

The “Troubled” Child: Adolescent Egocentrism

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In 1967 David Elkind first discussed the concept of adolescent egocentrism. Adolescent egocentrism can be defined as “the tendency” for adolescents to have a “differing perception” about how they believe others perceive them and how others actually perceive them (Adolescent Egocentrism). Teenagers have this belief that other people are as “obsessed” with their appearance and behavior as they are, also known as the “imaginary audience” (Elkind, 1967, p.1030). Teens may obsess over their actions or the way they look, because they believe that everyone is watching them, and want to impress them. Elkind used the example of a boy combing his hair in the mirror “imagining the swooning reactions” he will receive from girls (Elkind, 1967, p.1030). Elkind then explains that these obsessions are most likely in vain, as their peers are too concerned with what others think about them to worry about what they think about others.

Adolescent egocentrism does not only affect teens on their perception of how others see them but also on their perception of their emotions compared to others. Adolescents often believe that their feelings are unique to those of others, that no one can feel suffering with such “intensity” (Elkind, 1967, p.1031). Examples of this can be seen in literature, such as Holden Caulfield’s character in *The Catcher in the Rye*, and often is displayed in movies and shows aimed at teenagers, such as *Tall Girl* and *Riverdale*.

This belief that the adolescent has in their own “personal uniqueness” can often lead to a conviction that they “will not die” (Elkind, 1967, p.1031). Elkind called this belief that adolescents have about their uniqueness in emotion and immortality “personal fable.”

As research is done, more and more issues are arising, with adolescent egocentrism at the core. With new technology being invented every year and social media growing, there are many more opportunities for adolescents to fuel their egocentrism. In an article about social media and its effects on adolescents, Daniel Houlihan explains that social media “exacerbates” teens’ belief that they are unique, or as David Elkind called it, personal fable (Houlihan, 2014). Along with this, online bullying is rampant on social media because adolescents feel that they are invulnerable to negative outcomes of their actions (Houlihan, 2014). This increase in online bullying then negatively affects the teen being bullied as these comments damage their ego and can lead to emotional struggles.

However, adolescent egocentrism does not only harm teens emotionally, but it also harms them physically. This lack of cognitive maturity leads to adolescents taking risks that could seriously injure or even kill them. An article written for the *Journal of Youth Studies* explains how teens are at a rising risk for skin cancer due to the use of indoor tanning beds (Banerjee et al., 2015).

They theorize that teens are doing this, not only to impress their "imaginary audience" but also because they feel immortal to the risks that indoor tanning poses (Banerjee et al., 2015).

This mentality of being immortal can also lead to much more common issues, such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, fighting, and dangerous driving. These risky behaviors are actions that every teen has either done themselves or heard of someone else doing. According to the CDC 67% of students have drank alcohol before twelfth grade, about 50% of highschool students have smoked marijuana, and 40% of highschool students have reported smoking cigarettes (CDC, 2020). These statistics are extremely concerning as the earlier teens start abusing substances the higher the chances of developing an addiction or continuing to abuse substances become. Along with substance abuse, statistics show that 41% of sexually active students reported not using contraceptives in 2013, 24% of high school students reported having been in a physical fight in the past year in 2017, and seven teens aged 13-19 died in a fatal car crash per day, with hundreds more injured in 2018.

Nevertheless, how can we help adolescents and keep them safe? Because adolescent egocentrism is a cognitive limitation and part of the brain's development, it is not something that the adolescent can change. However, parents play a crucial part in helping their children stay safe and make smart decisions during this time. The first solution to helping adolescents is making sure that parents or guardians are aware of what adolescent egocentrism is, how to handle it, and where they can find the support, they need to help the child, is an important piece in helping egocentric adolescents. When adults lack the awareness that teenagers have no control over their egocentrism, it can often lead to them

putting their adolescents for their behavior, as it is seen as immature, overly emotional, and disruptive. But adolescents need someone to understand them, someone to support them and lead them on the right path without being harsh or blaming them.

Many sources claim that the best way to help with adolescent egocentrism is by creating a caring and understanding environment around the adolescent, and I agree with these claims. I think the best thing that a family can do for adolescents facing egocentrism is give the teen support and a connection to confide in their family about their emotions or behaviors in a safe environment. Perhaps if the teen has a good relationship with a relative, they will be able to call if they are in trouble or need to be picked up because they are intoxicated. This would mitigate some of the risky behavior of teenagers, such as dangerous driving or abusing substances.

