

A PSYCHIATRIST LOOKS AT ADOLESCENCE

Paul Cassar, B.Sc., M.D., Ph.C., D.P.M., F.R.Hist.S.

The Royal University of Malta.

One of the disturbing features of our times is the so-called teenager or adolescent. Many parents think that the teenager is a phenomenon of our age but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact only the name of "teenager" is modern but the human being so labelled and his difficulties are as old as mankind itself and will always be with us as long as humanity exists. It may well be asked: "If adolescents are not a new phenomenon why are they vexing our minds?" There are several reasons for this concern on our part:

1) The population of our Islands is increasing in numbers. Infantile mortality has been reduced considerably and, therefore more children are surviving to reach adolescence now than in the past.

2) Owing to the increased competition for jobs, parents are taking more interest in the educational upbringing of their children than formerly and, therefore, the conduct of our young people has become of paramount importance to us.

3) Stimulation of the physical and psychological needs of the adolescent is to day more frequent and more intense than formerly through such media as books, advertising, television, films and the stories about the personalities of the world of entertainment. There is also more exploitation of these needs by commercially interested adults who tempt young people with suggestive literature and music through magazines, pictures, fan clubs of film stars and gramophone records.

4) We are providing our children with dangerous and expensive toys, so that when they reach adolescence they are accustomed to the use of quite harmful means of expression. For instance, instead of fists and stones, they are using knives and guns; instead of the bicycle they have the motor bike and the car. Adolescents, therefore, are getting into more serious trouble than in the past.

5) The chaotic economic and political

situation of the adult world, the constant threat of war, our ideological conflicts and our declining standards of honesty and sincerity are all influencing our adolescents in an unfavourable manner by undermining their confidence in our moral code and by increasing the feelings of insecurity and perplexity to which their period of life makes them unduly liable.

What is Adolescence?

Life is a continuous process of change in body and mind from birth to death. This change, however, is so gradual that we become aware of it only at certain stages of our life when it reaches a sufficiently high intensity of development or decay. Thus we speak of the periods of infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age and senility.

Adolescence is that period of transition from childhood to adult age extending roughly between the ages of 14 and 20 years. It is a time of growth of body and mind, a phase of adaptation from the unrestraint of childhood to the social and psychological maturity and responsibility of the adult. It is a period of trial and error characterised by the emergence of new desires and needs, new feelings and new drives resembling those of the adult but lacking the personal and material means of satisfying them because the boy or girl is still without experience, is still economically dependent upon his parents and is still without a mate for satisfying the incipient sexual urges. It is, therefore, a time of stress which the adolescent tries to neutralise by striking some sort of balance between the drives within himself and the opposing pressures of the adult environment that impinge upon him. This process of adjustment is not always smooth and, when unsuccessful, may lead to frustration, resentment and rebellion. In the majority of cases these disturbances are only of a temporary nature and disappear as maturity sets in.

What are the main characters of adolescence?

1) There are outward changes in the appearance of the body, especially of its sexual features. With these changes goes awareness of sexual feelings, curiosity and interest in the body which are shown by the desire for personal adornment, dresses, etc. There may be fear of menses in the girl and of nocturnal emissions in boys because they do not understand the nature and the harmlessness of these natural manifestations.

2) There is a feeling of physical well-being and power and, therefore, a craving for activity and adventure; hence the zest for life and the restlessness of the adolescent.

3) There is a craving for independence and for new experiences which makes the adolescent resent advice and control regarding his conduct.

4) The adolescent imitates the behaviour of adults and is attracted by their temptations such as drink, gambling, sex, cars, etc.

5) He feels the desire to belong to a group because this gives him a sense of security and strength in his budding independence from his parents and also support against the restrictions of the adult world.

6) He strives for recognition and acceptance as an important person. In his attempts at self-assertion he uses awkward and irritating methods such as cheating (to show his cleverness), opposing for the sake of opposing, bullying, bravado, snobbery, defiance, extravagance and even the earning of an unsavoury reputation.

7) He criticises his parents because he starts realising that adults (and, therefore, his parents) are not always the ideal beings he thought they were in his childhood and because he discovers that they are not always truthful and right in their dealings with him. In this way his parents cease to be the idols of his childhood and to command the blind obedience and respect of former days.

8) He rebels against authority and convention; he enjoys flaunting the social and moral codes of adults and takes pride in being vulgar, noisy and destructive.

Management of the adolescent

Since adolescence represents a phase of the growing up process we must accept the inevitability of this period of development but we must take care to guide it along rational and harmless channels. We must, therefore, allow that measure of freedom to the adolescent which would enable him to follow his talents, to experiment and even to make mistakes. We must, however, check his freedom when he tends to depart from socially and morally approved ways of conduct to show him that there are limits to one's liberty not only during adolescence but also later on in life. We have also to encourage stability and reliability in him by enforcing regularity in the performance of certain activities such as a time-table for study, meals and recreation.

When we have to correct his behaviour, we should try to talk straight but to avoid arguing and sermonising because arguing creates ill feeling and resentment while preaching is boring to the young. We have to base our authority on wisdom and friendship and not on dogmatic and sneering domination.

Do not ignore his point of view and his opinions but listen to them and show him why you have other ideas. Remember that as we reach middle age we tend to form rigid patterns of thought and behaviour, to resent change and to become intolerant of anyone who tries to disturb our opinions and way of life. We must make an allowance for the change in the customs of society since the days when we ourselves were boys and girls. Society is not a static organization but a dynamic and constantly changing one. We must, therefore, not expect the adolescent of to-day to conform to all the standards that were applicable in our own adolescence. Let us remember that we, too, have had to abandon certain standards that prevailed in our parents' time and to accept new ideas and new conditions. We must keep in mind that the world of to-morrow belongs to the adolescent of to-day and not to us. Our duty is to place at his disposal the wisdom and the results of the experiences we have gained throughout our life but we must not expect him to accept them unconditionally or to apply them in all circum-

stances. After all we adults do make a mess of things sometimes in spite of our experience and the warnings of our elders. It seems that in certain respects each generation has to start from the very beginning in learning the lessons of life — hence the repetitions of the same blunders and fallacies by one generation after another.

As I have already said, adolescents imitate adults. In the long run, therefore, it is we adults who provide them with a pattern and standard of conduct to which they try to conform. That is why they want to read adult papers and magazines,

to see adult films, to go to dances and to meet in clubs and cafes. They imitate us in our quest for power, in our sexual code, and in our efforts for social prestige. They also imitate us in our blunders and in our stupidities. We must, therefore, take care to provide the adolescent with high moral and religious ideals and examples, to serve him as a stabilising force in moments of stress. But we must do so in childhood before he reaches adolescence. If we succeed in doing so, then we can feel sure that he will not go seriously astray not only in adolescence but later on in life as well.
