

ANY CURRICULUM or individual guidance which is planned for the purpose of helping youngsters to adjust to their own changes in size, or bodily proportions, or other phenomena of physical growth must recognize that

growth is a continuous process and that such terms as infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood tend to give a false impression of separateness. Nevertheless the body changes connected with the early part of adolescence, coming at a time when the individual is particularly sensitive to appearance and particularly anxious to appear well, frequently affect his or her general competence in meeting and enjoying social situations.

It must also be remembered that there is a wide difference among individuals as to the amount of adjustment each has to make to the sequential characteristics of physical growth. For one boy, consciousness of growth is merely a general and pleasant recognition of his progress towards being grown up. For another boy, perfectly normal bodily changes may be generally, or even acutely, disturbing, and therefore his need for adjustment may be considerable. In this discussion the attempt is made to draw attention to some general and some specific ways which have been found useful in helping youngsters to accept themselves as they change, but it must be emphasized that there is no substitute for individual guidance by a sympathetic and wise adult who knows the child to be guided and who knows the changes that are to be expected.

A kid in the "awkward age" confounds both himself and adults. He needs help, the kind of help a teacher can give when she talks with him about his troubles or when she awakens his interest in painting or carpentry or some other creative outlet. "It behooves us as teachers," writes this author, in emphasizing the importance of helping children understand themselves, "... to be alert to any signs that a youngster is disturbed about his growing body, and to be ready to help him analyze, face, and conquer his fears." Herbert R. Stolz, M.D., is assistant superintendent in charge of individual guidance, Oakland (Calif.) Public Schools.

¶ *The guidance of an understanding teacher eases the worries of adolescence*

Helping Youngsters Adjust

When Youngsters Become Concerned

In general, elementary school pupils, who are wholesomely busy discovering what the world about them is like, are not particularly interested in their own physical development. Some of them are mildly interested in their gaining weight from year to year, and perhaps the marks on the door-jamb which record their gain in height from birthday to birthday are temporarily subjects for conversation and comparison; but usually the parents are more interested than the child. In the period just preceding adolescence when individual differences in rate of growth become more obvious and when the child begins to think of himself as becoming this sort or that sort of an adult, the interest of many children in growth is more sustained, and a few will be found who become vaguely uneasy if their present bodily dimensions in relation to those of their fellows make it seem probable that they will not achieve their emerging ideal as regards height, strength, or body proportions.

A little later, perhaps in the seventh grade for girls and on the eighth grade level for boys, the attention of a considerable number of children becomes more or less persistently focused upon the outward signs of their growth and development. In our culture, it would seem that this is more likely to occur with girls than with boys, and at this time the preceding vague uneasiness of some children may become a clear-cut dissatisfaction with their growth pattern. This period of greater preoccupation with the growth characteristics of their own bodies tends to persist for two or three years, and then to gradually yield its place of importance to other ideals of self-fulfillment. Here again there is a sex difference. The period during which the body is the most important symbol of the self tends to be distinctly shorter for boys than for girls due to our cultural emphases. In any case, by the time a pupil is ready to graduate

to Their Physical Growth

from senior high school he or she has usually made considerable progress in accepting the peculiarities of personal physique and in recognizing that success and happiness depend far more upon intellectual, social, and vocational competence than they do upon beauty, strength, or physical presence.

Release Through Zestful Living

If we study in detail the case histories of those youngsters who are least disturbed by the pubescent and adolescent changes through which they grow, we are often impressed with the fact that they have for years been so interested in the world about them, or in some particular hobby, or in academic achievement, or in athletic success, that they have had little time for introspection. This seems to give a lead which might well be followed in relation to all children; namely, that zestful living which includes increasing competence in one or more areas of satisfying experience is probably the best general insurance against the so-called stresses of adolescence. Applying this to our responsibility as teachers would seem to mean that each succeeding teacher should make it a point to find out whether the child has found outlets for creative effort either in connection with his school experiences or with experiences out of school. It also entails the further responsibility that when a child is found who has apparently no such developing interest in things or persons outside of himself, the teacher should do what he can to start the pupil along this road.

