

Adolescenthood

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THE USE of the term *adolescenthood* as a concept of human development helps us to define adolescence as a distinct entity rather than as a period of transition and change during which a person moves from childhood to adulthood. As long as adolescence is conceptualized as an in-between stage, the adolescent has no status in his own right. He can be viewed neither as a child nor as an adult and is apt to be treated as either, neither, or both.

The concept of adolescenthood requires us to think of, and to relate to, youth as though this developmental period — in its early, middle, and late phases — has specific meaning and presents the adolescent with specific problems. It requires a conceptual shift similar to that which occurred earlier in this century concerning childhood development. Before that time children were regarded as miniature adults, and that is how they were reared. With the understanding that a child does not feel, think, or relate as does an adult came the recognition of childhood as a distinct phase of human development. The whole approach to rearing, educating, helping, healing, and saving children took a new focus and, I believe, a more appropriate one. Should not adolescence be viewed in a similar fashion?

We tend to deal with our world as we conceive of it. Do we regard adolescents as adolescents for the time being or as "just young kids" who will be adults tomorrow? To deal with youth, we need to understand the period of adolescence for what it is. With that thought in mind. I should like to explore simultaneously two major questions: "What is involved in conceptualizing adolescenthood? What are the implications of such a conceptual shift in our understanding of children and youth?"

A. Period of Being

There is no longer much question about our perception of, and attitude toward, childhood. According to a standard American dictionary, childhood is "the state or time of being a child," and adolescence is, "the state or process of growing up from childhood to manhood or womanhood." Our emphasis on adolescence as a time of change and growth, as a passing developmental phenomenon introducing adulthood, reveals more about our hopes and fears than about the actual content and opportunities of adolescent development. It is almost as if we were saying to ourselves and to these young persons: "Whatever it is, it will pass. Don't take adolescence too seriously. Think of it as a process of change that will lead to a different life — hopefully a more real and definitely a more comfortable one.

Anne Frank challenges us clearly when she comments in her diary: "I feel so differently. I wish they would tell me what I can expect to feel rather than put me off with the explanation that I am in a phase of change."

Essentially, the adolescent is regarded as a child who has left the safe harbor of childhood but has not yet reached the shores of maturity. In short, he is at sea. He has the hope and promise of reaching a land of opportunity so long as he does not fall prey to the doubts and temptations of his travel companions, his peers. (And while at sea, he

must blot out, as frivolous, all childish fantasies of a carefree life lest he drift toward never-never-land.)

In view of the fact that adolescence covers half of the growing-up period, our perception of it as a phase of change is not appropriate. Who wants to remain "in-between" for several years of his life? In fact, the combination of longer life expectancy and the need for preparing for the ever-increasing complexity of modern life points to the possibility that adolescence will become even more prolonged. Adolescence will have to serve as the major developmental proving ground for living in a highly technological society. For these reasons, I submit that we need to consider adolescence for what it is — a period of *being* an adolescent.

Actually, this is not a new concept. Ernest A. Smith, in his book on group life in teenage culture, describes a youth culture that he clearly distinguishes from its adult counterpart. (2) Similarly, Talcott Parsons points out that young persons in the age group between childhood and adulthood form distinctive patterns of values and attitudes that facilitate processes of adjustment from childhood emotional dependency to full, adult maturity. (3) Edgar Friedenberg, (4) in his provocative thesis, defines adolescence as a time for the young person to differentiate himself from his culture, though on the culture's terms.

Resources for Ego Expression and Repair

Our current concern over teen-age behavior, youth culture, and adolescent crises suggests that we need to define the ways and means of ego expression for adolescence, as we have done quite successfully for childhood and, to a considerable extent, for adulthood. We have clearly accepted the idea that, for the childhood period, *play* is the appropriate channel for the individual's creative investment and the mirror for his sense of competence. In adulthood, *work* assumes a like function. In adolescence, we are not sure whether both, either, or neither of these is the salient factor.

We have no clear understanding of what the ego-building processes are in adolescence. Childhood allows ample outlets for ego repair — recovery from personal defeats, frustrations, and loss of a sense of competence through play and fantasy. Adulthood affords men and women institutionalized opportunities for stepping aside from the pressures of daily work and living. The bowling alley, the golf course, and the fishing trip serve as examples of a wide array of such resources. The cocktail lounge, the divorce court, club activities, even taking a drive are other social outlets for overcoming personal difficulties and readying ourselves for facing adult life anew. We may well ask ourselves: "What are the corresponding resources for self-repair for adolescents?"

