

# Adolescents

## Are Here To Stay

This article tackles a very timely question, "What's *right* with adolescent boys and girls?" Home, school and community must assist these young people as they attempt to find positive, contributing roles in today's adult world.

**A** HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT in California has a complaint, and in indignant fashion voices it in a letter to a magazine editor:

"I think it's a waste of space . . . You open any magazine these days and sure enough there's a column or page devoted to teen-agers' behavior . . . I have yet to see an article about the problems of the middle-aged. Don't tell me that teen-agers are the only ones with problems in this world. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

This student is certainly speaking the truth when she complains about the amount of publicity given the teenager or adolescent in recent times. No age group makes the pages of newspapers as consistently as do adolescents; and the emphasis of the reports, discouragingly enough, is on the youngsters' shortcomings or "peculiarities."

A brief perusal of the numerous magazine and newspaper articles on the subject, educational films on youth problems, and even congressional investigations attests to the current feeling that the period of adolescence is

<sup>1</sup> *Senior Scholastic*, 55:3, October 12, 1949.

indeed a period of crisis and conflict. In fact, the term adolescence to some has become synonymous with delinquency. Marynia F. Farnham in the introduction to her book, *The Adolescent*, emphasizes this point. "Many parents," she says, "look forward to the age with grim foreboding, bracing themselves for the shock, expecting the worst . . . There must be some reason why this time of life—a natural and inevitable period of development, often full of charm and beauty—should have become a major mystery."<sup>2</sup>

Many areas, of course, would have to be explored to begin to get answers to the question of what causes adolescents to act the way they do in our society. Ivan Nye claims that "a wide common base can be found for agreement that adolescent behavior today is a result of the nature of present-day American society."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to cite two aspects of society that

<sup>2</sup> Marynia F. Farnham, *The Adolescent*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> Ivan Nye, "Adolescent Parent Adjustment—Socio-Economic Level as a Variable," *American Sociological Review*, 16:341, June 1951.

are particularly to blame: one is its urban, industrial character which has made the adolescent's labor of little or no value, and the other is the extremely rapid rate of social change which gives the adolescent many experiences that the parents did not have and with which adults, present institutions, and the mores are unable to cope in an organized manner. In reference to this last point, Newton Edwards points out that "the adolescent today must in some way adjust to a culture that is characterized by instability, confusion, and conflict . . . Our society is undergoing changes no less significant than those produced by the shift from a feudal to a capitalistic economy. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

### Prolonged Adolescence

Many students of the problem have pointed out that the new social forces mentioned plus a lengthened life span have created a prolonged period of adolescence. In certain primitive societies where the coming of age of their youth may be recognized in brief puberty ceremonies, the step from childhood to adulthood is relatively abrupt and eventful. In this country a few generations ago, boys and girls were frequently married at sixteen or eighteen and were established in homes of their own. In our early frontier society young people took over the responsibilities of adulthood early and were accepted in adult roles by the society. For the majority of boys and girls there

<sup>4</sup> Newton Edwards, "The Adolescent in a Technological Society," *The Forty-Third Yearbook*, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944. p. 185.

is a period of from five to ten years between the time when they are physically mature and the time when they are permitted to take their place in adult society. "This long period of adolescence, which is due largely to socioeconomic causes, creates problems of adjustment in regard to the school curriculum, family relationships, heterosexual activities, and community participation."<sup>5</sup>

But must this period—this long gap between childhood and adulthood—be such a critical one? Ralph Linton points out that in societies which recognize adolescence as a distinct condition the period passes with little or no stress, and the transition from the roles of childhood to those of adult life is accomplished with little shock to the personality.<sup>6</sup> It is felt, therefore, that a basic factor primarily pertinent to adolescence that contributes to the conflict and confusion of the period is the failure on the part of adult society to identify in positive terms the role and status of the adolescent. We simply leave their social role in doubt, says Linton, and "we alternately demand from them the obedience and submission of children and the initiative and acceptance of personal responsibilities which go with adult status. The results of this inconsistent treatment are . . . well known to students of personality psychology . . ."<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to hear the statement often made by

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, Walter Scott Monroe, Editor. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950. p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph Linton, *The Cultural Background of Personality*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1945. p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

youngsters, "Sometimes I don't know what they (parents) want."

A familiar pattern in the raising of young children is the one in which the child is continually told how he must act. He may be told that "a good boy (or girl) does this or doesn't do that." The child is given little choice in matters, and he learns that "Mother knows best." When a child brought up in this manner reaches adolescence, he is confronted, as Lawrence K. Frank puts it, "with a strangely contradictory situation. Suddenly the parents begin to reproach the child for lack of maturity, demanding that he show some sense, use some judgment . . . and stand on his own feet. The poor adolescent may never in his life have had an opportunity to use judgment or take responsibility, but now he is berated for inability to take charge of his own life (according to the standards of his parents)."<sup>8</sup> We have the case of grown-ups seeing the child become much more adult in size and suddenly expecting him to have completely equipped and built-in with this growth a fully mature sense of judgment and responsibility. The child is often told, "You're a big boy now, so we shouldn't have to tell you how to act."

