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Mastering Adolescence
Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
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August 1976
4 pages

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Stress and the Family

4. Mastering Adolescence

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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At no period in life is one more aware of change than during adolescence. Bodies suddenly seem out of control; they not only grow energetically, they change dramatically. Hair appears where it has never been before. Boys become men, girls become women. Suddenly the face breaks out with acne, or a youth's voice cracks in midsentence.

All of us who have "grown up" vaguely remember what it was like to feel awkward and shy, a victim of sorts—all those hormones within us surging, leaving their unmistakable presence felt. Yet, we also forget. Time blurs the difficult side of human experience, leaving only a certain nostalgic glow. We see a movie (*The Summer of '42* or *American Graffiti*) and we long for days irrevocably gone. Then we were happy, carefree, full of hope. Needless to say, we were also (and maybe, predominantly) plagued by uncertainty, confusion, even despair.

Today adolescence is an exceptionally long stretch of time, beginning at about 12 and extending to about 20 or 21. It is also, to a degree, a class-related phenomenon. Millions of people all over the world have been working for years when they have reached, say, 15 or 16. Often they are already parents and have had little, if any, schooling. To have survived infancy is a triumph, given the infant mortality rate that obtains in so many "underdeveloped" nations.

But for most young people, adolescence is indeed a possibility; that is to say, they belong to a world which emphasizes a prolonged childhood, a prolonged period of education and only a gradual entrance into the rights and responsibilities of adulthood.

It is important to make this social and economic distinction because, for one thing, some middle-class adolescent youths desperately need a sense of perspective about themselves and what it is that may be ailing them. Often they see themselves as hopelessly driven or

controlled by the biological stresses of a given moment in life when, in fact, they are responding to pressures generated by a given culture or social position.

Historically, we know that even the rich, centuries ago, had no notion of adolescence; children became adults (responsible working men and women) when they were eight or nine. Life was short, hard, unpredictable; no one talked about "growing up." One was born and soon enough one was at work.

Our notion of the family—a mother and father with several children living under one roof—was also unknown. Children were raised communally and the notion of privacy was unheard of.

In a sense, then, adolescence has a social history. As the family became more distinct and more entrenched in its house or apartment with its doors that close and are locked; and as children went to school longer and longer in order to secure greater economic leverage, boys and girls remained under parental control for a gradually increasing amount of time. Their ancestors, were they alive, would judge them men and women, but would think they lived strange lives—unmarried, without children, often without work and blessed (or cursed) with hours and hours of spare time.

Much of the stress of adolescence has to do with just that fact: it is hard for people who are strong and vigorous and potentially capable of living active, independent lives to be in many ways still children—protected, watched, doted upon and, all too often, kept tightly in line.

"I'm caged, locked up," a youth of 16 once told me. When I asked why he felt like that, he said, "I sit in school all day and study subjects that bore me. I'd like to work with my hands but I'm told I have to 'get ahead,' be a lawyer like my father, or a doctor. My parents are always worrying about who I'm going out with—is she a good girl, and will we be good, or will there be trouble. They say they know I'm grown up, but they don't really believe it. They treat me like I'm a

piece of property. They tell me they've given me so much, and they want so much for me. I'm an investment, that's what. They tell me it's because they love me that they worry; but they worry most, I've noticed, when I'm off doing something on my own. They're afraid they'll lose me—all they've put into me! I know I exaggerate; of course they love me—they're good parents. But it's crazy; it's unnatural. I'm a grownup man, with ideas of my own, and I'm treated as if I'm a child, a big child, but still a child.

"My father says it better than I can, though he doesn't mean to say what he does. The other day he told me how hard my grandfather worked to rise up and build a business for himself. 'Your grandfather,' he told me, 'never had time to feel sorry for himself or mope around and ask for more records and a car and clothes and all the rest. He was out there working when he was 12. He never finished school. He kept at it, and made something of himself. He got married and carried two jobs for years, and saved his money and bought his own house when he was 23!'

"Well, the longer he talked about my grandfather, the more I wished I could live his life. I want to do something. I want to go and be off on my own, and live my own life, not be a kid, a teen-ager, a high school student—all those words!"

There was more, much more; his dissatisfaction ought not be dismissed as "neurotic," but seen as the expression of a shrewd person's capacity for social criticism.

Our culture has mixed, somewhat inconsistent attitudes toward youth. On the one hand, we urge them to delay various forms of gratification and stick to one or another course of study, course of life, really. Reward will come later, we insist, so curb your desire for independence, submit to the authority of teachers and parents, however confined you feel.

On the other hand, we often remind young people how bold and entrepreneurial their forefathers were; no prolonged adolescence for them, but rather an active, self-assertive youth, unencumbered by the demands that contemporary middle-class life makes on youth.

The nation's cultural myths dwell on the heroic. Often enough we glorify youths who have found ways of growing up fast without any of the conflicts so many of today's youth inevitably feel as they contend with their conflicting senses of what is desirable. Yet we also ask for obedience at all costs to the demands of various authorities.

