

When a Shaver Begins to Shave

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THE PUZZLING SITUATIONS confronting a boy crossing the threshold from childhood to adolescence have provided psychologists materials for many a book. Yet in the numerous discussions on adolescent psychology very little reference is made to the first shaving experience—the object of desire for some maturing youth, and the cause of worry and distress for others. The first shave may be considered of too little importance to worm its way into the literature of adolescent psychology, and when regarded as an isolated incident, this evaluation is probably correct. But when it is recognized as a symbol of the anticipations, joys, stresses, and strains of growing up, it attains a new significance.

This article is based upon information gathered from 125 boys, ages 17 to 19, who each wrote a short anecdotal story on "My First Shaving Experience." This collection of papers has been shown to a number of adults. Generally the anecdotes are initially greeted with amused and indulgent smiles. That anything beyond amusement is involved does not occur to most persons.

An examination of the anecdotes, however, leaves one wondering whether undue and needless obstacles are not placed in the way of maturing youth. If around so simple a proc-

ess as beginning to shave are built so many emotional reactions, both desirable and undesirable, what must be the circumstances centering about the more complex aspects of maturation—as adjustment to the maturing sex drive, to one's increased independence and responsibility as an adolescent, or to one's initiation as a full-fledged participant in the social and vocational world?

By social custom the adolescent is expected to shave when a certain stage of maturity is reached. The act of shaving in itself should be nothing to worry about. Men shave every day, doing it habitually and with little thought. But when an adolescent fails to have essential security and understanding and the sympathetic guidance of adults, situations and problems incident to maturity are met with uncertainty and reluctance rather than assurance and confidence. When he does have these essential psychological ingredients, growing up becomes an easy, joyous process which the boy and those around him regard as natural and desirable.

Of the 125 individuals, only some 20 per cent found their first shaving experience a natural and even pleasant experience. For the rest, negative emotional reactions of varying degrees and kinds were associated with the first shave. When the experience was an easy and natural next step toward maturity, it seemed definitely associated with the sympathetic understanding of adults who made it so.

Let us take our evidence from the boys themselves.

A Natural Phase of Growing Up

"This event does not stand out any too clearly in my mind. The reason is probably due to the lack of fuss made over it. No friend called attention to the growth of moss on my upper lip; it remained for my father

Grown-ups sometimes take for granted phases of maturing which may seem quite complicated and insurmountable to a child. The (to an adult mind) undramatic accomplishment of shaving, for example, is one of the "little things" that may temporarily make life difficult for an adolescent boy. To help us understand our task of guiding youngsters through such experiences, Lester A. Kirkendall, U. S. Office of Education, presents a series of statements from boys between the ages of 17 and 19 in which they describe emotional reactions to their first shave.

to start the shaving process. He came home one night with a safety razor and proceeded to show me the tricks of using it. I succeeded in getting through without a mishap and later glowed with pride at the compliments of my father concerning the way I handled the razor. I remember the next morning of remarking to my friends that I had shaved the night before, and though I took some kidding, I was regarded more as a man in their eyes than ever before. I had the reaction that I had finally reached manhood."

"My first shaving experience was surprisingly free from emotional difficulties. I had never associated the appearance of the beard with any grand ideas of 'manhood' and with the first growth of fuzz I merely accepted the fact that I now had another responsibility in the maintenance of my personal appearance. No doubt my lack of emotion was due to the fact that my father spoke of my having to shave soon, in a very natural manner which did not emphasize the fact that I was approaching any unusual stage in my life. I felt no different on that first day than I did this morning as I scraped my chin."

A Pleasant Experience

Many boys look forward to shaving with anticipation. To them it means approaching manhood:

"As a boy I had always wanted to shave; I knew that shaving would make me a man among men. Each time that I washed my face, I looked carefully into the mirror to see whether I had any evidence upon my face which would allow me to join the ranks of my much esteemed elders. Time marched on—11, 12, and 13, 14, 15, and 16—would I never grow a beard?"

Sometimes the interested and sympathetic attitude of the parents toward the first shave of their son transforms this event into a memorable occasion:

"I remember distinctly my father's teaching me to shave. There is nothing much to relate. As Dad shaved, I watched. 'See, you pull up here, and then come down over here.' On it went.

"'Now you try it.' With my father as a spectator I succeeded in plastering my face with lather. . . . I took the razor as my father watched closely. As far as I was concerned

this was a piece of gold in my hands. Dad watched me for a moment and told me that it was all mine. 'Go right to it.'