In relation to childhood, both the child and the adult have a tacit mutual understanding of the appropriate forms of behavior for expressing the proper dependence and independence that they grant each other and that their immediate society expects. The adolescent, however, knows only that he has a period of approximately ten years of prolonged dependence upon his elders, a dependence that must end eventually. I should like to introduce here the idea that *peer associations* and *peer groups*, with their relevant group norms, serve as the major avenue for ego development and ego repair in adolescence. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

Another crucial and complex question for adolescents is that of sexual adjustment and behavior. For the child, the question supposedly does not exist; the subject is taboo. In

adulthood, sexual behavior is legitimized by marriage and other social customs. During adolescence, sexual interests are only tentatively granted recognition. These interests usually achieve clear definition only when their existence creates unusual complications. I have no clear formulation for a resolution of this problem except to suggest that we need to examine it candidly. The adolescent must find ways to resolve it other than by simulating a maturity that he does not yet possess. Simultaneously, he should not deny his sexual urges as he grows up but rather discover how best *to* sublimate them as he waits for the sanctions of marriage in a dim and distant future.

Modes of Thinking

What, then, constitutes adolescence? First, we should recognize that adolescents, like children and adults, have their distinct modes of thinking. Anne Frank jolted us into a stark awareness of an adolescent's penetrating, insightful thinking. Her sensitivity and literary style are probably unique. However, her searching inquiries, I believe, could be matched by most adolescents — if we had access to their thinking and took time really to listen to them. We should probably find that the adolescent has a consuming interest in relating himself to others and to the world around him. His mode of thinking is concerned with "fitting the pieces together," building a consistent whole out of his as yet partially developed understanding of his life experiences and ideas.

With the onset of adolescence, the youth can deal with abstractions and become more able to handle his own relationship to his world in symbolic terms. He can deal with questions of relativity and differential relationships. With this acquisition he can be all things to all people. He tends to become fascinated by hypothetical questions and the construction of hypotheses. The many probabilities inherent in one hypothesis seem to hold greater interest than the reality that surrounds it. The adolescent is apt, for example, to find more pleasure and greater success in figuring out a number of unusual ways to do a job than in tackling it and completing it expediently and immediately. Most important is the realization that, in adolescence, the youth is able effectively to combine horizontal thinking and reasoning with vertical thinking and reasoning. Once life could be explained in relation to current events, but he now wants to understand the present in terms of the past, and the past by its outcome in the present. He relates his and others' experiences to past, present, and future. To adults, the adolescent's inquiries and challenges may appear impertinent and inquisitive. To the youth, they are pertinent. Empirical knowledge no longer suffices. New experiences and understanding serve as points of departure for new mental explorations. Curious as it may appear in his mental explorations, he tries to apply logic, tries to reconstruct *his* understanding of his world into a consistent whole. In his everyday life, however, it is the nature of the experience, the empirical evidence, that counts and that defines his behavior. We can readily find a fifteen-year-old who can give a mature interpretation of the universal meaning of fairness — in fact, a teen-age club code tends to make it very clear — but in the same teenager's everyday conduct, fairness is applied with a more limited and time-bound perspective. (5)

In most of these mental explorations, language serves the adolescent as his tool for thinking. The spoken language helps him sort out experiences and ideas, deal with the complications of daily life, and experiment with a variety of roles. We might say that the adolescent puts his internal struggle clearly before him — "on the table"— as he tries out ideas. His verbalizing shifts from one extreme to another. Our understanding that these

shifts are taking place should reassure us that the adolescent's playing with ideas, his taking extreme positions, his boasting or confessing, and his exaggerated talk of exploits or conquests may all represent his way of fitting together different roles and perspectives into a complex but unified whole.

In childhood, thinking takes the form of action — *playing out* thoughts. In adolescence, thinking occurs by *talking out* alternatives, usually more than one at a time. Adults should guard against labeling these mental explorations as actual verbal commitments. They are not. The youth's hair-splitting and verbosity are his essential ego tools for completing his adolescence. The problem for society and the youth himself arises when the youth acts out his thoughts and feelings. We must be aware that the adolescent needs a compatible arena where he can pursue his verbal explorations. In such an arena, he can try out his world for the proper fit.

Peer Associations

Earlier in this article I mentioned that parallel to childhood's play and adulthood's work is adolescence's reliance upon peer associations as the major channel for ego development and ego repair. Through peer associations the youth can find his sense of being and his proof of competence. Once we accept this premise, we can regard with less suspicion the adolescent's preoccupation with peer groups.

Our studies of the adolescent's peer contacts reveal that many of his activities are directed toward self-definition. It is in adolescence that the youth searches for what he thinks, for what he is, for how he really feels, and for what is expected of him. And these developmental phenomena find their most vital expression within peer groups. Among his peers, the youth brings into the open his concerns about defining himself, his preoccupation with the role he will finally assume in life. All the while, he tries out various new roles. This is a manifestation that Erik Erikson describes as establishing a sense of identity while overcoming a sense of role diffusion. (8)

Part of this search for a "sense of being" in adolescence finds expression in the adolescent's multiple involvements in many activities. He feels harassed, and yet he feels a sense of urgency to participate in a number of different group associations. He dashes madly from one group activity to another. Each of these associations serves the adolescent's purpose in trying out new roles while he works simultaneously on those he wants to keep.

