

# Young People's Needs: A Head Teacher's View\*

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It is common to hear parents and teachers complain about how difficult the task of educating our children has become. One hears a compilation of alleged transgressions: vandalism and violence, rebellious spirits and anarchic ideas, ingratitude and excessive independence. Adults assert that they were different (that is, better!) in their younger days.

## The need to understand children

This criticism may be valid. Society today has made the work of educators more strenuous. However, our task as educators is so hard because we seem to find it increasingly difficult to *understand* our children's needs and their mentality. We forget that they do not have the same needs - and the ability to express those needs - that adults have.

## The Contribution of Modern Psychology

Possibly the greatest and most useful contributions that modern psychology has made to education are the insights into the mind and mentality of young people and it will be to our advantage as educators to pay heed to these new discoveries.

Parents and teachers should remember that though we too went through the experience of growing up, memory can play tricks on us: our recollections of the past are often dim and vague.

## Aspects of Childhood and Adolescence

Childhood and adolescence are periods of intense and fast physical growth; this results in the use of great energy, followed by tiredness. Because they are changing fast young people often feel confused and cannot understand their own experiences. At times they feel depressed and nervous, at times they are cheerful and euphoric. They need "safety valves" for these tensions. They

need physical exercise and movement to "let off steam".

Then, the intellectual growth of the child and adolescents is often misunderstood. By nature they want to learn; they are receptive to nature around them, but they are quicker to respond to sense experiences rather than intellectual approaches. Teachers could remember this and adapt their teaching methods accordingly. Learners should be allowed to be more active and to discover on their own, rather than passively absorb what they are told. Our teaching methods tend to be still too intellectual and abstract, leaving the learner passive. This constitutes a serious deficiency in our educational system.

Another aspect of young people's personality that needs great attention is the emotional one. Younger children are more open, while adolescents are more reserved, but at both stages they have emotional needs. Their most urgent need is love, which is as essential to them as the air they breathe. It is easier to love the younger child than the adolescent, often enough a rebel, and difficult one. However, at this stage too, love is essential. Though it is given more discreetly, it needs to be expressed - even externally and verbally - if we do not want adolescents to close in within themselves and increase their isolation.

Adolescents go through a period of great uncertainty and doubt. They feel insecure, because they cannot understand the changes they are undergoing, cannot control their feelings. We need to accept this emotional instability, and handle it prudently and wisely.

Another important change in the adolescents is in the area of their autonomy and independence; they need to be allowed this slowly but surely. Often there is a crisis of authority, and we need to inject in our relations with the young, both at school and at home, a modicum of discipline, but we also have to understand that over protectiveness and excessive dependence harm the growing person. Overprotectiveness makes of the learner a timid creature, fearful of taking risks and facing danger, of becoming decisive and confident. Personal responsibility has gradually to

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\* These extracts are taken from a speech delivered by Rev. C. Caruana, S.J. on Prize Day (1982) at the Gozo Seminary.

replace parental authority. Our children are too often excessively reserved. They must be encouraged to form relationships with their peer group, that they may belong and overcome their loneliness, to join clubs, to work with others on common projects and thus develop "team spirit", to foster the desire to do something for others; a sense of altruism can be inculcated to overcome instinctive selfishness.

### **The role of Educators**

In brief: educators have to see beyond the

learners' physical and academic needs; it is not enough that they are physically healthy and are doing well in examinations. Our duty is to form their total personality: physical exercise and sports should help them become active and use their initiative; developing their imagination and fantasy should make them more creative, inventive and alive; if we show them love, they will grow to love others and be happy in relating with them; if we respect their desire to become more independent they will become men and women of ideas, willing to take risks, and to accept responsibility.