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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some commonly recognized characteristics of preadolescent and early adolescent youngsters and the needs which underlie them, and describes the variety of resources available to the parent who seeks to understand, guide, and live in harmony with a young person who has begun the transition from child to young adult. Characteristics discussed pertain to physical growth and change, mental maturation, and social and emotional behavior typical of the age group. Needs associated with each area are delineated. The resources discussed include some which reside within parents themselves and others which are available within the local community. (Author/JMB)

LIVING WITH CHILDREN IN TRANSITION

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS OF PRE AND EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Shirley M. James

Learning the developmental characteristics of the pre/early adolescent is no problem for the parent of a child in the ten to fourteen year age group. Understanding the causes of these characteristics, or the needs which underlie them, and living peaceably on a day to day basis with a pre or early adolescent youngster is for most parents more of a challenge. The vast majority of them want their offspring to leave their childhood behind and make a transition to young adulthood with mind, personality, and body intact. They care about their youngsters' happiness. They fear for their safety. They also commonly worry that they are losing touch with them and despair of ever again being able to predict or understand their behavior.

It is my intent in this paper to briefly discuss some of the commonly recognized characteristics of pre and early adolescent youngsters and the needs which underlie them, and then to discuss a variety of resources available to the parent who seeks to understand, guide, and live in harmony with a young person who has begun the transition from child to young adult. Characteristics discussed will pertain to physical growth and change, mental maturation, and social and emotional behavior typical of the age group. Needs associated with each area will be delineated. Resources which will be discussed will include some which reside within parents themselves and others which are readily available, generally within the local community.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRE/EARLY ADOLESCENTS AND THE NEEDS WHICH UNDERLIE THEM

Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of pre and early adolescents is a pronounced, yet erratic rate of physical growth and change. According to Gatewood and Dilg (1975) and to Egnatuck (1975) this accelerated and uneven rate of physical development and physiological change causes many emotional, behavioral, and psychological side effects. The pre or early adolescent is often quite insecure and defensive about his physical appearance, and afraid of being in any noticeable way "different." He characteristically has a strong need for information about human growth and development. One or more periods a day of moderately strenuous, but not totally prestructured, physical activity are generally necessary for his physical as well as his emotional well being. He needs interaction with and the acceptance of peers of differing stages of physical development and the reassurance of adults with whom he identifies that this time of uneven growth and discomfiture will pass. In sum, he needs to be able to accept his present stage of physical development as normal, if somewhat unsettling or disturbing.

Mental development also figures in typically pre and early adolescent behavior, for developing mental abilities characteristic of the age level are nearly adult, yet they are less than refined and unevenly manifested. Further emotional and social maturation and a conscious realization of how one may apply newly unfolding mental abilities to other learning situations

must be experienced before the pre or early adolescent can take full advantage of a rapidly increasing capacity to think abstractly. To wit, being egocentric by nature he tends to be intellectually captivated by that which he perceives to be personally relevant, but less than tolerant of, or attentive to, anything which does not seem so. It is characteristic of him to spend much time and energy pursuing that which is "interesting," but equal time and energy overtly rejecting that which is "boring." Offsetting this, however, is an intense pleasure in "getting" something new or always before obscure, an expanding curiosity about people and things beyond the immediate environment, periodic insight into how people think, and a fascination with both sensory and imaginative experience. According to David Elkind (1974) all of this is possible because of certain qualitative aspects of the mental development characteristic of the age group. These include his learning to reason about verbal propositions, his beginning to introspect and examine his own thinking, his developing ability to understand the nature of metaphor and to see multiple meanings of words and events, his capacity to think in terms of ideals and of contrary-to-fact situations, changes in his problem solving skills, a willingness to give up personal interpretations which are counter to evidence which is presented, and the ability to raise and test hypotheses consciously and in a systematic way. The pre and early adolescent, then, has a strong need for learning experiences which are appropriate to his rapidly developing mental abilities, challenge his further intellectual growth, and relate to

personal interests.

Social and emotional changes are also integral parts of the developmental characteristics and needs of the pre and early adolescent. Due to the physical and mental changes he is undergoing and an emerging but not fully developed desire, or ability, to assume the role of a young adult, his emotions, behavior, and self-confidence are regularly in a state of flux. Egnatuck (1975) points out that although the pre and early adolescent wants and needs a stable environment, his own emotions and social behaviors are often far from stable themselves. He is, further, quite intense about any undertaking, and in the process of searching intensely for a new personal identity will, without apparent explanation, range from exploratory behavior one day to utter retreat the next. Powell (1971) believes that such intensity of experience, this searching, and the heighthened emotionality are results of a complex interaction of the several types of rapid change and development which the pre or early adolescent is experiencing. Because of all of this, he has an unusually strong need for home, school, and community to accept his developmental characteristics and provide for them through a variety of socializing experiences, extended contact with strong and emotionally healthy adults who are accepting at the same time that they are consistent, and opportunities to "try on" for various lengths of time certain self-selected adult roles.

