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# **Adolescence: Navigating Toward Adulthood**

**with Theresa A. O'Keefe**

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**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
School of Theology and Ministry  
CONTINUING EDUCATION

# Adolescence: Navigating Toward Adulthood

## USING THIS RESOURCE

This resource is a guide to using an STM Online: Encore presentation as a conversation starter with members of a faith community. Each part of the presentation may be used separately, in combinations with each other, or in a sequence over a period of time. For example, a catechetical leader might use each part of the presentation over the course of a year at meetings with catechists. A pastor may choose to use only one segment to encourage discussion on a related agenda item. “Navigating Toward a Meaningful Life” has broad application to the experience of faith communities today. Consider using one or more segments with youth group leadership, high school teachers/catechists, campus ministry teams, or parents and mentors of adolescents.



## OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENTATION

In the fall of 2018, Theresa A. O’Keefe gave a public presentation entitled “Navigating Toward a Meaningful Life: Adolescents and Faith Formation.” In it she describes adolescence as the time in life when humans first gain the capacity to think in more expansive ways and so imagine their lives beyond self-interest. But they are not likely to do this without prompting. Dr. O’Keefe argues that religious education for adolescents should provide the Christian narratives and practices that provide the ever-widening horizon of God’s love and a vision of hope for the world and their lives.

**Part 1: The Tasks of Adolescence [video 9:55 minutes]**

**Part 2: Adolescent Growth and Development [video 10 minutes]**

**Part 3: Toward a Meaningful Life [video 17 minutes]**

**Part 4: Helping Adolescents Navigate a Meaningful Life [video 14 minutes]**

# Part 1: The Tasks of Adolescence

## OVERVIEW

O’Keefe begins by examining the tasks of adolescence, which she names as developing the capacity (1) to recognize oneself as a person; (2) to see other persons as persons; (3) to recognize the relationships between persons; and (4) to interpret the world around them.

## MOVEMENT FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

O’Keefe identifies adulthood as “the capacity to be responsible in the context of relationships.” Adolescents are challenged to move from an instrumental understanding of the world to a relational understanding.

### A time of transition and transformation

#### CHILDHOOD

- Unselfconscious self-interest
- Limited ability to see cause and effect.
- Able to follow explicit instructions, but within a limited frame of reference.

#### ADULTHOOD

- *Expected* to consider the concerns of others.
- *Expected* to anticipate and plan for long term consequences.
- *Expected* to follow through on obligations and
- *Expected* to interact well with others even without explicit instructions.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. Dr. O’Keefe names four tasks at the heart of adolescence: learning to (1) to recognize oneself as a person; (2) to see other persons as persons; (3) to recognize the relationships between persons; and (4) to interpret the world around them. How do these correspond to your own sense of what the work of adolescence is?

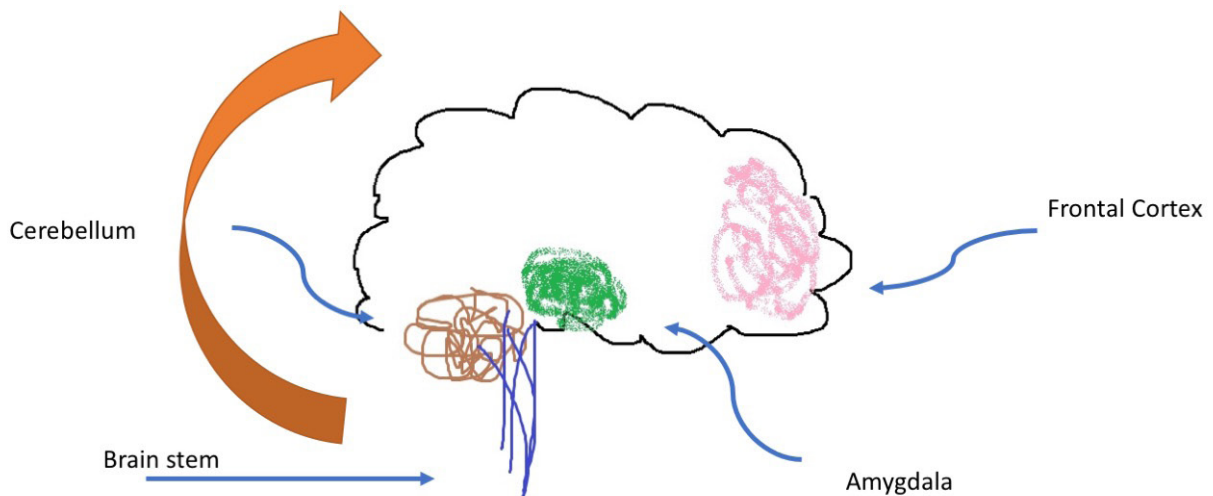
2. In what ways do you see yourself supporting the adolescents with whom you live or work in accomplishing these tasks?

