

Today's Children Are Different

GERALD GRANT WITH JOHN BRIGGS

Teachers and parents need to regain some of their lost authority and help youth contribute to society, not just borrow from it.

In contrasting ourselves with our children or our grandparents, we tend to exaggerate change. For instance, maturation now occurs earlier—perhaps a year or so—but nothing on the order of magnitude previously assumed.¹ Yet the relationships between young and old have changed, as well as the way we socialize the young. It is these changes, rather than the shift in maturation rates, that are most important.

Socialization strongly influences the kinds of persons we become and the attitudes we have, including our attitude toward biological change. I would like to reflect on those changes by comparing what adolescent life was like for my father and myself and is now for my son, a 16-year-old high school sophomore.

My son lives only a mile from the house where my father was born in 1899 and two miles from the neighborhood in which I grew up. He attends the public schools of Syracuse, as we did. Of course the Syracuse that my father knew was a small but bustling city less than a fifth its current size. Barges came through town on a canal that has been filled in, paved over, and renamed Erie Boulevard. The center of the city is relatively dead today—the action, especially for adolescents, is in the suburban malls, where they shop for electronic gear, sports equipment, and designer jeans, and then return home to talk about their forays, possibly on their own telephones.²

My grandfather, James Grant, a Scot who was part owner of Master's and Grant Livery, fell on hard times and into hard drinking and died when my father was 13. Mary Duffy Grant moved her five children to a flat over Madigan's butcher shop, where my father went to work after he completed grammar school in 1912. An older brother was "placed out" with relatives in Cleve-

land, a common practice in the 19th century. He was the only one of the five to complete high school, not far from the average in 1900 when the nation was still three-fifths rural and 10 percent completed high school. My father's work experience typified the shift that was occurring in an urbanizing nation. He had some apprentice-like jobs in the stable and butcher shop, where adult supervision was close but informal. At 18 he went to work in a new steel factory, where relationships were more hierarchical and the work took on the specialized character of the industrial era.

Most males went to work at 14 and learned what they needed to know in face-to-face relationships on the job. One learned by watching and imitating, picking up skills according to one's interest, effort, and opportunities. From the age of 13, my father turned over his earnings to his mother. He took us on tours of his old neighborhood, pointing out the flats in which he had lived and at what rent—he remembered because he had paid it. This, too, was typical throughout the 19th century, when children aged 12–18 supplied a third of the family income. It was a time when the young were expected to do the work of adults but were treated in most respects as children until 18, when those in rural areas might leave home for a boarding house in the city. Although one was not legally an adult until 21, most were emancipated informally by 18.

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Photo: Michael Sexton

"Adolescence" Is Born

By the mid-20th century adolescent culture had been born and given a name by G. Stanley Hall. The adolescent was neither expected to do the work of an adult nor treated as an adult. Adolescence was a moratorium from adult responsibilities and privileges with the exception of those "dropouts" (and the term was just then coming into use) who went to work, bought a car, and weren't kids any longer. Sociologists wrote about the overwhelming power of the peer group as the high school became the major socializing institution for most youth.

In *Adolescent Society*, James Coleman described Syracuse Central, the kind of high school from which I graduated in 1955. It was a place in which rating and dating games rivaled the formal academic curriculum. The curriculum was "tracked" and the path to maturity was partly affected by whether one was preparing for real work on graduation or continuation of the dating game in college, which then had such old-fashioned requirements as curfews and separate dormitories for boys and girls.

The adults in the school had more real power: we students could parody the uptight principal but we were careful when we did so because we knew he could throw us out. We generally observed the rules and believed that completing school was important to our occupational futures, but our strongest emotional commitments were to the values of the peer group. We did not feel the need to challenge adult culture as youth were to do in the 60s; we tended to give it superficial compliance while attending to our own pursuits—within bounds allowed by adults. Those bounds included the acceptance of chaperones at school events, and in the lower middle class neighborhood where I grew up, adults on the block felt free to correct a misbehaving child on the street.

Within my peer group culture, coke was something that went with french fries. Marijuana or any hallucinogenic drugs were unknown. Beer was regularly smuggled to parties after junior year but hard liquor was rarely seen. The fine gradations of petting dominated sexual



Photo: United Way of America

discussion and "going all the way" was generally forbidden. Pregnancy meant disgrace and automatic marriage; abortion was rare except among the wealthy. The technology of birth control was limited to the male condom and it was more for show than use.

The school was still perceived as a powerful social escalator. For families like ours, it worked. Whereas my father had gone only as far as eighth grade, three of his sons finished college; two of them are professors. But it was a world much less fair to women and blacks. My sister went to business school, not to college (later she became a nurse). Although Syracuse Central abutted what was then a black ghetto, it enrolled few blacks, and most of them left or were pushed out by the end of compulsory schooling at age 16. Those who could not afford to go to college usually didn't. There was no community college and virtually no free public higher education with the exception of state teachers colleges.

