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Coping in Early Adolescence:

The Special Challenges of the Junior High School Period

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The Special Challenges of the Junior High School Period

Coming of age in America is an increasingly lengthy, challenging, and fascinating process. It represents the most dramatic example of the complex processes involved in negotiating a critical period of normal development. It illustrates the shifting interplay between the biological, psychological, and cultural demands on the individual. At the present time much of the focus of attention has been on the failures of coping in this era, especially as indicated by higher suicide rates, prevalence of drug abuse, and increase in violent behaviors. I have viewed adolescents from the perspectives of developmental psychology, school consultation, and clinical psychiatry. This chapter represents an effort to delineate the phases of adolescence and to explore the significant variables operating within each phase. The major emphasis will be on early adolescence. The adaptive challenges posed by superimposed tasks have generally been underestimated, if perceived at all. It seems important to sharply define this early adolescent period. The implications for future research efforts and some clinical implications will also be discussed. Late adolescence is only briefly discussed here because there is more than ample discussion elsewhere.

In general, the adolescent receives enormous attention in both the

popular media and in scientific writings. Even in the scientific literature, however, with rare exceptions, neither in title nor content is there any allusion to the vastly different populations that are lumped together under the generic term “adolescence.” There is every reason to believe that the adolescent period can and should be divided into three distinct eras, which have their characteristic tasks, challenges, and coping possibilities. It is also likely that it may bring additional clarity to our thinking to make some further distinction within eras, in terms of sex, ethnic, and possibly class differences, particularly if one focuses on the “culture of poverty” as separate from the more affluent sectors of the population in terms of child-rearing practice and outcome.

One possible explanation for the lack of differentiation within the universe of adolescence is the relative recency of the construct. It is generally conceded that the cultural invention of adolescence is a byproduct of the Industrial Revolution. Prior to that there had apparently been no need to provide for a hiatus category to deal with the individual who was biologically no longer a child but whom the society did not find it convenient to induct into adult roles, particularly occupational niches. Such a need does exist in today’s highly technological and rapidly changing world. Gertrude Stein is reported to have said that America is the “oldest modern country in the world.” By this she meant that we have had the longest experience as a mechanized, highly industrial nation. As a corollary of this, we also have the

longest experience with adolescence, or a teen culture.

A definition of adolescence is not easy. It can be stated that both the beginning and the end of adolescence share in common a change in status: at the beginning, a change in biological status and at the end, a change in psychosocial status. It is important to recognize that a significant shift in status represents a major disequilibrium, in that the prior tested solutions and habitual ways of functioning no longer can apply without modification or regrouping. Thus, the initiation of adolescence represents one crisis and the termination of adolescence represents another. It is clear that in former times, when the shift to adult social roles temporally overlapped with the biological change in status, there was but a single critical period in going from childhood to adulthood. With the insidious lengthening of the adolescent period, we have now arrived at a situation in which there are two largely non-overlapping critical periods in the transition from childhood to adulthood. In fact, I should like to propose that our adolescence is now sufficiently lengthy to provide a demonstrable interval between these two periods which deserves consideration in its own right. Furthermore, the sex differences in the negotiation of the early, middle, and late phases of adolescence are noteworthy.

There has been a tendency for those interested in adolescence to focus their discussion of the subject in terms of either one or the other of the critical

periods. By and large, the heaviest emphasis and the bulk of the literature have been on the male in late adolescence who is being socialized into adult roles, or to put it another way, the identity crisis of the male. A great deal has been written about both the internal processes of these young men as well as the cultural factors that impinge on youth and the ways in which they influence socialization. Unfortunately, the inference has often been drawn that the conclusions thus reached pertain to all ages and stages of adolescents and speak equally validly for the female as for the male.

The smaller number of discussions that deal with the biological or hormonal changes tend to see these as almost exclusively libidinal in impact and as independently compelling and controlling a wide range of behaviors, "explaining" all or most of adolescence. The importance of each of these approaches is undeniable. But our adolescent transition is now too complex to be comprehended by any single approach.

It is difficult to set the boundaries of adolescence in a precise way. It is immeasurably easier at the lower or younger level when, by definition, one is dealing with pubertal change as the criterion. However, even here there are problems. There are difficulties in the appropriate categorization of the individual whose hormonal timetable is either notably advanced or retarded with respect to his age mates.

