

INVITED CONTRIBUTION

Factors Affecting Adolescent Behaviour

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The adolescent period was once considered to take place between 15 and 18 years. It has steadily and rapidly expanded during the past 50 years so that today it reaches up to 25 years or more, and down to 10 - 12 years of age. As a result, modern man is now spending a considerably longer portion of his life as an adolescent. This creates problems.

The phenomenon is both sociologic and biologic. As physicians, it behooves us to have some insight as to cause and effect if we hope to be more helpful to boys and girls and to young men and young women.

Physical size has great status significance to the adolescent. Unlike the pre-adolescent child, the adolescent has great concern and anxiety about his body. If a boy, he wonders, "Will I grow taller?" "What kind of a man will I be?", or if a girl, "Will my breasts develop more?" or, "Am I ever going to stop growing?" The parents will ask the same questions of the physicians and add another, "Doctor, can't you give him some medicine to make him grow?" or, "Can't you give her some medicine to stop her from growing?"

Adolescents do not want to be "different". For them to be different is to be abnormal. Physicians must help them and their parents understand that a boy may be shorter than average but is perfectly normal; or a girl may be taller than the average and still be a normal girl.

On the other hand, we must recognize that for the short boy and the tall girl their anxiety is not entirely fantasy. The boy is short and for boys social and athletic success is related to size. (Besides, girls like tall boys.) Being too tall poses a problem for the young girl, too. She may want to date taller, more mature and older men at a time she is quite immature emotionally, if not sexually. These adolescent differences, though normal, do produce temporary maladjustments. The small boy is likely to display unacceptable behavior in an effort to prove that he is more masculine than he is, and sometimes tall girls behave in a manner that suggests they are trying to avoid the appearance of being feminine.

In earlier times the adolescent was largely confined to the primary influence of the family and family acquaintances. Grandparents and relatives were frequently living in the same house, or nearby. Adolescent peers were under nearly identical pressures to conform and since they have always identified with one another, a stage of adult responsibility was more easily achieved. Schools and churches had limited enrollments. Close contacts between parents, ministers and teachers allowed the student to experience school and church almost as an extension of his home. Nowadays, teachers and schools are visibly the tools of society. Many ministers remain in distant secondary relations with the adolescent who is shunted to a church "youth group" to be further isolated with his peers. Teachers no longer like to cope with the problems of the individual child but instead send them to "school counselors". Not only churches and schools, but government organizations, unions and medical institutions provide special departments for the adolescent group. Thus, the adolescent is continuously and progressively isolated as a *member of a group*, as a result he has been socialized out of the family and into the group and

society before he can establish acceptable standards of adult behavior. Movies, advertising, T.V. and magazines address themselves to the adolescent group.

Neither a child nor an adult, adolescents have always sought conforming identification with their own peers. Characteristically he has always had the need to establish his identity, develop independence, and, if male, to prove his masculinity. In the past, if the stress became too great he could "run away" and "go west". Today he escapes into the anonymity of the group. Unfortunately, in the group, an adolescent may engage in conduct that is not really approved by him or even any one member of the group. Once an activity has been suggested no one dares risk his group status by being called a "square" or "chicken".

Sagacious promoters have learned that it is profitable to appeal directly to the adolescent and adolescent group without the prior appeal to parents or school. They comprise a new, very large, rich and growing market. Clothes, cosmetics, rock and roll records, and portable radios comprise just a few of the products sold to them in tremendous quantities. Entertainment ideas and sex models are created and promoted through the mass media of magazines, T.V., and radio.

Techniques are used to exploit the normal adolescent rebellion against adults and take advantages of their conformity to group identification. Just develop a product that irritates parents, promote it to the adolescent group on a nationwide scale, wait till it catches on and presto—you become a millionaire. Due to modern communication, irritating fads quickly become universal. Witness rock & roll—as popular, and almost simultaneously so, in Moscow, London and Sidney, as in New York or Los Angeles. The promotion of rock & roll records by the use of "payola" to Disc Jockeys—provided insight to the extent and success of this kind of promotion.

