Cultural Commentary: Coping with Adolescence

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Growing up in an adult world is not an easy task for young people today. While experiencing the stress involved in the progression through puberty, teenagers must also seek to develop some sense of who they are, sometimes called personal identity. This complex developmental process is often thwarted by social and economic factors that affect teenage behavior. For example, society has moved away from the traditional family structure of two parents with children. Columnist Ellen Goodman reports that only 7% of the population is now made up of what used to be a "typical" family with a working husband and housewife.

According to a position paper for the Association for Childhood Education International, the number of children from single parent families has doubled in the last decade. As a result, children's needs have often become subordinated to parents' desires for careers, materials and new mates or partners, and inexperienced teens have become the sounding boards for the single parent's frustrations.

Over half of the twenty-five million women with children in the United States are working outside the home, compared with only 20% in 1950. Consequently, fewer opportunities for parental guidance are available.

Young people are being exposed to many types of family units. They are living with single parents, aggregate families (each spouse bringing children from a previous marriage) communal families, homosexual families and in joint custody situations. Each of these family situations has its own problems which directly influence the children involved. This is especially important to the extent that the family provides teens with the sense of security they need during this period of development.

For many of these families, economic issues have dramatic influences on living conditions.

A high school on Cape Cod had thirty-five students whose families resided in a local motel. The uncertain future of those teens—especially when the motel management announced it was "going condo," presented unique problems to the children and to the school's counseling staff.

Faced with a new family setting—a breach in their security system—adolescents find themselves feeling angry, unhappy, discouraged, frightened and unaccepted. They do not understand what is happening to them and why.

Changing Times

Young people today are often the targets of criticism by parents and other adults, but have things really changed? Teen behavior, dress, choice of music and attitudes have traditionally been criticized. Consider some examples from the 1960's. Parents had reactions to the Beatles—strong reactions. Their teenagers began sporting the mop-top haircuts of their famous idols. Seemingly for the first time, the behavior of adolescents had ramifications that went beyond the confines of the family and into the mass culture. Adults without children were suddenly aware of the impact of a group called teenagers.

Has there been a change of parental attitudes since the '60's? We have survived Elvis Presley, the Beatles and Woodstock. Parents of the 1980's still have similar concerns. "Punk" or spiked hair styles are apparent wherever teens gather. A few parents' groups are questioning the sexually explicit lyrics of today's popular songs. The general adult hue and cry, however, does not seem as loud. Have most parents become resigned to the behaviors and attitudes of young people? Do they feel helpless? Are they complacent? Calloused? Too busy?

The activities of the adolescent have become serious social concerns rather than mere behavior problems confined to the family setting.

Teens are more sophisticated, many possessing vocabularies that were virtually unknown to the teens of the 1950's. Most educators and sociologists attribute this knowledge to the impact of the media. Teens now have MTV. Many are tuned in for every hour of their free time watching televised videos of rock performers. Often they
are exposed to the sexually explicit lyrics of their favorite singer’s top hits. It is not unusual to have a camera pan the audience of a video performance and focus on a bare-breasted woman.

The increased sexual activity of young people has had a far reaching community impact. The number of teen mothers is increasing at alarming rates. Babies are having babies. A Boston area high school announced recently that it is making plans to open an on-site day care facility for the children of their students.

Sex education and counselling have become the subjects of media events. A recent TV ad was pulled from a local channel because it showed a young person stating “Today I learned about safe sex.” In the same ad, another child talked about learning where babies come from. In a recent edition of the Cape Cod Times, eight people were asked how they felt about contraceptive devices, including condoms, being advertised on television and in newspapers. Seven of the eight individuals were in favor of such information being disseminated. In some schools, a teenaged girl can get a pregnancy test on the way to math class. Other schools are exploring the need to establish birth control clinics on the premises.

A more frightening change among the adolescents of the 80’s is the increasing rate of teenage suicides. Young people seem to be making the tragic statement to society that life is not worth living. A young victim in a suburban community told his friend to go to the school gym later because “something big is going to happen there.” School authorities found that he hanged himself there later in the day. Other friends of the youth indicated that he had drawn pictures of himself hanging that he had shown them around the school. Nobody believed him. His cry for help came too late.