The boundary difficulties are enormously more complex at the upper or older end of adolescence. The age at which individuals are admitted to adult occupational roles is constantly being raised, and thus, in the most meaningful way, adolescence is being lengthened. While the occupational role is most salient, there are other adult roles that must be negotiated, namely, autonomy or living independently of parents; intimate or monogamous sexual relationship; the assumption of adult responsibilities of voting, age of conscription into the army, age for legal drinking, and legal responsibility for making valid contracts. These rights and responsibilities have no regular pattern. There are also some accommodations in terms of admission to adult sexual roles at an earlier age. Accompanying this, there is a trend toward earlier marriage, at times while individuals are still quite dependent on parental support. The recent move to grant the vote to eighteen-year-olds represents the admission of this group to a significant adult status in terms of societal responsibility. The very ambiguity about the termination of adolescence is variably experienced as stress in its own right.

Early Adolescence

There is a dominant theme that gives focus to the issues of each era. The dominant theme of early adolescence is pubertal change. I have intentionally avoided the term “sexual change,” despite the fact that pubertal changes are, of course, a response to changes in the sex hormones. Puberty is also a time of

general growth spurt. There are striking increments in height, changes in facial contours, fat distribution, pelvic proportions, and muscular development. These are at least as important as the changes in the genitalia and secondary sex characteristics, and they function independently in shaping the course of adolescent development.

The current information about the biological changes involved in the onset of puberty reveals that the pubertal events result from an interaction between sex hormones and the cells of the hypothalamus. In childhood, until eight or nine years of age, there are trace levels of circulating gonadal hormone. Evidence in mammals indicates that prior to puberty the cells of the hypothalamus are sensitive to these minute amounts of circulating hormone, and there is a resultant feedback system set up, in which the anterior lobe of the pituitary, via the hypothalamus, is inhibited from secreting gonadotropins which would otherwise evoke secretion of sex hormones in functional amounts. The significant change of puberty is the maturation of the cells of the hypothalamus and their escape from the restraining influence of minute qualities of gonadal hormone. The factors influencing this maturation of the brain in man are not yet elucidated.

It is the case, however, that the onset of puberty has shown a secular trend toward an increasingly earlier age. Tanner estimated that a lowering of the age of menarche by four months per decade would represent the trend of

the past 100 years. The average age in i860 was 16.5 and is now 12.5 years. The onset of puberty in females can be sharply defined by menarche, which is a distinct event that can be precisely recorded. It is known that the comparable events of puberty in males show a lag of roughly two years. However, it is assumed that the pubertal events in males reflect the same secular trend as females. This finding is generally attributed to better nutrition. It is acknowledged that other factors, as yet un-elucidated, may well play a role. In any case, it is significant to note that the biological onset of puberty is at increasingly earlier ages. The generational change is noticeable, though not striking. However, the net effect over historical time has been to further extend the span of adolescence by causing a lowering of the age of onset at the same time as social factors are extending the upper limits.

Menarche, as was mentioned, is a notable event that serves as a convenient marker for pubertal events. It is not, however, the initial event of puberty. After ages eight or nine, there is a gradually increasing excretion of estrogens in girls which becomes accelerated at about age eleven. Initially, this excretion is not cyclic; it becomes cyclic about eighteen months prior to menarche. Menarche almost invariably occurs after the peak of the height spurt is passed. While menarche does not mark the initiation of pubertal changes, neither does it signify their completion. Its occurrence marks a definitive and mature stage of uterine growth, but not full reproductive function. There is usually a period of twelve to eighteen months of infertility

post-menarche, and maximum fertility probably is not reached until the early or middle twenties. Significant development of secondary sex characteristics also precedes menarche. Beginning growth of the breast is usually the first sign of puberty. This is then followed successively by growth of pubic and axillary hair.

The first signs of impending puberty in boys occur typically at age thirteen (two years later than the girls) . The initial signs are some enlargement of the testes and penis followed shortly thereafter by height growth spurt. The changes occur roughly one year after testicular cell growth and the secretion of male sex hormone by the cells of the testis. The enlargement of the larynx occurs a little after the spurt in height, and the voice deepens during the period when development of the penis is approaching completion. The growth of pubic, axillary, and facial hair occurs in sequential order.

Typical or average ages have been given in this brief summary of pubertal changes, but the range of ages for all of these changes is very large.

