

ADOLESCENCE OVERVIEW

Academic and professional discussions about the nature of adolescence have bogged down in endless controversies as to what word to use (youth, adolescence, or young adult, etc.) and what ages it covers (15-22/25/older; or 12-20/21; or 13-19). More serious arguments have to do with whether adolescence is a fixed developmental stage or a social construct, and whether or not adolescent programs only reinforce an arbitrary cultural boundary that marginalizes young people.

We have found it best in teaching and in this Encyclopedia to use the terms youth, adolescents, and young people as general synonyms. (Teenagers obviously refers to those 13-19.) Adolescence (or youth) we take to be the transitional age between childhood and adulthood.

Adolescence begins with the clear-cut physical change of puberty (about the age of 12 in girls and 14 in boys). It would be helpful if the end of childhood and entry into adulthood were marked by clear social rites of passage. But this is not the case in most urban societies. Many young people therefore, create their own, sometimes injurious, markers of leaving childhood and entering adulthood.

It is helpful, then, to get a sense of the meaning of childhood. Primarily because of mass media, it is no longer an age of innocence—since no adult burden or seamy secret is kept from childhood view. Still, childhood is generally an age of dependency.

Adulthood is the age of responsible independence or mature autonomy. An adult is generally considered able to function apart from parental care—emotionally and financially. An adult should have a clear vocational identity. And an adult is ready to commit to intimacy and parenthood (though one may choose not to do so). Understanding childhood and adulthood sheds light on the nature of adolescence.

Children play adult life (their toys are clear evidence of that fact). Adolescents need to practice adult life in a school setting, in part-time and summer jobs, in dating or social situations, and in special time away (a moratorium) such as traveling, a year abroad, or time in the military or

national service.

If we define adolescence as the transition between childhood and adulthood, we have a simple functional definition, and we can then think of it universally. Children in all societies have been treated differently than adults. Before children are ready for adult roles such as going to war or caring for a family, they were given special instruction and recognized through certain rites. This is why we look on childhood pregnancy or the forced use of children as wartime killers as undesirable situations.

This is not to say that adolescence, as we think of it today, is not a modern invention in the way it has been structured. Urban societies, especially in the West, have done several things to adolescence:

- Prolonged it well into the twenties.
- Socially segregated it as an age group from children and from adults.
- Protected and restricted this age group especially in terms of life and death matters.
- Confused them with double messages and mixed values.

Whereas, traditional cultures generally had a dominant, approved value system and a counter, negative value system, today's children and youth face complex and subtle differences in the values of their parents, their friends, their teachers, their religious instructors, and the media. There are many different ways to look at right and wrong, the acceptable and the unacceptable.

The confusion and burden of adult responsibilities without adult privileges is another factor creating stress in young people. We ask them to grow up, but we want them to remain, and we treat them, like kids. We ask them to make their own choices, with which we often disapprove.

It is not clear how societies today can eliminate adolescence and integrate this age group into a smooth continuum from childhood to adulthood. Most experiments involving the elimination of special attention to, and programs for, adolescents have not produced broad evidence of real integration.

The critical developmental task of adolescence (following the work of Erik Erikson) is the identity issue. Personal identity involves an understanding and acceptance of one's physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual/academic,

social, and spiritual uniqueness. Young people work out their personal identities in the context of their friends. Personal identity (including self-esteem or self-confidence, value system, and personal boundaries) and relationships are the key issues of adolescence.

To the degree that society isolates and marginalizes adolescents, to that degree a youth culture will emerge. Whenever people find their needs unmet in a dominant culture, they tend to form a subculture. Young people identify with their own by means of a special language, fashion, humor, music, and much more. The subculture of youth contributes to and feeds off pop culture. To the extent that some types of youth feel estranged from their cohorts or have specific interests that distinguish them, they will tend to develop subcultures of the youth culture (e.g. heavy metal, punk, skate boarders, surfers, etc.).

Children and young people are socialized by various social systems surrounding them: the family, community, schools with athletics and social clubs, the media, friends and cohorts (all those the same age), and in some cases, religious organizations. It is important to note how the influences of these social systems are changing.

To the degree that most adolescents identify with their own age group over against childhood and adulthood, societies need to make sure their needs are being met. Their voices need to be heard; they should be enabled to contribute to the world and communities. As does everyone, youth need a life now.... not just in some dim future.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How do you define adolescence or youth, and how have you seen that age group change?
2. What was your own adolescence like? What were its most positive and negative aspects? How could you have been better understood?
3. Contrast your teenage years with someone whose experiences were quite different than yours.
4. With what do you most agree or disagree with this article? What would you add?
5. What do you think adolescents today most need from adults and the social systems surrounding them?

IMPLICATIONS

1. If it is true that with puberty, a young person achieves new physical, emotional, and intellectual powers and a new sense of self-consciousness, it stands to reason that life-reaching decisions are made in that age. The opportunities to affect individuals and society for the good at that age are tremendous.
2. An understanding of adolescence is very important for parenting, education, and all youth work.