"After cleaning my face and removing the suds on the mirror and sink and putting plenty of powder on my face, I opened the door and awaited the comment from the family."

One boy writes, "I had been in bed for some days with scarlet fever. At the time I was 13 years of age. . . . The morning I was to be allowed up, my mother brought me a mirror and asked me to look at myself. Lo and behold, upon looking into the glass I saw my face covered with hair. . . . I spent the next few days looking into mirrors whenever I had the opportunity. I did not feel so badly now that I had gotten from my illness something I had wished for a long time. . . .

"'Well, son, let's get that beard shaved off and have you look civilized again.' These words were the ones I think I can remember probably more than any others used by my father. I was seated in a chair directly beneath the light in the kitchen, and my father prepared to remove my mask of hair. Here was the moment I had waited for so long; now I could say I had shaved. After my father had applied the lather, he turned his back to me and stropped the razor. When he again faced me, he held in his hand a long, sharp, gleaming razor, which, when I saw it, sent all kinds of thoughts through my mind. What if my father's hand slipped? What if he should forget to stop at my ears? These and many other gruesome thoughts flashed through my mind in a split second. . . . The whole operation took about fifteen minutes. . . . I still remember how proud I was to be able to say to my friends, 'I shaved yesterday.'"

The Gang Is Impressed

It is quite evident that shaving means approaching manhood to the boy's associates and that he sometimes achieves or loses status according to the evidence he carries of a beard. Here are some of the youngsters' worries on this score.

"My beard is extremely light and not very noticeable. So I was not bothered so much by its presence as by its absence. This did cause me a slight feeling of inferiority, and I wished that I had a heavier beard too."

"I wondered what was wrong with me—why I didn't have hair on my face. I worried for fear I would be called a baby or a 'pansy.' I went so far as to make liberal applications of hair tonic to my face to hasten my faltering crop."

"If I had admitted that I had never shaved, I would have been subject to ridicule. Therefore, I chose the easiest way out. The discussions usually ran along these lines: someone would remark how tough his beard was getting or how he hated to shave every day (when in reality he probably shaved once a month) or what type of shaving cream he used. My own beard, if I may take the liberty to call it that, consisted of a few paltry hairs, but I considered this sufficient to heartily agree with the boys that it was unlucky to have a tough (!) beard. . . . I had read in those glowing advertisements of men with tough beards and tender skin, and of course I placed myself in this category."

"When I went to school the next Monday, I was quick to inform our gang that I had taken my first shave. I believe that I was in the seventh grade at the time. None of the other fellows in the gang had shaved, although some of them needed to remove their fuzz also. I considered myself as the first 'man' in our gang."

"I was quite proud of those cuts in school as they marked me as one who shaved. . . . Being cut with that straight razor made me think that I had fully reached maturity, as I had shaved and cut myself as I had often seen my father do."

Fun-poking Doesn't Help

On the other hand, emotionally sensitive boys are affected by the joking and laughing about the downy hair on their faces. When a father or mother wittingly or unwittingly makes remarks of this nature, the outcome usually helps to build a barrier between the boy and his parents. The boy feels unable to seek help not only with reference to shaving but on any other matter that affects his personal adjustment. Parents by lack of understanding may weaken the bonds between them and their son, preventing consultation and the sharing of confidences. The son eschews his parents' guidance and seeks advice

of friends and acquaintances, or personally copes with the problem as best he can. When we remember that about four-fifths of the group related reactions of this kind, there is evidence of a basically undesirable approach to maturity.

The following paragraphs illustrate this clearly:

"My first shaving experience, when I was about 16, caused me much anxiety. My father used to 'kid' me with such remarks as 'put some cream on your face and let the cat lick your whiskers off.' He often told me to start shaving but never offered me any shaving supplies except advice. My face soon began to look dirty all the time. I was secretly ashamed but, at the time, saw no way to remedy the situation."

"Remembering, midst happy reflections on my first shave, that I shared the house with my parents, pride turned to fear. How was I to keep my 'Achievement' from the prying eyes of my parents, especially my mother? To be sure, much to my embarrassment and dismay, my mother noticed my raw, cut face upon her arrival that night. I attributed the cuts to a football game early in the day, but upon closer inspection, my mother knew of my attempt. I was so embarrassed that I left the house immediately, and did not come home that night until all were asleep. There was nothing much said, but for a few weeks I felt ill at ease."

One must not assume that boys can never take "kidding" about their embryo beards and moustaches. It is not so much the kidding, as the spirit in which it is done, which determines the boys' ability to meet it.