What has happened to make these changes occur? There is no uncomplicated answer. McKay feels that the impact of industrialized urbanization, an increase in the number of affluent families and the advent of the automobiles have been most significant. Urbanization and industrialization have attracted families from stable rural cultures to the large city. The rural, agricultural family maintains a cooperative, mutual family economy to which members of all ages must contribute. Rural institutions and discipline remain relatively uniform from year to year and the rural adolescent can attain adult status rapidly by assuming responsible adult work and do it without losing face with his peer group, who are doing the same things. In the city, this transition becomes very difficult. Young people are neither needed or wanted by commerce, labor, or industry. Even odd jobs are scarce, so the teenager is forced into a leisure class culture in which the only accepted role is that of a student—(in Jr. High, High School or College). As a result, these institutions, whether they like it or not, have been cast in the key role of influencing, molding and containing adolescent behavior, and they have replaced the family in this respect.

Paradoxically many school officials, government representatives and the leaders of other institutions who deal with adolescent groups, persistently back away from any implication that they should have responsibility for the control of behavior of the individual members of the adolescent group. How many times have you heard the cliches, "We cannot teach what the parents should have taught", or, "We don't have bad children—just bad parents". These are only partial truths, sometimes used as excuses by officials and children alike. *The way the school may influence and control behavior, entertainment, speech and the dress of the adolescent has not been sufficiently recognized, or accepted.*

I recently encountered a young man who excused serious deviations in behavior with the comments, "Don't blame me, blame my parents, they are responsible for what I do." It is important to hold adolescents responsible for what they do. This is in itself a very important part of growing up. Although it is true that pre-adolescent children, quite unconsciously, take over the codes, and standards and values of their families. At adolescence teenagers and parents find it difficult or impossible to get through to each other. It is at this time an interested coach, teacher or minister can sometimes provide invaluable influence on the individual adolescent. Let's face it, in times of stress almost any other adult can communicate with an adolescent easier than can his parent. At the same time the adolescent is acutely conscious of the parent's attitude. He is the first to be disappointed when parents do not measure up to his own idealistic standards. Paradoxically, the teenager seems compelled to look not to adults but to his own associates for the approval or disapproval of his own actions.

Of course youth group behavior varies widely by area, social class, and ethnic culture. We have mentioned the difference between rural and urban adolescents. The other area of contrast is between groups in affluent districts and underprivileged districts in the large city. The Chicago Institute for Juvenile Research reports the profile of behavior of street gangs in underprivileged areas. They are characterized as follows:

- 1) Deliberate flouting of adult authority in general.
- 2) Readiness for physical combat.
- 3) Rejection of the discipline of school.
- 4) A tendency to sexual aggressiveness.
- 5) Continual search for "kicks"—including narcotics.
- 6) Repudiation of work as a way of life.

Many of the male gangs have "sister" gangs of girls.

To some extent the same motivating factors of rebellion and group conformity are also present in the adolescent groups of the more affluent district. Although not truly delinquent, these youngsters exhibit behavior that is unconventional and is unacceptable and troublesome to adults. Fortunately, the youngsters are protected by their own established concepts of right and wrong, gained in earlier years, by the strength of the conventional institutions they attend and by the conventional adult with whom they have contact. The typical affluent adolescent will rebel and seek his kicks in a less destructive manner than will his underprivileged counterpart—but he does rebel and he does look for "kicks", usually with the automobile. In fact, the automobile may have caused a greater cleavage between the adolescent and adult than any other single factor. The car has become a necessity for dating. Possession or use of the car is a most important symbol of adulthood, especially for boys. It represents excitement, power, and temporary freedom from adult restraints. Parents apparently are not very successful in resisting pressure to let the adolescent have the family car, or even one of his own. A study at one large school revealed that 68% of the high school students controlled the use of a car by the spring of their senior year.

Social problems are compounded by the progressively earlier physical maturation of children, this at a time the process of emotional maturation is becoming progressively longer. During the past century the average age of the onset of menses in girls has decreased by about 6 months each decade. No doubt about it, boys and girls of today are physically ready for reproduction long before they used to be and long before they understand the meaning and responsibility involved in reproduction.

