They're a funny, fascinating crowd—our “pin-feathery” pre-adolescents

The In-betweens

ESTHER LLOYD-JONES

At the age of 10 one has finished with the rather interesting distinction of having holes where teeth used to be. The holes have filled up. One feels pin-featherish.

The mothers of boys are deciding about this time that shorts just don't look right any longer, but they're a bit reluctant to take on the expense of long trousers, realizing that every fall thereafter will mean ripped cloth instead of merely skinned knees. Mothers of girls are beginning to wonder whether it would improve their daughters' looks if they cut off the braids and had them wear their hair bobbed. But, if their hair is bobbed, won't they have to begin to have permanents, and are they really old enough? And, then, too, there's the added expense that permanents will entail.

From the standpoint of the youngsters themselves, it's a rather unsatisfying time of life. Life is drab. Coddling by mother and aunts and uncles is definitely out. Youngsters are told in many unspoken ways—as well as bluntly spoken ones—that they definitely are no longer the least bit cute. They sense the lack of satisfaction that parents have in their appearance. They don't feel comfortable somehow inside their funny, changing skins, but they're not yet up to doing anything about their appearance.

Consider, from another angle, how one of these pre-teens youngsters feels in his own age group. It may be a girl who, at 12, has astoundingly shot up almost overnight to be five feet eight inches tall. She feels for all the world like Alice in Wonderland and that she certainly must have gotten hold of the wrong bottle. The difference is that she won't find any other bottle—or cake—to bring her back to what would feel normal. And so she goes towering around amongst her classmates, knowing that they view her as some horrible possibility of what might happen to themselves.

She doesn't know quite how to cover up the fact that she's so huge and different from her kind. Maybe she titters a lot, vainly hoping thereby to seem less august and remote from other children. Maybe she takes refuge in a brooding silence, hoping by this camouflage to escape unwelcome attention. Dancing class, where she must majestically steer little boys about, is utter torment.

Children who are neither very young nor very old have often been neglected in our thinking. Naturally, they have never liked being thought of as babies, and today, with their older brothers and sisters reaching maturity more quickly than in normal times, they find themselves particularly isolated. In this article, the predicament of the in-betweeners is appealingly set forth by Esther Lloyd-Jones, Chairman, Department of Student Personnel Administration and Professor in charge of the Guidance Laboratory, Teachers College, Columbia University.
What of the boy who matures early and finds himself rumbling when he merely wishes to talk in a normal voice, who begins to get pimply-faced and fuzzy-chinned when his boy friends all mercifully seem to stay the same as they were? He, too, feels out of place in his group. The furniture doesn't fit him. His playful little taps all seem to cause serious injuries. He wonders if, instead of being a good-natured kid, he may not really be a bully at heart. In an effort to adapt himself to his group, he may turn inordinately silly or silent or, perhaps, tough and ugly.

But what about the large majority who don't do the shooting-up stunt quite so early? Many of them are vaguely disturbed, perhaps because they're afraid of turning into monsters overnight or perhaps just because they stay so little and babyish and are afraid they never will grow up.

These pre-adolescents are in a period of relative immunity to physical disease, but they are on the verge of catastrophic physical changes and they certainly are not immune to all the psychological reverberations these conditions cause in them.

Young Sophisticates

There are, of course, many social problems arising out of heterogeneity of size and physical development. The average 10- and 11-year-old is homosexual in his social interests: boys much concerned with other boys and boys' interests; girls, scornful of boys, wanting to be let alone to play by themselves at the affairs that are really interesting to them. A bright little boy of 10 may feel ready to do anything that will win the favor, or even merely the tolerance, of the less bright, but tough and glamorous big boy of 11, who lives in his block or is in his grade. Similarly, the less mature 12-year-old girl may figuratively break her neck in trying to live up to the standards of conduct of another 12-year-old girl who is mature and far more sophisticated.

In about the sixth grade, first a sort of negative and then a more positive attraction begins to form, and one finds the more mature girls making subtle and somewhat awkward efforts to attract the favorable attention of the more attractive boys.

We don't ordinarily think of this kind of thing as getting well under way until junior high school years. During this past year, however, there have been reports from sixth grade teachers of social precocity such as the most experienced of them have never before seen.

As an example, in one sixth grade group, made up of 11- and 12-year-olds, most of whom are distinctly brighter than average, this past year has been a unique experience for the veteran teacher. Never has she had a group so interested in sex as this past year's has been. Never has there been such an epidemic of "dirty" notes. After a short, warming-up period, in which the girls emphatically urged the boys "not to chase them today" (to be sure, of course, that they would), the girls and boys split up into devoted pairs. These pairs took on many of the manifestations of older youngsters, wanting to have dates and go to the movies together two by two, unaccompanied by any adults. Devotion and jealousy, "silliness" and tension, kept the group upset all year long.

The parents of this group, too, were
utterly bewildered, not knowing just what to do with their precocious children. One mother, in a parents’ meeting, told of her bewilderment when her son begged her to explain to him what a “wrapper” was. She finally discovered that he meant “raper” and what he was after was an understanding of the career of Errol Flynn.

**Special Problems of Today**

It would appear that to be added to the ordinary adjustments in-betweeners always have to make are some new adjustments of a special sort growing out of a changed social situation. Is it possible that, as our 18-year-olds have taken over responsibilities of handling bombers and living in submarines and as our high school youth have taken on heavy agricultural and industrial jobs, as they look toward early marriage and parenthood and service in the armed forces, our pre-adolescents are also trying in their own special way to grow up faster?

Certainly, we cannot afford to overlook or neglect these youngsters. One reason why they demand especial understanding is that the average age when juvenile delinquency first becomes apparent is about 10. Certainly, if we take the incidence of juvenile delinquency as our index, we are not doing a very good job of understanding and dealing with these youngsters.

But most of all, we should pay more—and more understanding—attention to these boys and girls just because they tend to get left out. They are truly the in-betweeners, with the enchanting younger ones on one side of them and the important and peremptory adolescents on the other.

Schools alone can’t meet their needs. Neither can their perturbed parents. Schools and parents, however, working together honestly and intelligently, can do a great deal for them. Sympathetic and skillful teachers can do much to see that no youngster is catapulted out of social connection with his group simply because his hormones take a spurt; can casually reassure youngsters who tend to develop anxieties over their physical differences; can see that these youngsters in school have rich and happy group experiences; can develop constructive relationships with parents of the children so that group and individual problems can be helpfully discussed by teachers and parents together.

**Who Is Responsible for the In-betweeners?**

Parents can group together to see that out of school the youngsters have wholesome social experiences, which the children and parents should jointly plan and carry through. Parents, too, can try not to coddle nor to squelch but more sympathetically to understand and stay in effective contact with their pin-feathery children. When one of them, struggling to pierce some dark mystery of life that defies him, asks a parent what it’s all about, that parent should be able to help him without upsetting him further, or at least should be able to advise him just where to turn for the help he needs.

These pre-teen boys and girls are a funny, fascinating crowd. They’re just on the verge of becoming our adolescents and, then, our adult citizenry. We can certainly do a better job with them than we’ve been doing. And they’re fully worth it.