



## Transactional Analysis Proficiency Awards for Adolescents

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### Editor's Note

As IJTARP Editor, I am also involved with another ICTAQ initiative – the TA Proficiency Awards. This scheme has been quieter since Covid emerged in 2020 and made it difficult to run TA programmes within schools – although it has continued to run for teachers in Croatia and Guatemala, and for health workers in the UK. When I was asked to comment on an article that the author was submitting as an entry requirement to a course on psychology, I pointed out that it contained much useful information about adolescents and obtained agreement that it could be published in this journal. The relevant TA information has been omitted because the scheme can be run with only a beginner's knowledge of TA – and ideas can be seen at <https://taproficiencyawards.org/>

### Abstract

A comprehensive review of how adolescence is a period of major transition is followed by the suggestion that a transactional analysis programme that has been running internationally for several years might usefully be introduced into UK schools, and readers are invited to become involved.

### Key Words

transactional analysis, adolescence, school, TA proficiency awards, self-awareness

### Introduction

Adolescence is a period of huge developmental change, physically, mentally, and socially. It is a pivotal period in which individuals are vulnerable to influence, with increased possibilities, responsibilities and decisions that can affect one's entire life, both positively and negatively. This article was prompted by awareness of the way in which TA has been taught within schools, and how the TA Proficiency Awards scheme can make such a significant contribution to the issues of adolescents as a Way of narrowing the social equality and mental health gap. The author, and ICTAQ, invite anyone

interested in taking this initiative forward to contact them.

### Adolescent development and challenges

Adolescence is a period of major transition between childhood and adulthood driven by biological change. Alongside puberty and the development of sex characteristics, adolescents experience enormous changes in their body, thought processes, emotions, social dynamics, identity, sexual identity, relationships and self-image with a significant rise of responsibility. There is nothing within western culture to acknowledge when this starts or ends, making these transitions more tricky than traditional non-industrialised societies who celebrate and honour such milestones which may provide clarity, acknowledgement and collective support for this time of great change (Gross 2020).

Parental relationships undergo a change in this time, from child-parent to young adult-parent relationship, this is not always a smooth transition. Parents can become highly critical, have unrealistic expectations or rejection, resulting in negative identity. Research has shown that parents who considered their own adolescent experience to be conflicting were less satisfied with their own family (Gross, 2020). This suggests an embedded cycle that might take more than the parents to break, to provide the tools necessary for a happy and fulfilled life. An intervention of self psychology like TA could improve well-being to a community level for generations to come. However there may well be cases where the complexity of their experience and how their personality sits around this, cannot be simplified at this level.

Research has shown that in comparison to children, adolescents experience amplified physiological reactivity, particularly when it comes to stressors relating to social evaluation, performance and rejection (Macglaulin, Peverill, Gold, Alves & Sheridan, 2015). Adolescents' intensified responses,

beyond their control, can often be met with stigmatisation from stereotypes in the media that characterise adolescents as problematic and dramatic. The concepts of TA are framed around each individual having their own intrinsic value and meeting them where they are without judgement and expectation. If this positive regard is not being received at home, providing the experience and space within the school setting could be crucial in providing the skills to experience life to its full potential.

Meta research into brain development of adolescents, reviewing structural and functional development revealed an essential reorganisation and pruning of the brain in this phase of life (Konrad, Kirk & Uhlhaas, 2013). This research highlights the vulnerability of environmental influence for all adolescents. It could also be worth considering this time to be a critical period in which beliefs about the self, others and the world become rooted. When considering the concepts of transactional analysis, this may be a crucial time to provide a lens on the data held by the parent ego and beliefs of self held by the child state and highlight the agency that each individual has for their own development. Eccleston, Eccleston & Hayes (2009) question the legitimacy of therapeutic programs within education, suggesting they are based on popular ideas rather than empirical evidence and to seek 'self-fulfilment' rather than imposed external goals, will inevitably lead to a continuing need to seek help through therapy. Whilst the evidence is not available empirically the concepts in TA are intended to provide the awareness for an individual to be their own therapist and perhaps reduce the need for therapy later in life.

Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs motivational theory implies that physiological, safety, and love and belonging desires must be satisfied in order for healthy esteem and confidence, which are required to empower a self-actualised and fulfilled life. Considering this theory and applying it to the adolescent stage in life, 'physiological needs', to ensure survival, include water, food and shelter from birth, in adolescence this extends to healthy food and appropriate exercise (Teen Rehab, 2021). To what levels these needs are met and the disparity in this is not measured or supported in an equitable way. Malnutrition, overcrowded housing for example, may impact an individual's desire to feel safe, with motivation remaining with desire to have physiological needs met. The second stage, 'safety needs', fundamentally, is the provision of shelter from the elements, in addition to this, there is the need to be secure with freedom from fear (Teen Rehab, 2021). As with the initial stage, to what level this is, or is not being met, is not measured and

supported in an equitable way. The third stage 'love and belonging', for an adolescent should mean a strong supportive family, relationships which allow for unconditional positive regard, and inclusion, respect and intimacy from friendships and family (Teen Rehab, 2021). Again this is not measurable and can be impacted by many factors including family size, unrealistic expectations of parents, addiction, abuse, emotional neglect, divorce, bereavement and mental health issues within the family.

Some of these factors are considered to be Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). The hierarchy of needs suggest that these basic needs must be met in order to achieve esteem, allowing an individual the confidence, independence and ability to achieve self-actualisation. Self-actualisation is when an individual is able to achieve their personal potential and self-fulfilment to keep striving for personal growth. A universal TA program for all students within secondary schools could be an equitable stepping stone that lifts up those whose safety, love and belonging needs are not being met, providing some basic tools to harbour these through their sense of self. For those where safety, love and belonging needs are not a concern, TA could further develop their emotional understanding and awareness of self and others.

Parental responsibility defined on the government website states a parents main role is to provide a home for the child and protect and maintain them. It goes on to say that parents are also responsible for disciplining, making medical choices, choosing and providing education, choosing names and looking after a child's property (Gov.UK, 2011). Referring back to the above paragraph, discussing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, these responsibilities stated, do not attempt to consider the emotional needs that are required for children and adolescents to develop in a mentally healthy way, as supported by countless studies.

Attachment Theory by John Bowlby (1969) highlighted the significance of a secure attachment on healthy social and emotional development. The Adverse Childhood Experience Study (ACE) by Feletti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, Koss & Marks (1998) correlated a graded relationship between the number of categories of ACE's and adult health risk behaviours such as alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide attempts, mental health conditions such as depression and eating disorders. The ACE study, collated data from 13,494 adults who completed a questionnaire about their experiences, asking if they experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse, violence against mother, living with household members who were

substance abusers, mentally ill, suicidal or ever imprisoned. The results showed that more than half of respondents reported at least one ACE.

An ongoing longitudinal study, known as The Grant Study, has been following two groups of men for seven decades. 268 Harvard graduates and 456 men from inner city Boston of which 275 remain active. Participants have completed questionnaires every two years and personal interviews every fifteen years. The study gives weight to several factors that contribute to living a happy life. These include maintaining a healthy weight, limiting alcohol, and mature coping skills. The study's director George Vaillant suggested warm and intimate relationships to be the most important factor for a fulfilled life (Ghent, 2011).