Disciplining is still essential at this stage, and the teen should know that they will be disciplined, but it is important that the adolescent knows that this discipline comes from a place of care rather than a place of anger or disappointment. Theo Riley wrote that in a cognitive test done on a sample of seventh grade girls and boys emotional support from a parent was associated with a lower level of egocentrism (Riley, 1984). Along with this, it was also found that parental withdrawal heightened levels of egocentrism for both groups (Riley, 1984). Adolescents struggling with egocentrism already believe that no one understands or cares about their emotions, so a decrease in parental support does nothing but strengthen that belief.

Although having a sound family support system is crucial to guiding an adolescent through these difficult years, I also believe that the community plays an important role as well. Children in this age range spend the majority of their time at

school, and it is important that they must have a good support system there, especially if they do not have this at home. Middle school and high school are filled with drama, fighting, and bullying, and more often than not, these situations are treated with no amount of understanding. Adolescent egocentrism can lead to a very competitive environment, personal fable can lead to fights and overall bad decision making, and an imaginary audience can lead to competition as every child tries to impress each other. A second solution is for schools to be equipped with mental health services so these adolescents can get the support they need. In my experience as a middle and high schooler, I have seen many of my bright peers give up on their education and turn to be trouble makers because they feel as though no one cares about them and if everyone thinks they are a bad kid, then that is what they will be.

A third solution, and something I think would be very impactful, is having more safe places for teens and pre-teens to go to have fun. Even our own city of Charlottesville has very little for teens to do without parental supervision or access to money. Places like rec centers, bowling alleys, or skate parks where there is plenty of activities to do and light monitoring to keep adolescents safe. I believe that this would decrease illegal activities done by adolescents because they could form a community and hobbies in a safe space.

Although these solutions can not completely fix adolescent egocentrism, as it is a cognitive issue, I believe that they could help, and slow the negative effects of this issue. By giving the teen or pre-teen the support that they need and a safe relationship or space, they will have someone to go to if they are in danger or need help. It is crucial for adolescents to have supportive and stable relationships with an adult during this period, whether that person is a parent or

guardian, a teacher, or someone who leads a program they are a part of.

After researching for this paper, my eyes have been opened a little bit more. Growing up, I saw my peers struggling with adolescent egocentrism, and I felt myself struggling with it simultaneously, but I never knew what it was. I have always struggled with wanting people to like me due to what I dealt with growing up, but I felt it get so much worse once I hit seventh grade and started puberty. Due to my home situation, I had to grow up fast, and because of this, I focused less on myself and being a "teenager" and more on doing what I could to be helpful to my mom and brothers. So, although I was struck with an "imaginary audience," I was not as inclined to be risky because I did not want to cause any more stress to my mom. This lack of inclination towards negative actions caused me to judge those around me who acted in ways that I thought were "dumb" or "immature". I think now, after researching adolescent egocentrism, it makes a lot more sense why my peers tended to act out in dangerous ways, especially because they did not have any type of support system.

My role in society towards this topic shifted when I hit eleventh grade. I no longer felt judgment towards my peers, but instead wanted to help them, and that is what I continue to want to do. I want to advocate more for adolescents in school, I think this area is one that can be more easily helped and changed than parenting styles. My dream is to become a therapist and hopefully, through that I can further advocate for mental health services in schools and be taken seriously.

I believe that I have done well when it comes to civic responsibilities and am continuing to do well. I tend to use my voice strongly to advocate for others who may not have it as well as I do. I always make sure to stay informed on what is going on in society

and use whatever means I can to help society as a whole, whether that is by voting, through my art, or by giving out support to those around me. Although I believe I could do more, especially in helping adolescents in my community, for right now, I do what I can without pulling myself too thin.

So yes, adolescents are technically "immature" and "sensitive" but that is sim-

ply because their brains are in fact immature, and they are sensitive because that is how personal fables cause the brain to react. The sooner we as a society recognize that this behavior is not the adolescent's fault and something they should be put down for, the sooner we can slow the dangers of adolescent egocentrism.

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