In his peer associations the youth tries to dare himself and to dare others. He experiments with some patterns of behavior while he arbitrarily discards others. He tries to identify closely with some persons and violently rejects others. If we were to study the theme of an adolescent's behavior — the theme of his role-taking — we would find that today's adolescent is much like yesterday's Robin Hood, an individual involved in playing many roles in many clothes. Like Robin Hood, our adolescent is trying to come out on top with a satisfactory image of himself. He is acting out — making a fool of authority — as he attempts to locate the essence of authority. He is testing his peers while he is forming close relationships with them. He is ridiculing his society while he forges his own societal membership. The adolescent works on serious life questions and, in so doing, vacillates between opposite extremes in thinking and feeling. Erikson describes him fittingly when he says that at times the youth is more devotedly perverse, at others more perversely devoted. (7) To the adult, many of the youth's peer contacts seem to constitute a mixture of horseplay and unholy alliances. To the youth himself,

they are serious business — his very life. Peer association is the arena in which old and new ideas, relationships, and norms of behavior are tested; some are discarded, and some are revamped and eventually accepted for good.

Recent studies have shown that boys tend to relate to peers in small groups that serve as the testing ground for locating norms of behavior and for standardizing their own behavior. Girls, on the other hand, tend to rely upon close, personal friendships, in pairs or in very small cliques. These research findings carry a number of implications for the social worker both in the structuring of services and in his work with adolescent boys and girls. Above all, the findings indicate that peer associations are essential ingredients for adolescent development. It is obvious, therefore, that the adolescent needs the appropriate time, space, resources, and sanctions for a wide variety of such associations within the fabric of his everyday life.

Our studies have shown that the adolescent faces crises and change with and through peer support. An understanding of this fact calls for a second look at such treatment practices as splitting up cliques, groups, or gangs, or subtly sabotaging the youth's desire to be with his friends because we do not like their looks or feel too much excluded from his life. Social Workers must also accept the challenge to our common belief that, at the point of crisis, an individual tends to seek refuge and help in the sanctity of a confidential one-to-one interview. On the contrary, the adolescent tends to find his best sanctuary for help in what he considers to be the "privacy" of a peer group. Therefore, treatment or counseling of adolescents may possibly be most naturally carried out within the context of, and by means of, a group.

New Dependence Secures Independence

In thinking about the development of the growing child, we conceive of a maturing process in which the child masters each phase and, as he does so, becomes increasingly independent until he reaches adulthood. For the adolescent, peer experiences serve as a new social matrix in this maturational process. Dependence upon elders is in part replaced by dependence upon peer relationships. The adolescent becomes increasingly independent of immediate adult control. From infancy on, he has been encouraged to take steps toward increased independence, as well as to embrace new forms of dependence, including his eventual dependence on his peers. Human development involves, in part, a constant progression through successive stages of dependence. Secure dependence prepares for eventual independence in a given area and, in turn, allows the individual to become dependent in new and more advanced areas. The new dependencies become a steppingstone for growth toward further independence. This progression from dependence to independence, to new dependence followed by new independence continues through adolescent and adult development.

Thus, an adolescent's demand for independence is neither a radical shift nor a sudden insult to parental or other adult prerogatives. His independence can develop only within the various ranges of adult authority, not outside them. Adult authority itself is not under attack so much as it is under scrutiny. The youth searches for aspects of independence while simultaneously freeing himself for new spheres of dependence. In so doing, he slowly enters the family's "circle of elders," with a new and increasingly mature sense of dependence upon his family and other new adult associations.

Most important, parents still continue to serve their adolescent offspring, but now they become his mainstay in new and different areas. Parents continue to serve as the mirror

for the youth's feelings, thoughts, and actions. They also maintain their position as the youth's final authority, regardless of the images and questions the youth may cast upon them. They may feel lonely and deserted, but their feelings of loneliness are duplicated and may even be exceeded in the adolescent. The youth tends to feel lonely because his former dependent attachments to his parents do not provide him with satisfying company, and he has not yet found the beginning of a new life partnership. He therefore turns to his peers, who are the only ones who can fill this void.

What we find in adolescence is a split in the youth's means of meeting his dependency needs. He looks to his peers for everyday satisfactions and to his elders for long range orientations. The emergence of the Freedom Riders provides an example of this phenomenon. Elders gave direction and provided the ideas that the youth could then translate into purposeful behavior. Similar examples are the Peace Corps and President Kennedy's suggestion for a fifty-mile hike. Elders outline the ideas, and if they really believe in them and are not merely tossing out empty phrases with little conviction, these ideas will capture the youth's imagination and he will carry them out with competent creativity.