Needless to say, conflict need not be overwhelming; for that matter, the antagonistic impulses I have been describing need not prompt excessive anxiety or despair. No one's life is without ambiguity or inconsistency. At any age we struggle with various alternatives, and sometimes falter for a while as we do. Adolescents differ from others in the degree to which such a struggle takes place. By definition it is a period when decisions of lasting significance must not only be made, but stood by: day after day of attendance at

school and college, with all the commitments of time and energy thereby required. There is no one "healthy" way for adolescents to go about taking such steps toward their future life.

At any age there are wide fluctuations in what a given society calls "normal," and that is especially true in our country with respect to adolescents. They move gradually toward a greater sense of who they are, what they want to do, how (and with whom) they would wish to spend their lives; but there are static moments, lapses and sudden, inexplicable spurts.

Adolescence is, by definition, a period of change, a "moment," as it were, in a person's life; and as such, it is characterized by fairly frequent episodes of stress—moody introspection, a feeling of confusion, anxious moments of despair.

Anyone who has worked with youths knows how quickly they move from one state of mind to another: a peak of joy, followed by inexplicable sadness. Heightened social demands exert one kind of stress; but there are always the internal pressures of a fast-growing body generates. Often the young man or woman alternates between grim self-righteous asceticism and outbursts of sensuality. One moment idealistic motives prevail; a bit later the same person, perhaps unwittingly, is utterly self-absorbed.

What, if anything, are parents to do in the face of such developmental changes and tensions in a "child" of theirs who is at the same time a young man or woman? Often it is a matter of knowing how to keep one's distance, of being there without being especially insistent or inquisitive. Youths struggling for independence choose their own occasions for intimacy with those they love yet also feel the need to move away from. Such youths need to know that their parents want to help; but also need to know that their parents recognize that to grow up is to assert one's authority, one's initiative, one's own momentum, even if pain is thereby felt on all sides. Young people themselves are often the best judges of when their distress has gotten out of control and when they need turn to others—not always to parents, but to friends, teachers, ministers. Of course, as with anyone of any age, when behavior becomes bizarre, when episodic moodiness turns into chronic and severe depression, when crankiness or anxious spells become fixed, when there are relentless stretches of melancholy, with additional signs of trouble (suspiciousness that seems unwarranted, withdrawal, peculiar or provocative behavior, acts of delinquency) then a doctor's help may well be needed.

When young people go away to college, they face additional psychological hurdles. Again, it is hard to generalize about the adjustment of youth to our new styles of college dormitory living, or the new morality of the 1970's. There is a great deal of openness, candor and honesty among youth these days. What strikes older people as a shocking "breakdown" in standards is not felt to be so by young people, who have their own ways

of being just and honorable to one another, often without the hypocrisy some of us older people took for granted or long ago stopped noticing.

One gathers that the incidence of psychiatric problems has not risen as a result of the so-called "new morality"; there is a fairly constant level of emotional illness among young people in college, though some colleges respond to the psychological difficulties of students, and others choose not to pay them notice.

When adolescents hurt themselves while playing athletics, or in other accidents, they become newly vulnerable; they may again be "childlike," waited on, looked over—and may both enjoy that status and be angered by it. They may plunge into sadness and a feeling of worthlessness, only to recover quite quickly.

Then, too, there are difficulties which especially plague adolescents—disorders of the skin, menstrual irregularities and less common metabolic diseases.

A good doctor often is far better at handling the psychological problems that such difficulties generate, not only because he or she possesses medical knowledge, but because with adolescents an outsider, trusted but not too close to the family, frequently is able to talk more comfortably and reassuringly than parents can.

I recall one boy I worked with who came to me with the diagnosis of "acute adolescent turmoil." He had become increasingly irritable, moody, suspicious and withdrawn at home; at school he was sullen, rebellious, hard to reason with. We spent many visits, week after week, trying to find the sources of his discontent. Gradually he seemed to improve, though I never was sure whether anything I said (or conveyed to him that I felt) made all that much difference. Eventually he seem-

ed a little more relaxed with himself, and we stopped our talks.

A year later he was in college, and had gained enough distance on himself to write me a letter, part of which I will quote. In a way, his is one of the best descriptions I've ever come across of what adolescent stress is all about, and how it ought to be handled:

"I realize now," he wrote, "that there were moments when no matter what you said, I would have disagreed with you. I was determined to go my own way, and I wouldn't let anyone persuade me otherwise. But I know that I needed someone to disagree with, someone I could talk with who wouldn't walk away just because I was being a tough talker.

"When I have children and they grow up to be teenagers, I only hope that I'll have patience with them and not forget that it's not so much what you say, but your attitude. If you're sending signals that you care and you want to help, to be there, to stand by, then that's what a teen-ager needs.

"He may try to pick a fight with you, and he may scream or cry or cuss or whatever. But he needs you there, and you can't forget that. You shouldn't become a doormat, just as you can't rise to every piece of bait thrown at you. I guess you have to keep remembering that with time a lot changes, and soon the person who seems completely wrapped up in himself and has no perspective gets a sense of humor about things. And the next thing you know, he's really growing up. Then everybody can take a deep breath.

I'm beginning to take a deep breath myself—about myself. That's when you know that you won't be a teen-ager too much longer!"

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Michigan State University Printing