These studies highlight the relevance of an emotional developmental program or culture within secondary schools. Bowlby suggested that the mental representation of self and how one views themselves in key relationships have been internalised and modelled on their relationship with their primary caregiver, said to be developed from a combination of cognitive representation and conditioning, however attachment security can be developed (Gillath, Selcuk & Shaver, 2008). A TA program could provide a collective culture of safe and protective adult relationships to build everyone up, without a reductionist approach of investigating the exposure of ACE's to consider intervention. The lack of acknowledgement of emotional needs outlined in parental responsibilities on the government website would suggest that this an area open to interpretation and direct intervention, may be both unhelpful and take a lot to enforce any action. A TA program could support those who are forming unhealthy coping mechanisms and form agency for their own existence and reframe these positively. However, unhealthy coping mechanisms to live a fulfilled life, could well be self-preserving strategies within the family unit. An argument might be that some scenarios might be more than an education setting or such a program is equipped to handle, however if the situation is as such, then it could be a way of sensitively highlighting those cases where intervention really is necessary. Referring back to the Grant study, the highlight of fulfilling relationships being a crucial part of a happy life, some children and adolescents may not have an environment where any healthy relationships, which are mutually supportive and respectful, are modelled to them. A TA intervention program could provide a safe place to learn about their own self-awareness boundaries and expectations of themselves and others.

A theory of development of egos in adolescence within TA considers the 'chaos of adolescence' to be

a systematic organised life passage that follows a cyclical pattern. The theory suggests that the developmental adolescent process involves repeating and revisiting prior stages with an increased level of perception. This theory normalises the adolescent experience, of repeating themes and issues but on greater scales and considers the chaos, sensitivity and confusions that may appear as if overnight to be part of the development cycle of egos. Having been seemingly competent, dependent and capable at 12, it is suggested that due to a genetically programmed repetition, in which the adolescents 'Natural Child' ego state, becomes highly active because it is in a primal stage of the adolescent developmental process. Levin suggests that like infants there is a heightened need for wanting to be taken care of. Feeding, bonding and connection from immediate family and beyond. The developing adolescent pays particular attention to how these needs are being met, who is meeting them and what this says about them as an individual (Levin 2015). This theory suggests that culturally it may be helpful to reframe the experience of adolescence and consider the time to be one of increased sensitivity, nurturing and support towards adolescent individuals. As this is not a general cultural consideration, perhaps a TA intervention and culture within schools, could be the model of the behaviour to be transferred to the wider community.

### **TAPA - Educational TA program for adolescence**

Transactional Analysis Proficiency Awards (TAPA) is a program run by the International Centre for Transactional Analysis Qualifications. TAPA was originally designed to support children and young people and has now extended to include support teachers/educators, caregivers/parents, teacher assistants/helpers as well as having been rolled out to many other categories of adults including police officers and unemployed people. It is intended to teach self-awareness and relationship skills.

The TAPA program can be delivered by anyone who has undergone sufficient training, without the need to obtain professional accreditations as a TA practitioner. TA concepts however are easy to learn and can be taught in as little as thirty minutes, they are easily learned and easily applied and it is with practice and application that they become more effective (Barrow, Bradshaw & Newton, 2012). TA concepts are shared with students who are invited to build a portfolio to demonstrate their understanding and application of at least 6 TA concepts through a process of self and peer review. These portfolios are assessed by those who have completed at two years serious study of TA and, if necessary, candidates are invited to make changes so they can be awarded a TAPACY Certificate.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a crucial time for development, with a broad diversity of experience. Education of emotional literacy within schools could be a way of providing the life skills necessary to live a fulfilled life, regardless of academic achievement.

Transactional Analysis concepts provide understanding of interpersonal dynamics and communication patterns to navigate relationships better. Secondary school years could be a critical time for redirection and reframing or enhancing and affirming one's view of self and the transactions with others and the world. There are limitations to consider, including safeguarding, and gender and age receptivity to these concepts. It would be instrumental, to carry out further studies of this kind, perhaps measuring behaviour, attendance and attainment, as well as more in depth analysis of well-being over longitudinal studies. This could further evidence the benefits TA might have on mental wellness and life fulfilment as well as improvements on academic achievement and family and school environments.

**Sam Connors** is a fan of TA and this article has been extracted from a submission she was preparing as part of studies in psychology. She can be contacted at [sjconnors2004@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:sjconnors2004@yahoo.co.uk)

For more information on the TA Proficiency Awards, see <https://taproficiencyawards.org/> or email [ictaq@ictaq.org](mailto:ictaq@ictaq.org)

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