The previously cited shift in dependency is also reflected in sibling rivalry. In early childhood, sibling rivalry occurs over securing greater dependency satisfaction — that is, siblings vie for the closest relationship with the parent. In adolescence, sibling rivalry occurs as siblings vie to become the first in command — that is, the one closest to replacing the parent. This advanced form of sibling rivalry finds its expression not only within the family but also, though more indirectly, in siblinglike strivings for status and recognition as the authority (a replacement of the parent) within the youth's group of peers. The child needs to know the parent is "with him"; later, the youth needs the parent's expression of confidence that "he can do it."

New Codes for Heterosexual Behavior

In adolescence, the question of relationship to the opposite sex, the concurrent onset of sexual desires and the problem of self-control, present a most perplexing dilemma for the adolescent and his elders. The adolescent achieves full sexual maturity before he achieves psychosocial maturity, but there is no clear definition of what the standards of adolescent sexual behavior should be. The inherent conflict between internal desires and their outward expression is a product of socialization. The absence of a generally accepted code of adolescent behavior in this area requires our special attention.

It seems to me that the adolescent of today has developed an admirable repertory of heterosexual behavior for casual contacts, dating, and premarital pairing. Yet we lack a clear pronouncement of the *range* of standards we accept as legitimate for adolescence. Adolescents sense what their elders are conveying to them: "Almost everyone does it, but no one admits it." At the same time, adolescents convey to each other the thought: "Let me admit to you more than I actually did. After all, who wants to be thought of as a square?" Moreover, the implication that "almost everyone does it" creates a justification of behavior for which standards or codes are at best vague and unclear.

Distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable in an absolute sense are blurred, and the absence of guiding standards, codes, and mores is as much a societal and cultural problem for adults as it is for adolescents.

My own feeling is that answers to this problem will emerge from working *with* our adolescents to devise appropriate codes for adolescent sexual behavior. There should be

an emphasis upon meeting their condition of prolonged adolescence rather than merely reacting to the patterns that emerge. Such contemporary adolescent practices as hanging around the corner drugstore, phoning a friend on the hour and talking to him for an hour, going steady, riding around in cars, and so on tend to be disturbing to adults. But they do clearly reflect the adolescent's strong desire to relate to others. He wishes to develop new forms of mutual dependence with a single partner while desperately warding off the fear of being alone. The parents' recognition of norms of adolescent behavior would enable them to accept these behavior patterns as appropriate for the time being, without fear that they would last beyond adolescence.

Conclusion

Ordinary adolescent thoughts and behavior are phase-bound, even though youth may claim, and adults may fear, that they will last for life. We should view the early, middle, and late years of adolescent development as comprising a distinct state of adolescence. Such a concept may facilitate the exploration of adolescent behavior in terms of its essential ingredients of emerging adulthood. Just as a child's messiness, constant activity, and desire to touch everything are accepted as basic ingredients of childhood, so the ostentatious behavior or dress, perpetual mobility, and provocative defiance of authority of the adolescent constitute essential ingredients of his strivings both for an autonomous role (9) as an adolescent and for his own sense of identity. (10) An acceptance of the concept of adolescence as a developmental stage rather than a transitory phase would foster social guarantees (societal sanctions) for appropriate customs, programs, associations, and, especially, ample time to assure adolescent development. Then vocational training centers, youth centers, extracurricular activities, social centers for loafing, bowling, or dancing, and youth counseling or employment services with access to work opportunities would gain further relevance as basic social institutions for normal adolescent development. In a number of cities, youth committees have been set up to consider or regulate curfew hours and other critical issues for youth. They are working examples of other resources through which adolescents can have a chance to define their behavior for themselves within the context of their community. Essentially, the development of codes of behavior as guidelines for youth must be supported, not necessarily to defend the respectability of the adult community but out of a recognition of adolescence. The former may be a fringe benefit, but it cannot be the primary motive. Added institutional outlets for adolescence would assist the youth to unfold his individual creativity and test his sense of competence for himself and his peers. Above all, he is more apt to feel and know that he, as an adolescent *today*, has a future to which he himself is contributing. He can then work toward a future forged out of his own and his elders' developmental past and present. In short, adolescent life must be integrated with adult life as part of a living community in which the adolescent is free to be an adolescent.

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10. See Erikson. *op. cit.*, for a fuller exploration of the question of adolescent development as a developmental period in finding a sense of identity, a crisis in which the opportunities for finding oneself and the threat of losing oneself are closely allied.

From *Social Casework*, 46 (1) (1965). Pages 3-9