Mention must now be made of the social setting in which the biologically changing early adolescent finds himself. By and large, the institution of the junior high school will be his school experience. Theoretically, the junior high school was designed to ease the transition from

the experience of self-contained classroom and single teacher throughout the day, existent in the elementary school, to the large population, large campus, rotating classes and multiple teacher situation of the high school. In fact, junior high schools, as they now exist, duplicate in all particulars the conditions of the high school, so that the transition is not eased but, instead, the radical shift in school experience is displaced downward by two years. As generally followed, the system involves elementary school for six years and then junior high school for two or three years followed by high school for three or four years. As it works out, the entry into junior high school is timed with significant pubertal changes in most girls. There are, however, only a small number of early-maturing boys who have comparable pubertal changes at this time. The implications of this for the adolescent's development will be discussed later.

For all the students, however, entry into junior high school is interpreted as a drastic change in status. It is the true badge of entry into the teen culture. It is also the case that the academic demands, both in quantity and quality of performance expected, show a sharp increase. Achievement pressures begin to be applied from all directions. There is, as mentioned, the new experience of a very large institution with a succession of six or seven different teachers each day whose personal relationship with the student cannot have the same meaning or intensity of elementary school days. There are ultimate advantages as well as disadvantages to this system, but it is,

nonetheless, a sharp discontinuity with the past.

Parents also view the junior high school student as entering a new world. They expect to treat their child differently and think of him now as an adolescent. As mentioned previously, the stereotype thus evoked refers to late adolescents, and so parental attitudes and behaviors tend to derive from this model. The applicability of the late adolescent model for providing useful prescriptions for dealing with early adolescents will be examined.

Finally, it is worth noting some of the continuities with the past that do exist. The early adolescent continues to live with his parents, and the issue of actual physical separation from them and living on his own, or autonomy, is remotely viewed, if perceived at all. There is a sharp increment in the school demands, but he is a student and continues to think of himself as continuing to exist in the student role for considerable years ahead.

There is no pressure for real commitment to an adult work responsibility. Though going steady may or may not be the custom in a particular community, there is rarely any question of a more than playful relationship to the opposite sex.

Coping Implications

Pubertal Change

A primary task is coping with the impact of undeniable change in body configuration. The widespread concern of the early adolescent with his body has been generally sensed and has been documented in nationwide surveys of thousands of adolescents by the Purdue Opinion Polls. Their figures show that 52 percent of adolescents report a dissatisfaction with their weight. Generally boys tend to want to gain and girls to lose weight; 24 percent of girls want to improve their figures. Thirty-seven percent of boys would like to change their body builds. Twelve percent are deeply concerned about pimples. Thirty-seven percent are dissatisfied about their posture. Frazier and Lisonbee studied 508 tenth-grade students and found that among tall girls, 49 percent were very concerned about their height and 39 percent of short boys expressed equally great concern. In their sample, 82 percent of the students expressed concern about pimples or other skin problems. Sixty-seven percent of the entire group expressed a desire for some type of physical change. It has been found that when junior high school students were asked what they did not like about themselves, physical characteristics was the most predominant response. There was a very much lower percentage of high school students who responded in this way. In the stage of early adolescence, the individual feels himself faced with the problem of accepting his emerging shape and size as the physique that will characterize him throughout adult life. The psychological development of the individual is related to the course of his physical development.

It has not been so obvious that the timing of puberty would have significant and differential consequences for boys and girls. In actuality, there is a great range of chronological ages over which pubertal changes occur. Children mature at different rates. Mary Cover Jones and associates have done long-term investigations of the different impacts and varying outcomes of early versus late maturity in boys and girls. Skeletal age was used as a stable and reliable index of physical maturity. On the average, the physically accelerated and physically retarded adolescents of the same chronological age are separated by two years in skeletal age. In girls, as early as eleven years of age all of the late maturers are shorter than the mean for the early maturers. At the mean age of fourteen, the height distributions for early and late maturers show an extreme separation with no overlap. At the peak of growth, early-maturing girls are not only taller than their girl classmates but actually much taller than most of the boys in the class. From that age onward, the differences tend to decrease, and by eighteen or nineteen the mature heights of the early-and late-maturing girls are very similar.

Strength tests in boys show that late maturers are relatively weak and are low in tests of athletic ability. Early-maturing boys are more masculine (mesomorphic) in their builds, and late-maturing boys more childish (slender and long-legged) in their builds. Late maturers are likely to be perceived and treated as immature by both adults and peers.