High School Evolves

By the 1980s school had become a more open institution. On the way into my son's high school you will pass students in wheelchairs taking a last drag on a cigarette before classes begin. The enrollment is about 55 percent black and includes a variety of new immigrants, including some Cambodian refugees. More than 90 percent graduate. Paradoxically, while graduation no longer gives one an advantage in the competition for jobs, those labeled dropouts pay

a penalty. Youth are increasingly granted adult rights but few expect them to bear adult responsibilities. Many work part-time but it is a rare parent who expects any contribution to the family purse. Teen income goes for teen consumer items—one's own stereo has become a birthright.

The adult keepers often feel stripped of most of their former powers. The courts have held that teenage girls can obtain birth control services over their parents' objection, and the children's rights movement has won new due process rights for young teenagers. In Washington, D.C., regulations forbid a teacher from barring a door to a pupil no matter how late he or she arrives, since pupils have a right to an education (presumably on their terms).

Some schools, particularly large urban high schools, have taken an adversarial turn. In the face of elaborate due process procedures, adults shrink from instituting charges because of the demands it would make on their own time or because they fear they lack evidence that would "stand up in court." Instead, they look the other way.

The reasons for these shifts are complex and it is impossible to assign precise weights to them. To a considerable degree, our problems have been a function of our successes. We have laid a great burden on American public schools: namely, to be the principal avenue of creating a more equal and just society. We have attempted to right some great wrongs and have carried out a social revolution in the schools.

Schools have become larger and more diverse. Perhaps there never has been a true consensus on the socializing and moral functions of the schools, but simply an agreement among the elite whom the schools predominantly served in an earlier era.

Now nearly everyone is in the school tent and feels he or she has an equal voice in deciding what kind of show should go on. Specific court decisions, especially on the Supreme Court decision *re Gault*, were interpreted as placing strong limits on the discretionary power of principals and teachers, and subject any disciplinary decision to quasi-appellate review. The children's rights movement has exploited these decisions, and concern about genuine child abuse has created the machinery for children to challenge parents in the much more doubtful area of "emotional abuse." There has been a significant shift from the traditional American attitude of independence, absorbed from the cradle, of "ain't nobody the boss of me" to adolescents who have gone a step further. "Don't touch me or I'll have you arrested."³

The radical wing of the movement has stressed the oppression of youth, as in this excerpt from the Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor:

Our lives are considered the property of various adults. We do not recognize their right to control us. We call this control adult chauvinism, and we will fight it. We quickly begin to learn that these schools and families are part of a whole system that is sick.⁴

In addition to the pull of children's rights from below, so to speak, some parents appear to be giving a push from above by relieving themselves of the burdens of parenthood. In recent decades there have been increases in divorce rates, in children living with one parent, in two-career families as well as shifts in attitudes about the responsibilities of parents. Survey data indicate parents are now less altruistic, for example, with 66 percent feeling they "should be free to live their own lives even if it means spending less time with their children." And 63 percent say they have a right to live well now "even if it means leaving less to the children."⁵

There is also evidence that parents have withdrawn from efforts to supervise

children, taking a more passive role in relation to their children's curriculum choices (math, science, and foreign language enrollment have fallen markedly), and a 1978 poll showed that nearly three-fourths of all parents had no regular rules limiting television watching.⁶ When the students themselves were asked whether teachers demanded enough of them, 57 percent said they were not asked to work hard enough.⁷

Increased Affluence

In part, the shifts I am describing reflect the increased affluence of the nation as a whole. My father spent his youth in the working class, whereas my son enjoys upper middle class status. Similarly, some of the privileges that were once extended to a few youth in the 19th century now are enjoyed by a broad middle and upper class. But there has been a shift in the nature of those privileges and in the kinds of relationships that exist between adolescents and adults. At least five significant trends differentiate my father's world from my son's:⁸

1. *From being known to being on one's own:* In the world my father knew, children came into fairly intimate contact with a variety of adults in work and apprenticeship relations. Today, the separate culture of the adolescent has

been accentuated by the extension of many formal rights to adolescents. The young act on their own with respect to many fundamental decisions, which they make in isolation from adults and adult responsibilities.

2. *From obvious necessity to seemingly arbitrary authority:* The necessity for doing the task was self-evident in an apprentice-like world. Now reasons are more obscure—learn calculus this term so that you'll be able to do advanced economics later and thus get a good job someday. Adult roles cannot be readily discerned, and the connections between what you are required to do now and might do ten years from now are often difficult to understand.