The problems often come when a child indeed acts on his own because he is a "big boy now." There is much evidence to illustrate the condition in which adolescents are told on the one hand that "you are no longer a child" and, on the other, "you are nothing but a child." It is not unique to have

<sup>8</sup> Lawrence K. Frank, "The Adolescent and the Family," *The Forty-Third Year Book*, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1944. p. 246.

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this type of ambivalent and contradictory activity on the part of parents when youngsters have already reached the age of twenty-one or even twenty-five.<sup>9</sup>

It has already been pointed out that there are procedures employed by other societies of initiating adolescents directly into adulthood. Peter Blos, in his book, *The Adolescent Personality*, describes some of these procedures and then comments on the lack of a well-defined role for adolescents in our society.

In Western society there are no such cultural recognitions given to the gradual process of growing up nor to the significance of puberty as a stage of maturation. The adolescent lives in a cultural no-man's-land between a protected, socially irresponsible childhood and an independent adulthood in which he is suddenly to take on the full responsibilities of maturity . . . Established conditions in our culture are not favorable to the notion of preparing children for adulthood by permitting them to participate increasingly in adult activities.<sup>10</sup>

The point made that adult society has failed to identify in specific terms the role and status of the adolescent is not to deny that the lengthy period between childhood and adulthood is recognized in our society as the adolescent period. The multitude of discus-

<sup>9</sup> Ada Hart Arlitt, *The Adolescent*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1938. p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Blos, *The Adolescent Personality*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1941. p. 262.

sion and correspondence on the subject, as mentioned previously, certainly proves the recognition. But this recognition has not been the formal one given in the age-sex systems of other societies; it has been the informal, necessary recognition forced upon us by the behavior of adolescents themselves.

### Adolescents Define Their Own Role

Studies of adolescent peer culture groups have shown that the actual defining of the adolescent social role has been practically taken over by the adolescents themselves. We are all somewhat familiar with the special language, dress and dance rituals prescribed by the youths themselves. Caroline Tryon cites the existence of special adolescent groups with their own particular culture patterns. "These serve," she says, "the two-fold end of welding the group together and setting up barriers against the demands and pressures of the adult world, a world which has not for the most part welcomed children and youth as an integral part of it."<sup>11</sup>

The problem of sex relationships between boy and girl is another that has caused much discussion and concern. Paul H. Landis notes<sup>12</sup> that social training in our society, which makes no provision for adolescent rites and ceremonies, gives to the adolescent

<sup>11</sup> Caroline M. Tryon, "The Adolescent Peer Culture," *The Forty-Third Year Book*, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944. p. 238.

<sup>12</sup> Paul H. Landis, *Adolescence and Youth*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1952. p. 67, 286.

little specific idea as to how he is to conduct himself in the initial and other stages of pair association. Many of the definitions and relationships between the adolescent and his peer group of the opposite sex tend to be defined "by the adolescent group itself rather than by the elders." Farnham agrees and says that it is easier for parents "to let responsibility go by the board and simply turn over the whole business to the young."<sup>13</sup>

Many parents simply feel that there is little they can do about the child's development during adolescence. Recently, I had occasion to talk with a young mother who was voicing some of her fears concerning the behavior of her twelve year old son. "I can already see signs," she said, "that he is becoming an adolescent, and I know he's going to have the typical troubles of the normal adolescent." This mother who is an intelligent college graduate summed up her rather defeatist attitude with the comment that she and her husband knew that they had to be patient in this matter and that they were prepared to live through the period however turbulent it might be. The attitude of this parent may not be typical, but it is certainly widely prevalent in our middle class society. The sad thing about this attitude is the feeling that the period of adolescence is a terrible time that just has to be—that it is something like red hair or large feet. It is "natural and normal," and there is little we can do about it.

Other adults react negatively to the entire situation and aggravate it still further by their critical comments and descriptions of today's youngsters.

<sup>13</sup> Marynia F. Farnham, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

Adolescents in identifying for themselves the role that they are expected to play are not unaffected by the description and judgment of themselves on the part of the adult community. The mother of the twelve year old cited in the previous paragraph voiced another fear of hers in this regard. She was worried not only about the terrible time she expected her son to have as an adolescent, but was worried as well by the possibility that the son may not have the "typical" troubles of the adolescent.