These classic studies revealed that systematic comparisons between the behavior and personality characteristics of early- and late-maturing adolescents have indicated that acceleration in growth tends to carry distinct advantages for boys but disadvantages for girls.

In early adolescence early-maturing boys are given more leadership roles, are more popular, excel in athletic ability, are perceived as more attractive by adults and peers, and enjoy considerably enhanced heterosexual status. When studied at seventeen years of age, the early-maturing boys showed more self-confidence, less dependency, and were more capable of playing an adult role in interpersonal relations.

The findings on the late-maturing boys showed more personal and social maladjustment at all stages of adolescence. When studied on follow-up at age seventeen, this group showed negative self-concepts, prolonged dependency needs, rebellious attitudes toward parents, strong affiliation needs, and profound feelings of rejection by the group. Interestingly, the two groups did not differ in needs for achievement and recognition.

The early reports of systematic comparisons among girls aged eleven to seventeen showed that early-maturing girls were seen as “submissive, listless, or indifferent in social situations and lacking in poise. Such girls have little influence upon the group and seldom attain a high degree of popularity,

prestige or leadership." Late-maturing girls in early adolescent years were seen as relatively more outgoing and assured. They were described as being confident and having leadership ability.

In early adolescence early-maturing boys and, to a somewhat lesser extent, late-maturing girls share a fortuitous adaptive advantage. Early-maturing girls stand in an intermediate position adaptively despite their extreme position developmentally. A possible explanation for this may be that while their body configuration and tallness are viewed by the girls themselves and by others as discordant, this occurs while in the elementary school setting. Essentially this means that the task of coping with physical change occurs as the single major challenge confronting the early-maturing girl. She does not have the superimposed academic and social pressures inherent in junior high school. Her status with her peer group is buffered by halo effects, which can continue to operate because she is remaining in a stable social setting and does not have to establish herself with new peers. Also, despite the fact that her appearance is different both to herself and others, the changes are recognized by all concerned as desirable steps toward maturity. Finally, within the continuity of the elementary school period, parents are less likely to alter their expectations of her or drastically change their accustomed ways of relating to her. She is usually perceived by them as a large child rather than an adolescent. Again, needed stability may thus be achieved. In instances where the parents collaborate in permitting an early

shift to adolescent behaviors at ages of nine or ten, there is much more turmoil, as she strives to find a niche.

The late-maturing boy is at the most severe disadvantage. He is at least as highly discordant as the early-maturing girl, but under much less favorable circumstances. He continues to look like an elementary school boy at a time when it may be important to him to be as grown up as possible. He has a developmental lag of about four years as compared to the average girl of the same age and perhaps two years in relation to the age-matched boy. His inevitable discordance in size may put him at risk of a particularly slavish devotion to as much superficial conformity as is available to him. Despite these efforts at acceptance, he is likely to suffer considerable emotional distress.

There is every reason to further investigate the possibility that much of the unpredictable moodiness, hostility, depressions, and other signs of emotionality, which are so perplexing and troublesome to those dealing with early adolescents, may in fact, be substantially related to the significant changes in sex-hormone levels characteristic of pubertal development. In females it is well established that at the other times of major change in the levels of sex hormones, such as pregnancy and menopause, there is a notable corollary effect on mood. For some females, there is an even more fine-tuned sensitivity to the circulating levels of gonadal hormone such that there is a

cyclicity of mood that is dependent on the hormone changes of the monthly menstrual cycle.

It has been established that in nonhuman mammalian males of several species there is a rise of aggressive behavior at the time of onset of puberty. There are persuasive impressions that the same phenomenon exists in humans. Now that newer technology permits accurate measures of male gonadal hormone levels, an opportunity exists to explore this definitively in man in conjunction with a variety of behavioral indices and social indicators. If these sex-hormone-mood correlations are established for puberty, they would offer an important new insight into one of the distressing aspects of early adolescent behavior. At present, the adolescent casts about to find exclusively psychosocial justifications for his moods. Often, the adults dealing with him are hurt and baffled by his moody behavior. Unfortunately, many adults tend to automatically react in a counter-punitive style, and thus a downward spiral of negative interaction may ensue, leading, at times, to explosive outbursts on both sides. Both parent and child would feel better knowing that the mood had, in part at least, a biological base.

Psychosocial Change

The entry into junior high school catapults the early adolescent into the new world of the teen culture and imposes a drastic and demanding change in

the format of school experience. It is a time of inevitable crisis and reorganization for all children who are a part of this system.