In all of these areas the most important thing in the life of any pre or early adolescent is his own transition from child to young adult. His attitudes and interests are varied and his behavior and mood do fluctuate, but he is consistent in being quite preoccupied with the way that he believes that the

world sees him and with the way that he sees the world. Indeed, this is his developmental imperative.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO THE PARENT OF A PRE OR EARLY ADOLESCENT

If it becomes a regular or semi-regular experience shared by the youngster and at least one parent, browsing in the neighborhood bookstore or library can be a productive resource for the parent who seeks to understand and communicate with the pre or early adolescent. A young person going through many social, emotional, and physical changes comes in part to understand them by talking about them and by reading about others who have likewise experienced them. Bookshelves in a bookstore or library fairly call out to them, even to those who do not consider themselves "readers." A comfortable way of looking at books which are interesting, of talking about them, and of sometimes buying or checking them out often stimulates conversations between parent and child which are pleasing and insightful for both.

Libraries and bookstores can be a parent resource in at least two other ways. Books on the growth and development of early adolescent youngsters and books written specifically for pre and early adolescents abound in both. Books of both types are important to the parent of a child in the 10-14 years age group. The value of the former lies not only in informing the parent about the developmental characteristics and needs of his "transition age" child, but also in helping him to objectify or to gain perspective on the child's changing behavior. There are numerous such books available. The following are several:

Albrecht, Margaret. Parents and Teenagers; Getting Through to Each Other. New York: Parent's Magazine Press, 1972.

Dobson, James. Dare to Discipline. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972.

Holmes, Douglas et al. The Language of Trust; Dialogue of the Generations. Science House, Incorporated, 1971.

Johnson, Eric W. How to Live Through Junior High School: A Practical Discussion on the Middle and Junior High Years for Parents, Students, and Teachers. Philadelphia; J. B. Lippincott Company, 1959.

Kagan, Jerome and Robert Coles (Eds.). Twelve to Sixteen: Early Adolescence. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1972.

Lipsitz, Joan. Growing Up Forgotten. Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C.Heath and Company, 1977.

Minton, Lynn. Growing into Adolescence; A Sensible Guide for Parents of Children 11-14. New York: Parents Magazine Press, 1972.

Montgomery, Herb. Help! A Problem Solving Guide Based on Letters from Students 10-15. Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1972.

Of at least equal value to parents are books written specifically for youngsters of their child's age group. It is most unfortunate that in our culture it is typical that parents stop reading books written for their children as soon as their children learn to read for them and that unless its cover makes it appear risque parents of pre and early adolescents almost never touch a book written for this age group. Yet books written for pre and early adolescents which are accepted by them tap into deeply felt (sometimes even unrealized) needs and call forth responses that parents ought to be aware of, and when possible share, with their children. Through good adolescent literature young people become involved in human problems about which they have a natural concern and in vicarious problem solving. They "try on" different styles of thinking and behaving. They learn about themselves and about adults and children around them. They experience adventure in safety. They "touch" something in themselves and in others which is real. Through

good books written for pre and early adolescents they take steps toward defining themselves.

Like those of adults, the reading interests of pre and early adolescents vary considerably. At the same time, there are some books written for this age group which have almost literally universal appeal among them. Reading some of these would be an excellent step for parents to take even if when they began it their own youngsters were not reading them. Librarians can help locate these books. Titles with very strong appeal include

The Outsiders. S. E. Hinton. Dell Publishing Company, 1967.

The Dark is Rising. Susan Cooper. Atheneum, 1973.

Edgar Allan. John Neufeld. S.G. Phillips Company, 1968.

A Taste of Blackberries. Doris B. Smith. Scholastic Books, 1976.

Hang Tough, Paul Mather. Alfred Slote. J. B. Lippincott Company, 1973.

Island of the Blue Dolphins. Scott O'Dell. Dell Publishing Comoany, 1973.

The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou. Charles Scribners and Sons, 1968.

Mrs. Mike. Benedict and Nancy Freedman. Berkley Publishers, 1968.

The Cat Ate My Gymsuit. Paula Danzinger. Dell Publishing Company, 1974.

Slake's Limbo. Felice Holman. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974.

Shadow of a Bull. Maia Wojciechowska. Atheneum, 1970.

Julie of the Wolves. Jean Craighead George. Harper and Row, 1972.

In addition to gaining general insight into what is appealing to their pre and early adolescent children by reading books such as these, parents

can use such literature to help them communicate with their youngsters. They can, for instance, when talking with their youngsters show an interest in what they have been reading and/or watching on television, commenting when appropriate on how a book which they have been reading relates, and encourage the youngsters to do the same. Though reading only books for this age group would not interest parents and would soon make their offspring suspicious, a really good book written for pre and early adolescents is a really good book to young people and parents alike. The occasional reading of such literature by parents can serve as a bridge between them and their children.

