasing albeit in directions shaped by their cognitive style and strengths. If they have difficulty with time and social concepts, they can be confused about what becoming an adult means. For example, one high schooler became increasingly concerned with the implications of the expression "when you graduate, you'll be an adult and you will have to . . ." that was used by his teachers. He took this statement literally and couldn't understand how graduation would make him an adult when he had never had a date, didn't have his driver's license yet, etc. In his mind he wondered, "How can I be an adult when these things haven't happened yet?" In time, his teachers realized the source of his confusion (personal communication 1994).

Young adults with autism will use their own line of reasoning to form a worldview. For example, one young man was very interested in abstract questions such as "What is good art?" or "What could be said to all people that will make them stop all crime and violence?" His assumption was that there is a single best answer to these questions and if it could only be found, everyone would agree with it and act on it. In questioning people about such topics, he steered them toward applying percentages to the relative goodness of one art piece or of one solution to crime over another. His reasoning is that if people will quantify their comparisons, then the single best answer does exist and can be found. At this point in his life, this was one of the lines of thinking he used to construct his worldview. In discussing such matters one needs to respect and work with an individual's line of thinking.



**FIGURE 2.4.** Adolescents undergo a profound shift in their ability to think about the world (Ingersoll, 1989).

Many higher functioning persons with autism state that since childhood they have known they were different from others, but it was in adolescence that it became important to have a reason that they were different (Williams,

1992; McDonnell, 1993; personal communication, 1993–94). For these young adults, it followed that if the reason could be found, then it could be changed. Young adults with autism can be highly motivated toward increased self-

knowledge. But like any of us, they seek reasons that make sense to them.

Young adults' emerging self-awareness can also take the form of realizing that others know something that they don't know. A personal goal may then become to ask others questions that will elicit from others answers in concrete and/or quantifiable terms that they can then put into practice (McDonnell, 1993; personal communication, 1993-94). Donna Williams states:

What I wanted . . . were rules I could carry around with me that applied to all situations, regardless of context. I wanted rules without exceptions. It was like saying I would be able to tell right from left if we only did away with left. . . . (Williams, 1994, p. 65)

With their active, indeed proactive thinking, young adults may try to find the essence of what makes them different or what they are missing. Then it becomes important to them to have a formula or rules for how to be just like everyone else. For example, one young man had been told that his problem communicating was that he needed to use more inflection when he spoke. He hoped that if he could just learn to do that, he would be able to engage his peers in conversation better (personal communication, 1994).

Young adults may seek a concrete or quantifiable definition of an abstract social concept that they want to understand. When it is explained that the concept cannot be defined in this way, the young adults may respond by asking the question differently but with the same aim: to attain a concrete definition. Perhaps the young adults with autism have assumed that older, more knowledgeable persons do indeed have the answers. The young adults attempt to find the right line of questioning that will draw forth an explanation they can understand.

In assisting adolescents or young adults, one must provide them with guideposts that are concrete and descriptive while making it clear that these guidelines will not always apply and that they are likely to change. Providing "working" social rules is better than providing no information at all (Mesibov, 1992). But simplistic advice

that is not based on an understanding of higher functioning autism is not helpful (Dewey, 1980). Margaret Dewey, the mother of a young man with autism, recalls that teachers scolded her son for not listening, but he only became increasingly nervous as he tried to avoid being scolded and thus found it even harder to comprehend. He was also told, "Stop being so self-centered." Dewey notes that her son talks from the viewpoint that is clear to him, his own. And "yet when he steps outside the boundaries of his own affairs and shows interests in the affairs of other people, he is likely to be called meddlesome" (Dewey, 1980, p. 1). This young man needed more information than just admonishments to change or stop something. One must make clear what is and is not relevant and carefully describe what is occurring in a social situation (Frith, 1989). Specific strategies for such social assistance are described in Chapter 5.

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS WITH AUTISM

When young people begin to explore who they are and how autism affects them, it can be very useful to share with them the writings of other persons with autism. Temple Grandin (1986) and more recently Donna Williams (1992, 1994), Paul McDonnell (1993), Beth Moreno (1993), and Thomas McKean (1994) have written some of the first personal accounts. These authors are now being joined by many others through *Our Voice*, the newsletter of the Autism Network International (ANI), a self-advocacy organization (see Resources). Through ANI's newsletter and telecommunications network, members share their insights and strategies in letters and dialogue. Another excellent source of ideas from higher functioning persons with autism and their family members is the MAAP (More-Able Autistic Persons) newsletter published by Sue Moreno (see Resources).

In reviewing the writings of higher functioning persons with autism, one can find much that is unique. There is also a recurring theme in recent issues of the ANI newsletter (1992-1994) around building an identity as a person

with autism. The challenge discussed is that of being true to oneself (one's preferences, one's needs, one's ways of doing things) and at the same time trying to be a part of the social world. In the following list, thoughts from various writers have been summarized:

- Autism is a pervasive and integral part of who I am. My insights into myself and the world are the most valid ones for me (Baird & Blackmore, 1994).
- My way of sensing and perceiving the world and my way of thinking about the world are of value to myself and to others (Baird & Blackmore, 1994).
- Whatever others want to tell me, I am going to have to understand in my own terms and form my own meanings (Sinclair, 1992).
- I want information, but I don't want to be changed or cured or fixed. I want to learn from others and they can learn from me, but I don't want to try to change everything about me (nor can I) in order to be with you. You need to meet me halfway (Baird & Blackmore, 1994).
- I choose to moderate and control the amount of input I receive and the social situations I am in. I can't (nor do I care to) meet all of your social expectations (Horner, 1993).
- "Even if an autistic person has the same goals as a nonautistic person he or she might need to follow a different procedure to get there . . . ." (Sinclair, 1992, p. 15).

## RESPECTING ADOLESCENTS' AND YOUNG ADULTS' SELF-INSIGHTS

By the time persons with autism reach adolescence, they have developed strategies for coping with their sensory, cognitive, and social challenges. It is very important to listen to what young persons with autism know about their own needs and to help them build that knowledge into personal strategies and life pursuits that work for them.

In talking to young adults about their experience in high school, one discovers that sometimes their solutions to problems they faced were not considered by others. For example, one young woman (personal communication, 1993) was a member of the track team and loved to run. She asked that her high school schedule be arranged so that she could take Physical Education fourth period and run to calm herself down at mid-day. She knew this would make it possible for her to get through the rest of the school day. But her request was seen as being too rigid and asking for special privileges. She knew what she needed but she did not have the communicative ability to defend her reasons and persuade the adults involved.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter the challenges of adolescence for both higher functioning students with autism and their peers were examined. The impact of new cognitive abilities, peer relationships, and the struggle to form an adult identity were discussed. Examples from the lives of young persons with autism were used to highlight these challenges. The background information given in this chapter is important for understanding the various teaching strategies provided in the remainder of this guide.

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