Prior to the invention of junior high school, a child typically continued in the self-contained classroom until the end of eighth grade. He then went to high school for the succeeding four years. As mentioned previously, the commonest plan at present is for the child to start junior high school after the completion of sixth grade. There is, therefore, a loss of two years of the elementary school setting, at present. In the prior arrangement, the child had the opportunity of dealing with the stiffer academic expectations of the seventh and eighth grade in the context of a teacher who knew him well and in a peer group where he had secure status and a network of support. He also had the cushion of knowledge of his prior competence in the same setting to bolster him in attacking the new challenges. Similarly, it was also possible to move toward heterosexual explorations in a safe structure. Dating behavior was initiated with partners who were well known. It was possible for dating couples to combine this new activity with retaining membership in the long-standing, same-sex cliques or groups. There was the likelihood of going back and forth between the new group of dating couples and the prior reference group, where there could be information exchange and a chance to validate impressions. There was a great richness of resource in forming one's opinions about members of the opposite sex. Currently, there is a far greater tendency to go steady without prior dating experience and for the couple to have a

rather isolated existence with intense mutual dependence.

With the sudden entry into a new role status, the early adolescent may feel himself in need of a new set of behaviors, values, and reference persons. Although no child can escape the necessity for reorientation and reorganization at this time, there would appear to be class and cultural differences in the experiencing of this crisis.

It is noteworthy that it is a consistent finding of large survey studies of adolescents that there is far less turbulence than more theoretically oriented sources and case studies would lead one to expect. It now seems likely that the bulk of other types of professional literature may represent a sampling effect. It should also be noted that the surveys have typically been studies of public high school populations and not of junior high school populations per se. The relative calm of this high school era as a general phenomenon will be discussed later. However, there is retrospective material in these same studies which gives rise to inferences about junior high school students. (Incidentally, paucity of material and the great need for research directly on junior high school students should be mentioned.) The survey material has, by design, tended to include all strata of the population in representative numbers. This means that the middle classes, upper-lower through lower-middle, contribute by far the largest total number of students. There is reason to believe (and this will be elaborated on further) that the lower-lower,

upper-middle, and upper classes have disproportionately influenced the usual literature on adolescence. In contrast, the bulk of students in the survey studies come from the nonprofessional white-collar and blue-collar families who are moderately affluent and traditional in their orientation. They and their children tend to expect a continuity of generations in terms of values and occupational niches. There is mutual expectation of conformity or very little early striving toward autonomy. By and large, these individuals live in stable communities, and the children respect and wish to emulate their parents. Religious values and affiliations tend to be stronger than in the surrounding classes.

Offer extensively studied two large groups of adolescents in public high schools in Illinois. He called them “modal adolescents,” and he found that among his modal adolescents only very few were members of deviant groups where parental values would be seriously challenged. “The relationship between the subjects and their parents was stable, consistent and empathic.” The same findings are reported by Douvan and Adelson in their survey of 3,500 adolescents in Michigan. They also concluded that the process of detachment from the parents seems less dramatic and full of conflict than tradition and theory hold.

The early adolescents in the traditional families are buffered in meeting the combination of crises of early adolescence. They continue to have and

want to utilize the guidelines and resources of the parents in developing new strategies for dealing with the pubertal and school challenges. They are, therefore, less subject to peer pressure. The impact of the teen culture on them is less striking. It should be remembered that the early adolescent, the junior high school student, is typically between twelve and fourteen years of age. There is a four- to six-year period before the issue of actual separation from the home and parents will become real. A strong posture of independence at this early stage is not, therefore, linked with a valid developmental transition.

When the child had continued into eighth grade in an elementary school setting, there was further stability in the parent-child relationship. The mutual perception of change in social status and role was postponed until ninth grade and occurred after some mastery of the self-image problems related to pubertal changes had taken place. However, the modal adolescents of today, with their multiple superimposed developmental crises of early adolescence, show effects of the stress. In discussing his students, Offer noted that “in our subjects rebellion manifested itself most clearly in early adolescence, at ages twelve and fourteen.” Even at worst, however, this defensive behavior on the part of the traditionally oriented early adolescent is within bounds.