It is interesting to see how some senior high school students reacted to the question, "Do you think teen-agers are usually portrayed fairly in the movies?"<sup>14</sup> One boy from Kansas said, "No! In every film I have seen, the teen-agers were stupid, dizzy, or murderous."

A second pupil from Rochester, New York, stated, "I always hate to go to a movie with a teen-ager in it because the movie is sure to make some older person sitting behind me comment, 'Young people today have no manners.'"

"My pet peeve," wrote another high school student from Norfolk, Virginia, about teen-age behavior, "is the age-old saying, 'What is this young generation coming to?' . . . There's a screech of tires, and the very first remark that's made is a very disgusted, 'Oh, those reckless teen-agers!' . . . I realize that teen-agers are prone to show off in a car . . . Do you think, however, that such remarks as this help the situation? On the contrary, they tend only to make the teen-agers want to show

<sup>14</sup> *Senior Scholastic*, 53:32, December 3, 1948.

'that old crone' a thing or two . . . Of course, we have many faults . . . But instead of harping on our bad points, why don't more grown-ups get together and build up our good ones?"<sup>15</sup>

### Influence of Home and School

Our teen-age correspondent has given us in his last sentence some indication wherein we may seek for possible ways to improve the situation. It is important to realize that, despite the implication that the peer group develops a set of values, a way of acting or a role of its own, it does not do this in a vacuum. The home as an influence is still a vital factor—a factor that adolescents with their need for support and security do not really reject. A high school boy in commenting on the question of whether teen-agers today have too much or too little freedom argued that "teen-agers need a certain amount of freedom for they must develop responsibility and self-reliance. The amount of freedom should be determined by a teen-ager's parents on the basis of how well he uses that freedom."<sup>16</sup>

In the 1953 yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, William G. Brink stresses the home's still powerful position as an influence: "Despite the changes that have occurred, the home remains the

<sup>15</sup> *Senior Scholastic*, 56:16, January 4, 1950.

<sup>16</sup> *Senior Scholastic*, 53:39, Dec. 3, 1948. (Note: In the same article, the editor notes that in an uncontrolled response to the question of too little or too much freedom, high school students from all over the country scored as follows: 12% felt abused with restrictions, 48% felt they had about the right amount of freedom, and 40% felt that teen-agers had too much.)

most powerful educative force in society, and the child is most significantly and irrevocably conditioned by its influence."<sup>17</sup> The problem becomes one of acquiring knowledge and method to enable parents to make their influence felt by positive means.

Educators in secondary schools and colleges, under whose tutelage many adolescents will come, also have a special concern in the matter. Peer group studies have indicated that the big obstacle preventing parents and teachers from exercising a positive influence is the fact that they tend to ignore the social reality of the child society, or even deny its existence.

It must be admitted, of course, that we are still far from knowing all we would like to know about the "peer culture" and how it operates. But we have accumulated sufficient data to make it clear that our task, as adults, is to acknowledge the peer society and try to understand it . . . The role of the teacher (and the parent) is to understand the peer group and to work with it, not against it. In so doing, she will be helping children develop normally, and in a manner conducive to mental health.<sup>18</sup>

The problem of adolescent behavior today is a serious one and not an easy one to answer. In this discussion, a number of the negative aspects have

<sup>17</sup> William G. Brink, "Introduction—Youth Needs Motive in Secondary Education," *The Fifty-Second Yearbook*, Part I, National Society for the Study of Education, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas M. More, "Children Teach Others" (Chapter III), *Fostering Mental Health in Our Schools*, 1950 Yearbook, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Washington, D. C.: the Association, a department of the National Education Association, 1950, p. 50-51.

been presented. There have been, as well, some positive possibilities in terms of what parents can do and how the school may assist the home. In this latter regard, the following question may be properly asked: Cannot the schools, which are ready to supplement family teachings with academic knowledge, help the adolescent to find a more wholesome and more humanly constructive approach to problems of human relationships?<sup>19</sup>

It is strongly felt that the traditional school where the acquisition of information is the aim is far from sufficient. The school, in addition to supplying academic knowledge, must help its pupils grow in understanding of themselves, of society and of the relationship between the individual and the society in which he lives.

More study of the problem is obviously needed involving the cooperative investigation of all concerned. This would include all the academic fields bearing on the development of human beings including anthropology, medicine, physiology, psychology and sociology as well as the field of education. Too often students in one field have neglected to take seriously or to accept findings in other fields.

With future cooperative study and the application of knowledge thus gained, our society should offer much more assistance to adolescents through the home, the school and other community resources—in helping them work out positive values so that proper definition and status may be given to the role of the adolescent.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence K. Frank, *op. cit.*, p. 253-254.

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