# Part 2: Adolescent Growth and Development

## OVERVIEW

Drawing on insight from neuroscience, O'Keefe examines the way in which the adolescent's brain develops in its capacity to address the complex tasks of adolescence.

## The Brain – A Rough Sketch



The brain's new capacity means adolescence is the first time in life they gain the ability to:

- Be self-conscious --> self-awareness;
- Form an identity and affiliate with others;
- Share inner life deeply;
- Imagine the perspectives of others;
- Empathize.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. Reflect back on your own adolescence. What were some of the big questions that shaped your experience of that time? And how were the questions of adolescence different from questions of childhood? from questions of adulthood?

2. How does insight into the growing complexity of the adolescent's brain influence the way you think about engaging adolescents around questions of faith?

# Part 3: Toward a Meaningful Life

## OVERVIEW

Dr. O’Keefe examines key challenges to consider when approaching the relationship between adolescence and faith or faith formation. Ultimately, O’Keefe defines the work of faith in terms of living a meaningful life in light of the Christian call to love.

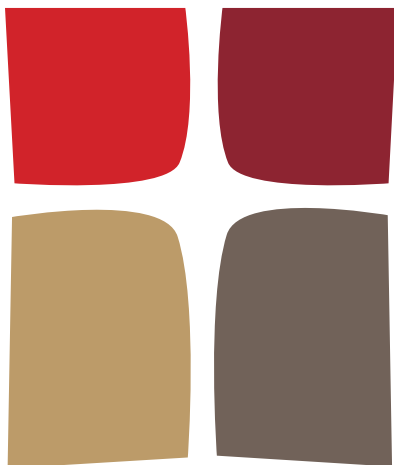
**One of the scribes...asked him, “which is the first of all the commandments?”**

**Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

**Mark 12: 28-31**

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. There are many challenges facing the process of supporting adolescents in the life of faith. Which dimensions do you think are being addressed in your setting – home, school parish? What can be enhanced?
2. O’Keefe defines the meaningful life for the Christian in terms of the horizon set out by the Christian tradition, which she proposes is summed up in terms of the world having been made in love and for love. How is that helpful for your understanding your own life of faith as well as the life you are supporting for the adolescent(s) with whom you live or work?



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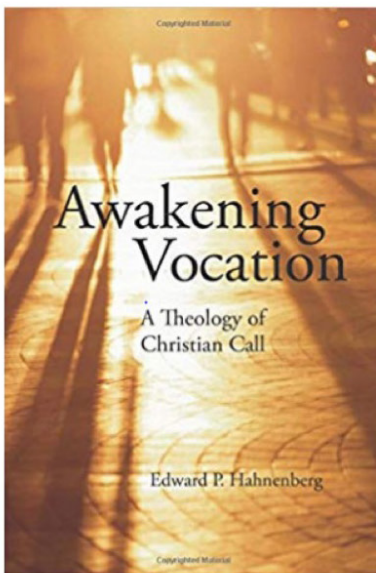
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# Part 4: Helping Adolescents Navigate a Meaningful Life

## OVERVIEW

O’Keefe points to four elements that we can provide adolescents as we support them in navigating toward a meaningful life: ways to interpret and connect, ballast in the form of the Christian tradition, practices that underpin a meaningful life, and robust relationships with non-parent adults.

## What about the church?



“Communal structures of support and accountability, a shared vocabulary, regular rituals, time with friends and a place for fellowship, tasks to accomplish together – this is the stuff of church.....Participation...is a doing-with and being-with others. It is also to “take part,” to have a stake or a share in something....Religion or church is not simply a resource from which I draw; it is an arena within which I act. I take part in something larger than myself, and I do it with others.”

(Edward Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 190.)

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. In what way has the Christian tradition served as ‘ballast’ to keep you on an even keel in your own Christian life? How can we convey that to adolescents?
2. What practices have shaped your own Christian life of faith? In what ways might you share that with adolescents you know?
3. How can the parish be more intentional about providing adolescents with strong relationships with non-parent adults?