Undeniably, the extreme disturbance of behavior described in much of

the literature on adolescence does actually exist. It occurs in families where there is expectation by both parent and child of sharp discontinuity between the child and adolescent role, and also where there is repudiation of parental values. These families tend to cluster in two groups. One is the lower-class, disadvantaged population. The other is the upper-middle-class and intellectual group. The latter, the enlightened, high-status parents, have usually derived their prescriptions for dealing with their adolescents from professional sources. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, virtually all the literature, although not explicitly stated, deals with the late adolescent phase. These parents find, therefore, an emphasis on the need for independent decision-making and the development of autonomy. In an effort to foster the perceived value of independence in the child, there may be a significant renunciation of parental prerogatives. This is not appropriate for the early adolescent. In fact, it is contraindicated. There is a heightened need for parental stability and guidance at the time of major biological, school, and social discontinuity. The early adolescent cannot possess the competence and mastery needed for independence. Instead, the early and mid-adolescent phases are the training grounds and preparation for the achievement of autonomy by the time of late adolescence. The success with which these earliest phases are negotiated will, of course, affect the final outcome of adolescent development.

In the poverty group, the adolescent finds a heightening of an already

preexisting tendency to find his guidance and support among peers rather than adults—the street gang. There have frequently been weak or missing fathers. In response to this, the adolescent males often tend to adopt styles of exaggerated masculinity, including hyper-independence, high risk-taking, and aggressive behaviors. Of course, father absence occurs sporadically in all social groups. Wherever it occurs the negative impact on the development of the adolescent male is significant. Grinker, Grinker, and Timberlake emphasized the history of strong identification with father and father figures as significant in the cluster of conditions found in his sample of emotionally healthy college freshman males.

Where there is a lack of firm parental guidance and availability of the parent as model and coping resource, there is a more urgent need for the individual to uncritically seek peer support and adopt the badges of conformity. While this uncritical allegiance to the peer group may be useful in allaying immediate anxieties, it has serious limitations. The peer group at this stage is usually too shallow and rigid to afford the necessary resources for growth and development. When the peer group is organized around drugs and/or acting-out behaviors, there is potential for considerable damage.

The pseudo-independence of this era is often characterized by a challenging and abrasive interpersonal style. In fact, the use of arguments and an adversary stance may represent a style of information-gathering. If the

significant adults can react without rancor they are usually rewarded, after some delay, with finding that their ideas and values have been incorporated by the early adolescent. However, many parents are hurt by this new adversary behavior of their children and retire in a self-protective retreat when their overtures are rebuffed. These are the ingredients of the generation gap. With the distancing of parent and child, there is often a relaxation of the demands previously made on him, and a lessening rather than a more appropriate increase in the responsibilities expected of him. Parents may lose touch with the activities and friends of their child under the rubric of privacy for the child.

There are data on the relation between parental interest and involvement and the adolescent self-image. Data from the same source deal with the effects of level of self-esteem on behavior. Rosenberg has studied 5,077 juniors and seniors in public high schools throughout New York State. He studied parental interest as indicated by the parents' knowledge of and relationship to their child's friends, parents' reactions to academic performance, and their responsiveness to the child as judged by dinner table interactions. There is retrospective information pertaining to the early adolescent period. He concluded that low parental involvement and interest are highly correlated with low self-esteem in the child. He said it is "not the punitive responses which are most closely related to low self-esteem but the indifferent ones." He pointed out that low self-esteem leads to characteristic

responses. The individual is more vulnerable in interpersonal relations (deeply hurt by criticism); he is relatively awkward with others (finds it hard to make talk, does not initiate contacts); he assumes that others think poorly of him or do not particularly like him; he tends to put up a front to people; he feels relatively isolated and lonely. There is low faith in people. In some "this low faith in people takes the form of contempt for the great mass of humanity; among others, mistrust, and among still others, hostility." "Low self-esteem makes them relatively submissive or unassertive in their dealings with others. ... It is, thus apparent that the individual's self-conception is not only associated with attitudes towards other people, it is also associated with his actions in social life and the position he comes to occupy in his high school peer groups."