In other words, whenever a teacher is faced with a new class he should begin systematically to gather information not only concerning the health, academic potentialities, and actual classroom performance of each pupil, but also data as to what are the activities in which each child is particularly interested during out-of-school hours. Sometimes these areas can be discovered in a two-minute con-

versation; sometimes they require more extended investigation, and sometimes there appear to be no such areas. It is obvious without laboring the point that the data so gathered can be used as the basis for cooperative planning and guidance by both teacher and parent. This approach may seem to have little relation to the specific problem of adjustment to somatic growth changes, but as is the case with so many other aspects of education, the indirect approach is perhaps the most effective. Obviously such a gradual development of interest in *performance* rather than in *appearance* will contribute to the general level of a child's self-assurance and thus enable him to meet with greater equanimity not only the stresses connected with physical growth differences, but also stresses from other causes.

Learning Facts Helps

In a considerable number of early adolescents who are disturbed over their growth or lack of growth, one finds that part of the difficulty lies in ignorance. The unknown is always troubling. The boy whose best friend has suddenly grown inches taller begins to wonder if his own retardation in growth means that there is something wrong with him or that he is always going to be "stunted." Experience with such youngsters indicates that when once they understand that the spurt in the growth, characteristic of early adolescence, does not occur for all young people at any given chronological age and that in all probability they will before very long experience their own period of rapid development, their anxiety is considerably diminished.

It would greatly facilitate the work of counselors in any junior or senior high school if there were available to them a folder con-

Courtesy Long Beach (Calif.) Public Schools



taining charts showing the graphic representation of growth in height and strength for a considerable number of individuals. These graphs should be selected to illustrate the differences in the timing of the early adolescent spurt and could also show the final height achieved at, say 18 years. A series of actual photographs of the same child taken to a standard scale is even better in illustrating growth. Unfortunately, such photographs are hard to come by. We will hope that in time it will be a routine procedure in many schools to assemble such a growth series.

Because of our cultural ideals of manhood and womanhood, boys are seldom disturbed by precocious growth or by being big. It is the slow developers or the small boys who are unhappy. On the other hand, very few girls are worried because they are small, while a considerable number, both by their posture and by their confidences, reveal their apprehension that they may be too tall or too large. In the case of boys who actually are small at every age and who will undoubtedly be small men, their self-acceptance can be promoted by emphasizing the success which small men have achieved and the social contributions which they have made. To persuade a large-boned, heavy girl that her physique is not an insurmountable handicap to happiness is somewhat more difficult, but still not an impossible task.

One of the vicissitudes of growth which is apt to be passed over as unimportant and even humorous by adults, but which may cause acute suffering to a sensitive boy, is the period of increased fatness which occurs just prior to and during the early stages of adolescence. The common assumption that fat boys are happy boys is far from true. Indeed, it may be said with certainty that the sufferings a boy may endure while he is passing through this fat period are frequently reflected in his attitude towards life for many years and in many ways.

To be fat during the early years of the second decade is peculiarly handicapping to

boys because of the great value they place upon participation in active games, and even boys are usually sensitive to the jibes and nicknames which an excess of subcutaneous tissue seems to invite. Here again, knowledge of the frequency with which this period of fatness occurs among boys and an understanding of the transiency of this phase of development is distinctly comforting. Actually about 25 per cent of all boys show this tendency in some degree and for varying durations. It is true that a few of them will continue to be fat even after high school graduation, but by that time the great majority will have lost their plumpness and will fall very easily within the normal group so far as appearance is concerned. One or more series of photographs showing how boys may be quite fat for a period of two or three years and yet emerge with not only passable but really splendid physiques are more useful in reassuring the self-conscious youngster than any amount of conversation.

Youngsters Need Adult Understanding

Specific suggestions have been given as to how teachers and counselors may help boys and girls through certain commonly occurring growth perplexities. There are, of course, many other deviations of the growth pattern which disturb young people but which are found less frequently.

For all youngsters who have this problem the greatest possible support is found in the sympathetic and intelligent guidance by some adult. Presumably this is the responsibility of parents, but all too often parents are either unaware of the difficulty or are themselves so badly adjusted to their individual peculiarities that they cannot develop in their children a robust self-acceptance. Therefore, it behooves us as teachers to know the usual sequences in the pattern of growth, to be alert to any signs that a youngster is disturbed about his growing body, and to be ready to help him analyze, face, and conquer his fears.

WE CALL YOUR ATTENTION to the index for Volume II of EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP to be found on the last pages of this issue. May we take this opportunity to thank our authors, and the host of members who have given us their comments and suggestions for EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP.

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