"No one at home ever joked much about my shaving, and when they did, we both took it in a spirit of fun; therefore, I didn't mind at all."

"I remember my first shave very well. It was on December 26, 1937. I know this date, so exactly because I received the razor as my very own on the day before as a Christmas present. I didn't shave on Christmas Day, as I wanted to, because my family prevailed on me to wait until the next day. I guess they didn't want any blood shed on Christmas Day."

Resorting to Desperate Measures

Of course, the adolescent may settle the shaving problems at home in his own way notwithstanding the fact that he lacks instruction or the confidence of his parents. When such is the case, the pattern of behavior is likely to be this: Father's razor is borrowed; the shaving is done on the "sly"—by an inexperienced and unsteady hand.

One boy says, "I bought a razor, a mirror, and some hand-soap to school, and during the noon hour the gang and I left the school yard and went down to a nearby stream. I was afraid to shave at home because of the peculiar sensation that I was sure to create."

Another fellow wrote that because of poor relationship with his father and mother he settled the matter of shaving alone. Because of the conditions under which he began shaving, the incident remains clearly in his memory. Reading his personal account, we see him coming out of church one Sunday morning and swinging down Main Street to his father's barber shop. There the weekly ritual of cleaning the shop takes place; he sweeps the floor, dusts the furniture, cleans the tools. But today as he works, his mind relentlessly ticks off two sentences. Over and over again they run, "Put milk on it. Let the cat lick it off. Put milk on it. Let the cat lick it off. Put milk—Let the cat lick—" Could he avoid this "razzing" by shaving?

He reports: "... and I felt pretty confident that I could handle a straight edge with ease. I made sure that the window shades were drawn and the door locked, then proceeded to make the lather. . . . After a great deal of effort I stopped the flow of blood and shamefacedly made my way home. Well, I didn't mind my dad's remarks, but the 'razzing' that I took at the dinner table was an insult to my pride. So in the middle of my meal I went upstairs to my room. It was a long time before I ventured to shave again."

A Social Handicap

Sometimes a socially inept boy is unable to capitalize on his approaching maturity with friends and is humiliated instead of proud. One senses in this description that the boy's social ineptitude in the matter of meeting maturity may be only a reflection of parental ineptitude in helping their son:

"None of the other boys had come to the stage where they were faced with the problem. For this reason I felt different from my friends in some way, although I did not know why. My playmates many times made fun of me because of my fuzzy face. They would tease and plague me, until I would run away to be by myself. I did not know what to do.

"For weeks this problem troubled me. Finally I forced enough courage to mention the matter to my father. He looked at me from all angles. He then told me that he saw no reason why the boys should bother me. This answer did not clear up the matter for me. I went about my school work and play with the thought that people were looking at me and making fun of me. When I was asked to parties, I would not go because I thought the others would make me the standing joke. This frame of mind held me in its grip for a year and a half. I really did not know what the older people thought of me, because I was ashamed to ask. I knew what the other children of my same age thought however."

Not a Matter to Call Forth "Discipline"

Sometimes an unexpected twist of events will transform the first shaving experience into so thoroughly a disagreeable experience that the boy remembers it with shame and disgust, or possibly in retrospect, tolerant amusement. There seems no reason why a boy should need to write, "I look back to my first shave with disgust, because it was so embarrassing to me.

"Two other boys and myself having waited in vain for a beard for several years came to the conclusion that we would shave anyway and at least command the respect of our associates at school and create an air of superiority among ourselves.

"As the possibility of shaving at home was definitely out of the question, for quite obvious reasons, the only alternative was school. We carefully made our plans and arranged to 'borrow' shaving cream and razors from home and to undertake a great step in the life of any boy.

"Unfortunately, the results were altogether negative, for having commandeered the envy and respect of our classmates, we were due for a complete change of face. The shaving cream had through some strange coincidence

managed to scatter itself quite widely over the lavatory and with the aid of a 'tattling' classmate, whom we never forgave, our teacher suddenly appeared on the scene. The consequences: We were obliged to lather our faces and sit in class in this condition for an hour, plus cleaning up the lavatory. The result of this was a change from respect on our classmates' part to utter ridicule."