Clinical Implications for Early Adolescents

An important aspect of the difficulties experienced by early adolescents lies in the fact that each of the three superimposed tasks involves drastic discontinuity with the past. Therefore, at a time of great stress, the individual is severely limited in his ability to draw on past learning and information in trying to cope with the new tasks. Many persons are also somewhat handicapped in ability to integrate new experiences because they have not yet reached the final stages of cognitive development in which their introspective and abstract thinking processes are well-developed. As a result,

most early adolescents are quite dependent on environmental supports in attempting to anticipate and regulate responses to the challenging tasks at hand. This tendency applies to many individuals who differ in such important variables as rate of maturation, sex, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

It might enhance the coping ability of early adolescents to receive prior education about the forthcoming pubertal period. Sketchy information is now given by some schools to fifth- and sixth-grade children on menarche and secondary sex changes. In addition, it would probably be helpful for children in late elementary school to become aware of the implications of the wide range of normality and the timetables for various manifestations of pubertal change which affect the total body image. In this time of intense concern over body image, the early adolescent is particularly vulnerable to real or imagined assaults on his bodily integrity. It seems reasonable that elective surgical procedures should be avoided at this critical period. When medical or surgical interventions are required they should be discussed with the patient with an understanding of his heightened anxiety and need for clear information about the ultimate consequences for his bodily intactness and attractiveness.

Available evidence supports the concept that parental interest, guidelines, and support, particularly of the same-sex parent, offer the most effective help to the early adolescent in negotiating his tasks. There is a need for public understanding of a differentiated view of adolescence and specific

information on early adolescence. Rather than accepting the notion of the generation gap as modal and even somehow growth promoting, parents need education about the underlying needs of early adolescents. They need to be supported in carrying out appropriate parental functions and in learning about effective communication with their children.

Implications for Research with Early Adolescents

Very little research has been directed primarily to the early adolescent period in terms of its specific coping challenges. At the same time, it has become clear that the junior high school period is a time of major stress and impaired coping ability. The roots of this high rate of distress in the junior high school population need to be further studied. It might be fruitful to study the transition from elementary school to junior high school in a fashion similar to the study of the transition from high school to college carried out by Coelho, Hamburg, and Murphey. Some educators are experimenting with alternatives to the traditional sequence of elementary, junior high, and high school. These deserve study in terms of the psychosocial and coping outcomes, in addition to curricular and learning considerations. The shift from thinking in terms of concrete operations to mature abstract thinking has not been studied in detail in this era to learn about the variability, rate of change, or other attributes of cognition peculiar to the early adolescent period. It is a clinical impression that information processing in this era is

significantly different from that in middle and late adolescent periods. There seems to be a general tendency to have difficulty in reasoning about things that are outside of direct, personal experience.

The desirability of further investigation into the relation of gonadal hormone to the moodiness of adolescence has already been mentioned. There is also a need to investigate the possible relation of gonadal hormones to aggressive behavior in males. It is, of course, important to study the problem of aggressive and antisocial behavior in the broader psychosocial aspects as well. Finally, there is a need to look at the ways in which the peer group can be more reliably used as a constructive coping adjunct. At Stanford, we have initiated a peer counseling program in which students are encouraged to assume a helping stance toward their fellow students and are given skills and information to bring to their role. This is but one of many models for utilizing the potential of the peer group. We need to explore as many as possible.

In general, there is a need for interdisciplinary research on early adolescence, linking biological and psychosocial variables. This critical period of turbulence and potentiality deserves far more study than it has so far received.

Mid-adolescence

The high school years, when students are roughly between the ages of

fifteen through eighteen, constitute the mid-adolescent period. It comes to an end with the graduation from high school. New adaptations are necessary then because of the imminence of taking a job or going to college and the actuality of separation from home and nuclear family.

While in high school there are no distinctive new challenges or changes in status. The format of school and the intellectual demands are an extension of the junior high. There are bodily growth and developmental changes which are the continuum of the pubertal changes. Finally, there is the continued socialization into the adolescent roles. The mid-adolescent is given increasing social responsibility and privilege, for example, driving the automobile, though he still does not have the voting rights or legal responsibilities that come after age eighteen at the earliest. There is an opportunity in the mid-adolescent era to work at familiar problems with greater depth and differentiation. The caricature-like, exaggerated quality of the prior period yields to the greater experience and emerging individuality of the mid-adolescent . Also, there is a gradual shift from the here and now perspective to a future orientation.

In general, mid-adolescence is an interval of quiescence and consolidation. The survey studies cited earlier were typically done on this age group, and the investigators were uniformly impressed by the tranquility of the group as a whole.