Presumably the youth of today could enjoy sexual freedom without entanglement in marriage but this is not acceptable in our society, where premarital relations are frowned upon despite the permission and encouragement of great freedom of association between boys and girls. In the past, marriage has been postponed as long as there were serious prerequisites and subsequent obligations tied to wedlock by the expectations of society. This appears to be undergoing a change with a growing trend toward adolescent marriages in spite of the "lack of established economic independence". Young people are naturally impelled to explore sex, and they will indulge as much as they dare and in the easiest way they can. When the circumstances are weighed in favor of the socially accepted avenue of marriage, they will take this path as the simplest answer. Fundamental reason for the increasing number of teenage marriages is that there are fewer obstacles and countervalues to getting married than there used to be. The very fact that marriage is not now out of the question for adolescents has probably led to increased sexual license with a certain percentage of inevitable pregnancies leading to marriage. The lessening age of marriage, in turn, creates its other problems. The union in which the bride is under age 20 is three times as likely to end in divorce as the one in which the bride is 22 to 24. Some sociologists feel that adolescent marriages are a part of the whole problem of the isolated adolescent and his peer group psychology. Marriage has become acceptable to the group. It should be observed that when many of our young people marry early they are hardly expressing rebellion if they are conforming to the public sentiment that marriage is a good thing.

If there is a problem of teenage sex morals, it is in part a reflection of their earlier physical maturity. Modern youngsters not only develop earlier, they win prizes or prison sentences, take part in political meetings and engage in sexual intercourse earlier. Changes in statistics are affected by this age shift; figures showing an increase in sex offenses involving the age of consent is clearly one such figure, for the age of consent has not been altered by the appearance of earlier puberty.

Thus far we have considered some of the central reasons for the problems of our adolescent culture. As physicians we must face the challenge and explore the problems of management. In dealing with areas of human adjustment there are no absolute infallible rules, but only certain principles and axioms to enable the physician to offer guidance to the adolescent and his or her parents. First we propose that "adolescence" be defined in terms that are more meaningful than chronologic age, biologic development or social mores. Zimmerman has found it useful to consider any boy, girl, young man or young woman as adolescent, regardless of age, whose day to day living is almost entirely concerned with the following problems:

- 1) His need for emotional separation from his parents.
- 2) His struggle to establish his personal codes of behavior in regard to sex, marriage and vocation, and to do this in a manner acceptable to himself, and his parents, as well as his peers.
- 3) His conception of himself as an adult and his vocational role in society.

Any youngster with such characteristics needs help in many areas. For parents one of the most difficult areas of management is related to imparting factual sex information. It is apparent that we as physicians must make a conscientious effort to do a better job of interpreting the meaning of sex to children and parents and to do it earlier than we have done in the past.

More times than not, parents have been unable to at any time discuss realistic and factual aspects of sexual growth with their children. It is probably important to ask parents, who request us to talk with their adolescent child, whether the child has given any indication that he really wants a discussion and this question should again be put to the child when he appears at the physicians office. If he says no, we stop and invite him to return when he feels more ready and really wished to come. On this basis they usually wish to, sooner rather than later.

Experience has repeatedly demonstrated that today's adolescents have excellent anatomical and physiological factual knowledge about sexual functioning. This is not really what they are curious about. They are primarily interested in the experience and feelings that surround sex relations. They want to know, "How does it feel?", "What happens?", "What do you do?" "What is it like?"; precisely the areas that we usually avoid. Actually, most of their interest is in trying to understand what the opposite sex may experience, for here is where most confusion exists. The adolescent boy and girl know there is a difference between them but they become confused because in the adult world sexuality for both sexes is generally described as male sexuality.

Sexual capacities that come with puberty are not the same for boys and girls. In boys, sexual desire is highly specific and clearly centered in the genitals. It is easily aroused by pictures, words and random thoughts. In boys, the desire is urgent. In girls, there are wide normal differences. A few girls may experience desire much the same as boys do and for others no direct sexual urges are experienced until much later in life. For most adolescent girls the phase "sexual stirring" is more appropriate than "desire". The feelings experienced by the girl are more diffuse and less well defined. Combinations of romantic yearnings, pity, malaise, maternal yearnings and feelings such as anger or fear may appear. Sexual arousal must be brought about by direct stimulation of the body and once attained seems to be less climax oriented than in boys, at least in early womanhood.

For boys, sexual desire is separate from notions of love. If a girl yields to him he may "feel" that he is in love with her, but these are mostly the projection of his own needs and quite different from the love he will later feel as husband father.

For girls, love takes priority over sexuality and they strive to fall in love. She never loses the underlying feeling that love leads straight to marriage. A fact that should be engraved in every young boy's mind. Girls, from the beginning are usually either finding a husband or practicing at finding one. Boys, on the other hand, are concerned first with sexual stimulation, second with companionship, third with love and only in the dim, distant future, with marriage. A discussion with the adolescent along these lines will help promote respect for his individual personal sexuality, its uniqueness and differences and this helps him develop the necessary image of self-differentiation.