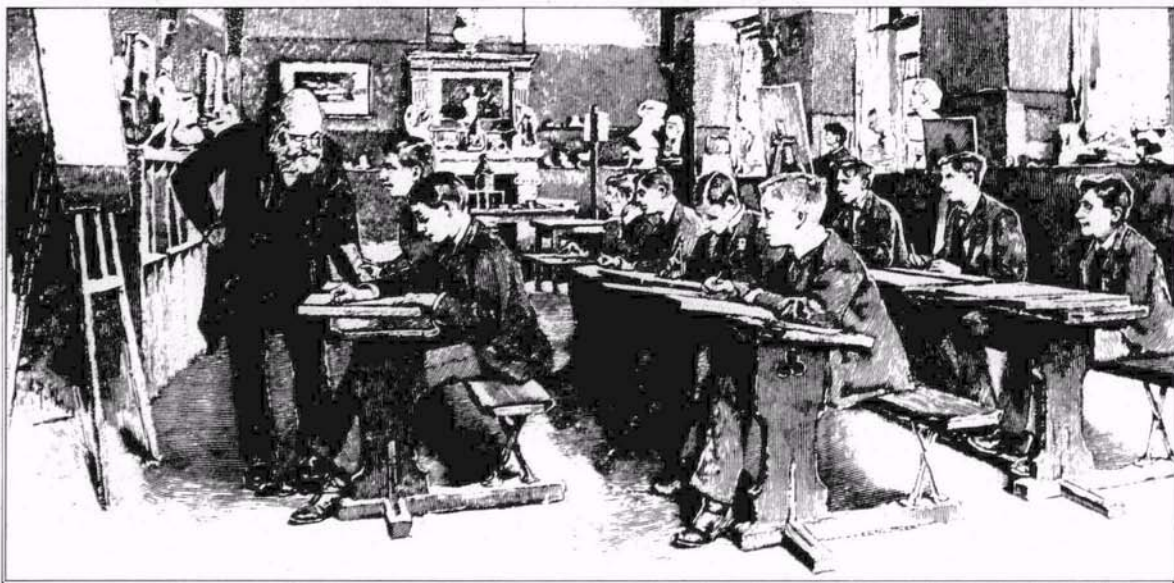
3. *From a world of likely success to one of possible failure:* In a society in which schooling played a less dominant role, you were seldom asked to do much beyond your evident abilities. If you could not repair the roof, you could clean the barn. This matching of person to task was less harsh than the sorting and grading that occurs in school where one is tested frequently and faced with the possibility of being stamped a failure. Compulsory schooling requires some to continue at frustrating tasks. Grade inflation and a general reduction in academic standards have been unsatisfactory solutions to this problem.

4. *From shared parenting to teenagers in opposition to parents:* In large families with children aged five to 19, older siblings shared parenting tasks and responsibility for discipline was more diffuse. With the advent of modern family planning techniques and the tendency to have fewer and more closely spaced children, the modern teenager is more likely to feel a member of a cadre in opposition to adults.

5. *From early contributors to long-term borrowers:* Until the end of the 19th century and part way into the 20th, the period of dependency was short and children became significant contributors to the family purse by age 14. Financial dependency now is longer (even to the late 20s for many graduate students) and increases during the late teenage years when many parents must take out a second mortgage to cover college costs.

Brad Pomeroy





From the adolescent side of the relation, then, adults seem more distant and less intimately knowledgeable about the talents and capabilities of the young. Adults appear more arbitrary about what they expect the young to do, and they are more inclined to administer tests and to exercise social control through bureaucratic arrangements. In the family, us-them feelings are stronger and adolescents may resent rather than feel grateful for the long-term dependency that the costs of extended formal education usually require.

From the adult side, there are fewer opportunities for the rewards of nurturance that occur in mentoring relationships. Like the young, adults struggle with the lengthened drain on the family purse and the tension that often produces.

Adults in Transition

Contemporary adults are confused and less certain of their own authority.⁹ Many who lived through the cultural revolutions of the 1960s took drugs themselves, participated in the sexual revolution, and experimented with the new "lifestyles." Guilt and pain over increased divorce rates and family breakup is widespread. Those who are internally divided sometimes mask their tension by adopting an authoritarian posture (and both authoritarian sects and schools are on the increase). But the more likely response is to withdraw from the responsibility of enforcing a standard or to let someone else do it. In many cases, that someone else is the adoles-

cent, operating under a new system of rules and rights. The adolescent experiences this not as true freedom—for they yearn for the presence of strong adults who care enough to hold them to worthwhile standards—but as the withdrawal of adults from responsibilities that are properly theirs. I agree with B. C. Hafen that the indiscriminate growth of the children's rights movement could have disastrous consequences: "It would be an irony of tragic proportions if, in our egalitarian zeal, we abandoned our children to their 'rights' in a way that seriously undermined their claim to protection and developmental opportunity."¹⁰

Daniel Offer and his colleagues have argued persuasively in a recent study¹¹ that psychologists have overemphasized the supposed turmoil that characterizes relationships between healthy adolescents and adults. Yet his data also show that teenagers have grown much less trusting in the last two decades. Comparing responses by teenagers in the early 1960s with those in the late 1970s, he concluded that "with respect to almost every self-image dimension teenagers in the 1970s felt worse about themselves than did teenagers in the 1960s." Teenagers describe themselves as less able to take criticism without resentment (dropping from 70 to 57 percent), and more likely to "get violent if I don't get my way" (5 percent then, 17 percent now). Increases in teenage worries about their health and feeling "empty emotionally most of the time" corroborate other data showing in-

creased drug use and suicide rates among adolescents.