The adaptations are smoother in high school not only because the tasks are less new and challenging but also because the coping assets within the individuals are greater at that time, owing to maturational effects. By the time of high school, full cognitive development has been achieved. This makes new dimensions possible in dealing with psychosocial as well as intellectual tasks. The mid-adolescent s are capable of useful introspections. They are interested in exploring the various facets of an issue, and they can learn a great deal by debates and intellectual discussions as a means of information gathering. Horizons are broader, and new connections of ideas can be made. The true relevance of a number of things can now begin to be appreciated. There is less response simply to the novel, exotic, or contradictory aspects of the environment but a more differentiated approach to their milieu. There is a real concern with values and ideals.

Likewise, interpersonal transactions are more differentiated and constructive. There is a more highly critical use of the peer group. There are planned experimentations and role rehearsals. Instead of previous stereotypy, peers are used in a variety of roles such as helpers, foils, critics, and models. The previous concern with exploratory learning about the opposite sex in general terms is giving way to the nurture of specific relationships in which there is mutuality and the beginning of tenderness. The mid-adolescent is making many refinements in his self-image and sense of identity.

There is a chance now to confirm some aspects of this new self in functional terms. There are added privileges and responsibilities that lead to new contracts with the parents and meaningful moves toward independence. The earning of the driver's license and use of the family car is an excellent example. In less affluent families it may be the obtaining of a work permit and opportunity to prove one's worth in the labor market in terms of responsibility and productivity.

In all these ways, the mid-adolescent , though somewhat more quiet, is making real progress and is laying the groundwork for definitively dealing with the salient issues that are to confront him in late adolescence.

Late Adolescence

Graduation from high school is the critical event that ushers in the stage of late adolescence for most young people. The long continuum of student life in secondary school while living under the protection and restraint of the nuclear family comes to an end. Some individuals may move directly into adult roles of marriage and full-time work responsibility. For most of the group, however, the post-high school era is the psychosocial moratorium of which Erikson has written so persuasively. There is a more or less extended period of time in college or apprentice training when the search for identity can be pursued.

As has been mentioned previously, this is the era so amply represented in the literature. Therefore, only a brief synopsis of the major developmental tasks of this period need be set forth.

Autonomy is a key issue. Most other tasks are derivative from this.

The search for identity could be restated as “now that I am free to be the kind of person I choose, what is it that I care about.” Away from the family, but under the protection of college and the general attitudes of tolerance that society affords members of this age group, there is a chance to try out modes of independent functioning.

Another task is the renegotiation of the relationship to the family. The separation usually does not mean estrangement. The goal is to achieve a more adult-adult relationship based on mutual respect and more equality. This generally involves a more realistic appraisal of the family with an acceptance of shortcomings and an appreciation of the assets.

The commitment to work is an important task. The late adolescent needs to define and pursue a goal in which his talents are used, interests are focused, and a sense of efficacy is established. The end point is reached when a particular adult work role is achieved. The choice of an alternative life style, where no such adult occupational niche is sought or occupied, represents a prolongation of adolescence despite the chronological age.

When the individual moves out of the family into the community, there is a heightened need to define himself in relation to his new situation and also more broadly in relation to the existing society. For different individuals this is a more or less difficult task. For different reasons both the disadvantaged minorities and the elite intellectual groups tend to find this an arena of great challenge and often turbulence.

Finally, there is the challenge of heterosexual adjustment and intimacy. Despite the new permissiveness, it is still the case that the majority of young people do not establish a mature, stable heterosexual relationship until late adolescence. This task is not derived from autonomy needs but stands in its own right as a major challenge. Mutuality and the ability to relate tenderly and with trust are the issues of importance in this task.

Kenneth Keniston proposed a separate developmental era in his "Youth: A 'New' Stage of Life." On close reading, however, it seems more likely that he is describing a specific kind of resolution of the universal problems of the late adolescent period. The tasks he describes are not different from those set down by Erikson in his description of the search for identity. Keniston stated, "Youth, as a developmental stage is emergent; it is an 'optional' stage, not a universal one." The distinguishing criterion for the designation of "youth" that Keniston cites is the attainment of postconventional moral reasoning, as described by Kohlberg. By this is meant a stage in which an individual comes

to feel that his personal principles transcend not only conventional morality but even the social contract. This variant of adolescence has been adopted by a vocal and highly publicized minority and as such seems to be best included in the general category of late adolescence rather than viewed as a separate life stage. It is more aptly described as a different life style and seen as but one of the several alternative broad strategies available for coping with the psychosocial pressures of this age period.

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