Some parents have also found that setting aside 20 or 30 minutes every evening or every other evening during which virtually everyone in the family stops watching television, working, or whatever they are doing, and reads from books, newspapers, magazines or whatever interests them has become a resource experience in their family. This procedure has stimulated interest in reading and conversations about what is being read. The ideas and the sharing of the ideas gained from the reading have brought parents and children together. Literature written for pre and early adolescents has been helpful, then, in this context.

Other resources have also proven helpful to parents who have sought to understand and help their pre and early adolescents. Television programs geared specifically to young people, such as "Inside

Out," which is produced by the National Instructional Television Center and broadcast over National Educational Television stations (including Channel 8 in the metropolitan Atlanta area) have helped not only the youngsters for whom they have been produced but their parents as well to understand pre and early adolescence. There are also games which have been designed for the age group which have stimulated insights into adolescence in students and parents alike, an example being the game "Decisions," which is marketed by Innovative Education, Inc., 201 Shagbark Drive, Rochester, Minnesota 48063.

RESOURCES WITHIN THE PARENT

There are other things which parents of pre and early adolescents can do and should do as they interact with them on a daily basis. Perhaps the first of these is to take a good look at themselves and at how they really view and react to their children's adolescence. Elkind (1974) has pointed out that parents often have ambivalent feelings about the rapidly approaching time when their children will leave home and toward their children's increasing independence and their psycho-sexual development. This ambivalence is sometimes expressed in inconsistent or even illogical behavior on the part of the parent. It is important for parents to consciously sort out their feelings, identify what they believe to be the essentials of a healthy environment for their transition age youngsters, and set about consistently trying to create such an environment. It is likewise important for them to smile or even laugh at their own mistakes as parents and to be gracious in accepting the fact that at times their adolescent age

youngsters' behaviors are bound to be, if not illogical, at least somewhat erratic. A perspective of this sort on parenting can be a valuable resource for the parent who achieves it.

The second thing which I believe that parents should do is examine thoughtfully the nature of any conflicts which come up between them and their children. According to both Kagan (1972) and Johnson (1959) the child as young as ten years of age realizes that his values are borrowed from his parents and that he needs to develop his own. He even often goes so far as to create alternative beliefs for himself which are in conflict with his parents' beliefs and with his current state. Though this step appears normal and perhaps essential, taking it often makes the pre/early adolescent feel much guilt, during the time that he holds to his new beliefs, about his seeming rejection of his parents and their belief system. He may vacillate between what he has been taught and what he has adopted as his own temporary belief system in an effort to assuage this guilt. The parent who understands this vacillation and the conflict within the child which underlies it can weather many of the storms it will create. Thus a thoughtful and realistic appraisal of the internal stress his youngster is experiencing and a continued discussion with the child of the values out of which the family has been operating will generally prove an important resource for any parent who seeks to understand and live peaceably with his pre or early adolescent offspring.

A third thing that parents can do is to ask themselves if they were 11 or 13 or 15 again how they would make sense of today's world and what would help them to do this. If they were back in those shoes again, and trying to live with their parents, their changing selves, and an incredibly complicated and sensate world of neon lights, fast food restaurants, mass advertising, violence, and changing work opportunities and occupations what would they need in order to find themselves and then keep themselves put together? Recently several parents asked themselves these questions and then pooled their answers. What they came up with follows:

1. "Connections" between things. Family background and history. Relationships with younger children and with someone elderly. A sense of stability to undergird the endless motion and change around them. A way to relate their present to their past and their possible future. Stories talk with, and photographs of people who have influenced their lives.
2. Freedom to identify with people outside of their families without having this questioned.
3. Privacy. Some time apart. A place apart, or at least some space to think of as their own.
4. Respect for their individuality and their separateness as a person. Not being called a "teenager."
5. Their parents' availability. Someone there not all of the time, but consistently enough that when good or bad or confusing things happened they could be shared without it being a big deal and without the noise of a television or the parents' preoccupation with something else interfering.

6. Responsibility. The demand that they contribute, that their existence relate to somebody else's well being, that they be accountable.
7. The dropping of the double standard in which they are given full responsibility for the lives of children during evening and night time hours while they "babysit," but treated during daytime hours by their parents and neighbors as if they themselves were babies. A chance to work at paying jobs or community service tasks if they can prove themselves.
8. Standards and equitable discipline. Parents who are flexible, but who hold to standards for themselves and when their children goof up or act childish remind them that they, too, must live by standards.

When they had finished pooling their lists and thus in a corporate sense identified what they thought would be their needs they set about examining where their own parenting was or was not meeting these needs in their pre or early adolescent children. They decided that in some cases they knew, but in others they were not certain. Then someone suggested that they really should ask their youngsters themselves what they felt their needs were, whether they were similar to those their parents had listed, and where things as they perceived them stood; then really listen to their responses. Perhaps this, then, is a key to it all, that the resources a parent of a pre or early adolescent most needs may be an understanding mind and a good set of ears.

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