The loss of trust is quite marked. Nearly twice as many (13 vs. 25 percent) say, "If you confide in others, you ask for trouble." The share of those who believe, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth does not apply to our society" has fallen from 67 to 40 percent. More now "Blame others even when I know I was at fault." Sidetaking and an adversarial posture are more evident in their views of their own families as well, with a doubling of those who believe, "My parents are almost always on the side of someone else" (14 to 32 percent).



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No Ideal Past

That loss of trust is related more to withdrawal on the part of adult socializers than to changes in children or in their basic needs. The proper response to our contemporary dilemma is neither to seek the restoration of some supposedly ideal past nor to "liberate" children from supposedly oppressive adults. It is rather to accept our responsibilities for having brought children into the world, to counter the current trends toward withdrawal from those responsibilities, to pursue an honest dialogue about the nature of those responsibilities, and to come to some agreement about what share of the responsibility the school should bear. Adults need to summon courage, conviction, and compassion in order to connect with adolescents even at the cost of painful confrontations and temporary rejections.

We also need to share socializing tasks with young adults as they begin to exercise more responsibility. We should give serious attention to mandating a year or at least a semester of voluntary service for all high school students. They could help feed the elderly in nursing homes, improve parks and public lands, care for the young in preschool centers, tutor poor readers in elementary schools, assist disabled students and those teachers who are trying to make mainstreaming work, improve food service operations in school cafeterias, paint and repair schools (including the teachers' lounge), coach grade school soccer teams, and minister to the needs of the terminally ill, to suggest a short list.

The young would have an opportunity to learn more by giving more, to develop other sides and aspects of themselves in a noncompetitive environment, to gain dignity and a heightened sense of self-worth by being useful to others, and to build a wider network of mentoring relationships with adults. A volunteer year would help to create a world in which adolescents would have more opportunities to be contributors and not just borrowers, to be known in relationships where authority is less arbitrary, and to feel less a cadre in opposition. □

¹See V. L. Bullough, "Age at Menarche: A Misunderstanding," *Science* 213 (July 17,

1981): 365-366. It appears that the alleged steep decline in the average age of menarche from 17 to 12.5 years was based on an atypical sample of Norwegian girls. We are grateful to Christine Murray for pointing out this article to us.

²A poll of its high school readers by *Highwire* magazine shows 37 percent own their own phones, 71 percent have a stereo system, and 84 percent a radio/cassette. "Students and Their Money," *Highwire* 2, 5 (Fall 1982): 20-23.

³For a more extensive analysis of these influences, see Gerald Grant, "Children's Rights and Adult Confusions," *The Public Interest* 69 (Fall 1982): 83-99.

⁴Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor, "We Do Not Recognize Their Right to Control Us," in *The Children's Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People*, ed. Beatrice Gross and Ronald Gross (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), p. 128. In the introduction to the volume, the authors write: "A good case can be made for the fact that young people are the most oppressed of all minorities. They are discriminated against on the basis of age in everything from movie admissions to sex. They are traditionally the subjects of ridicule, humiliation, and mental torture by adults. Their civil rights are routinely violated in homes, schools, and institutions," p. 1.

⁵Daniel Yankelovich, "New Rules in American Life," *Psychology Today* 15, 4 (April 1981): 35-91.

⁶National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Condition of Education*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1979, p. 18.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁸We are indebted to Joseph Kett's *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

⁹Although contemporary parental confusion may be particularly acute, it is certainly not new, as Bernard Wisby notes in *The Child and the Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968) quoting Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1903 on the timidity and confusion of parents: "Our own personal lives, rich as they are today . . . are not happy. We are confused, bewildered," p. 121.

¹⁰B. C. Hafen, "Puberty, Privacy, and Protection: The Risks of Children's Rights," *American Bar Association Journal* 63 (1977): 1383-1388, quoted in Bettye M. Caldwell, "Balancing Children's Rights and Parents' Rights," in *Care and Education of Young Children in America* ed. R. Haskins and S. Gallagher (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1980) p. 35.

¹¹Daniel Offer, Erik Ostrow, and Kenneth I. Howard, *Adolescence: A Psychological Self-Portrait* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

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