An important factor that contributes to the sense of helplessness and the negative self-image of today’s teenagers is the heightened divorce rate. A junior high school teacher overheard the following conversation between two boys in her classroom:

Boy A: “My parents are getting divorced today.”
Boy B: “Yeah? Who gets custody of you, your mother or father?”

Custody dilemmas are one more element of pressure exerted on teens. Their concerns about being kidnapped by the parent who lost a custody fight place an additional burden upon children and upon divorced and separated parents.

Such problems are transferred to the school environment as teachers and school administrators must be concerned about court orders and custody battles.

Not only has the security of the
nuclear family been shattered for many adolescents, but today’s teens lack the role models that were present in previous decades. Sports figures, formerly admired for their integrity and “wholesome” approaches to life are now being questioned about life-styles that include drug abuse. Basketball star Len Bias, possessing superstar potential, became a victim of the cocaine monster — instead of a revered sports hero.

Pea shooters and spitballs in school have given way to firearms. In Bridgeport Connecticut, four weapons were confiscated by authorities within several weeks. In another town, a youth was suspended for carrying an eight-inch blade needed for “protection.” Police are concerned that school administrators are covering up violations in an effort to keep their school from adverse publicity.

“‘There’s nothing to do’ is a frequent cry of teenagers today. They are often correct. Those young people without strong commitments don’t have anything to do. Many have not been taught the value of amusing themselves. When the diet of television and video games and tapes becomes boring, adolescents become restless — easy prey for vandalism, substance abuse and other forms of peer pressure. Teens have progressed from congregating on street corners to “hanging out” at local shopping malls and talking tough, a supposed sign of being grown up. Communities have had only minimal success with “under 21” or “non-alcoholic” dances. For most young people, these events do not have enough “action” and are not viewed as suitable replacements of adult activities.

In many cases, parents have ceased to be appropriate role models. Often, young people are permitted to view sexually explicit movies on paid television or videos. “He has to learn sometime — it might as well be at home” was the rationale offered by one parent who permitted such viewing for her sixteen-year-old. Adolescents are exposed to promiscuity as their parents seek companionship and prospective partners who share the home. Still other parents glamorize substance abuse by experimenting with drugs in the presence of their offspring and their friends.

Is There a Solution?

There may not be a solution to the problems faced by adolescents. Perhaps learning to cope and trying to understand is the best tactic for parents and other concerned adults. Each generation — and often each decade — will usher in its own fads. The problems affecting teens, however, transcend mere fads. The complexities of society and the implications for future generations are the issues that need to be explored and understood. Cape Cod teacher and counselor Jeff King feels that adolescents are members of a “Hopeless Generation.” “They see no potential — nothing to pursue in life that is unique. Everything has already been done.” Actress Joanne Woodward reiterated this concern in a recent television interview. According to Woodward, “because of the threat of nuclear obliteration, there is no real future for youth — morality and values make no sense.” The Carnegie Foundation reported that 60% of the teens interviewed felt that there was no future for them and 40% said they would choose not to bring children into the world because of the uncertainties.

Open lines of communication must be maintained between parents and teens. Where there is a generation gap, there is also a communication gap. Parents must accept the fact that their young people are not growing up the way they did nor the way they wish they could. They must find out what is important to young people today. Communication needs to proceed from the emotional level (How could you do this to me?) to acceptance and understanding at an intellectual level (Let’s talk about what happened).

Adults need to be educated to the ways of the adolescent — to know how to help young people grow and expand their knowledge base. Parents, teachers and all who work with young people need to know how to help teens cope with difficult years without eliminating their freedoms or violating their rights. Teens need to be exposed to values that will enable them to build a future in an adult world and enhance their potential. They need to know where they fit in.

Helping teens to cope with adolescence is no easy task. There will be no return to anybody’s “good old days.” Those of us who are concerned, however, must help adolescents to perceive the dangers that threaten a healthy, fulfilling life. Teach them about responsible partying, safe sex and “saying No to drugs.” Help them to know who they are within our complex society.

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