"After reaching the age of 15, I decided that it was about time I started to shave. The particular day I chose was on a Sunday when the rest of the family was downstairs. I made sure that the bathroom door was locked so that nobody would interfere with this delicate operation. Then I took my father's newest straight razor and decided that it needed some sharpening. I had seen barbers sharpen razors on a strop; so I knew just how to go about this procedure. All went well until suddenly the blade went through the strop. I was too deeply involved at this point to stop; so I kept right on. I then lathered my face well and rubbed the lather in briskly to loosen the few scrawny whiskers on the side of my face. At first I couldn't find the whiskers but after wiping off some lather I was able to see where to start. I had hold of the razor as if I were going to butcher a cow instead of shaving my face. I started to shave from my ear lobe towards my mouth. Without realizing the danger, I kept right on through with one stroke until I came to my mouth. Suddenly, I saw red blood gushing from the side of my mouth. I dropped the razor, grabbed hold of my mouth and started to scream.

"My father and mother came rushing upstairs, but instead of opening the door, I kept hold of my mouth and kept screaming. Father broke the door in, grabbed me and rushed me to the sink. Upon washing the cut, we found that there was more blood than damage. I was more frightened by the sight of the blood than anything else. There was more to this experience than I had hoped for. My father had different ideas about the broken strop. The final result was that I wasn't able to sit down for a few hours. I decided to grow up before shaving."

"Throughout my sophomore year I was the butt of many jokes and comments on the part of my fellow students because of my

very dark moustache. Near the end of the year I remember walking home one noon hour and overhearing two girls remark on the darkness of my moustache. When I reached home, I went immediately to my father's shaving set and after lathering my upper lip, I nervously shaved, hoping my mother wouldn't come into the room. When I sat down to dinner, my mother asked me if I were ill, and then it suddenly dawned upon her that I had shaved. Her only reaction was to warn me not to tell my father, and I, knowing the excitability of his temperament, avoided him for two or three days after that.

"I had none of the feeling of becoming a man when I did this. My only feeling was an intense relief that I had finally relieved myself of a tiresome joke which I no longer would be subjected to. However, my close friends, realizing my reason for the act, remarked on my sickly pallor and asked if I had used bleaching agents. When my father became aware of this first venture, he blamed it on the high schools and the attitude they raised in students, and my companions. I don't remember whether he chastised me manually or verbally, but it must have had an effect upon me, for I never shaved again until I was given a shaving set the following Christmas."

It Takes Confidence to Face Maturity

Sometimes the boy's reactions to the first shave, if known, point to the need for him to face his maturity and the world with more assurance and confidence:

"When I began to attain the 'peach fuzz' age, I started worrying. Contrary to the majority of my boy friends, I did not want to grow up. I was happy at that age and didn't wish to change—I even feared growing up. Therefore, when people said that I was almost 'a man' at the tender age of 13 or 14 because my face looked a bit fuzzy, I hurried to remove this indication of age. At first I used scissors. Then, as the hair became darker and more obvious, I did the usual thing of taking Dad's razor. He was very understanding and gave me an old razor and some used blades. But he told me not to shave any more than was necessary as the hairs had a tendency to grow in more rapidly when cut off. I willingly took his advice and tried keeping my youth as long as I could. However, being

dark-haired, I soon had a real problem on my hands. It became necessary to shave several times a week—and now, darn it, every day.”

“ . . . No comments were forthcoming from my family or friends in regard to my shaving, which apparently was accepted as a matter of course. However, I was not happy, for I felt as though my youth had vanished with each stroke of the razor, and I did have a fear of future evil. This apprehension that I felt is inexplicable, but I have felt it often in regard to doing something for the first time. . . .”

One interesting incident of identification with a fictional hero was cited:

“During one of my last fond reviewings of ‘Dick Merriwell,’ I ran across a phrase that decided the course I was to take. Dick very emphatically stated that he wouldn’t have an unhealthy, dirt-catching moustache on his face, and I decided that I wouldn’t either.”

I have sometimes thought if I were unable to ask directly about parent-son, and especially father-son, relationships and could gain the information only from a clue question, the one I would use is, “Under what circumstances did your first shave occur?” The circumstances surrounding this simple consequence of maturity are most revealing. Take, for example, the contrasts in father-son relations provided by certain of these excerpts. Why cannot all parents take the pride and pleasure in their children’s development shown by the parents of the boy recovering from scarlet fever? Why make a perfectly normal growth process difficult and unpleasant through chiding and physical punishment?

Surely, as teachers and parents these “first shave” anecdotes should bring to us a keener realization of the need a youth has for appreciation and sympathetic understanding of his experiences during the time he is growing up.

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We, the Children . . . Boys and girls discuss intercultural understanding. Reprint from March 1945 *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*. Published jointly with Bureau for Intercultural Education. 25 cents.

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