

Today's Adolescents Face Problems

LINDLEY J. STILES

What are the major problems faced by today's adolescents? These are described by Lindley J. Stiles, dean, Department of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

ADOLESCENTS, like other age groups, face problems. To help young people find in adolescence today the great and wholesome adventure that growing up normally should be, teachers and parents must understand the types of problems typically faced by boys and girls during these years. Also they must be aware continually of the effect of life in general—political, economic, social and moral trends—upon the growth of young people. The nature and intensity of the problems faced by adolescents are directly and sharply influenced by the culture of which they are a part. As conditions in a society change, the character of the problems faced by young people is affected.

Prior to World War II, for example, one of the pressing problems faced by most youths was that of finding a job after leaving school. Today, older adolescents are confronted with the choice of postponing full-time employment until they can complete their formal schooling. Within the past fifteen years, the period of adolescence has been shortened by as much as five to ten years. When youths were out of school and out of work during the depression years, the period of adolescence frequently extended from the age of eleven or twelve to twenty-five. The greatly increased demands for military personnel and industrial workers during and fol-

lowing World War II have forced millions of young people to accept full adult responsibilities by the time they reach the ages of sixteen to eighteen.

The impact of changing environmental conditions upon the problems of adolescents inevitably must enlist the concern of teachers and parents today. It is imperative for all who work with youths of secondary school ages to maintain sensitivity to the over-all effect of such conditions as the gearing of our nation to prolonged war preparedness, our apparent internal moral deterioration as a people, the increasing demand for highly trained technical competence in our society, and the sharp and persistent conflicts prevalent in politics, government and industry. Adolescents share and are deeply affected by these same conditions that confuse and concern adults. These conditions and others are complicating the problems of adolescents as they seek to establish ethical values, attain maximum educational development, develop competence for and accept responsibility for citizenship, maintain wholesome personal and group adjustment, think about whether they will become good members of the military forces, and as they endeavor to make plans for the future.

It is natural and necessary for young people to establish for themselves ethi-

cal values by which they are guided and to which they accord faith and devotion. Such moral codes determine the individual's relationship to and dependence upon religion, they shape his behavior in dealing with other individuals, and they guide his adjustment to group mores. In short, individually accepted standards of morality are the basis of man's relationship to God, to his fellow-man and to his society.

The increasing apparent deterioration in morality in the United States is confusing to the growing adolescent. When young people read and hear about corruption in government, politics, business and in our social institutions, they find it difficult to know what is ethical.

At few other times in our nation's history have adolescents needed so urgently to maintain faith in and devotion to their religion, to fundamental and lasting human values, our nation, their families and themselves. And perhaps at few other times has this task been made more difficult by the confused and inconsistent example set for them by responsible adults.

Attaining Maximum Educational Development

The adolescent of today is confronted with the very realistic problem of learning as much and as fast as he can in order to find his place in a highly technical and competitive business and industrial economy. No longer can a young person drop out of school with the sense of security that if he is willing to work he can always "get along." Few men with limited education climb the ladder of success today. Common unskilled labor is rapidly becoming a

relic of the past. Even in agriculture, which has traditionally been the haven for the unskilled, and frequently the incompetent, one man with a tractor has replaced the human strength of many. In order to survive, the individual must develop to the ultimate his intellectual and manual talents.

Not only must the individual be trained because of his personal need for earning a living, he must be educated to the highest possible level in order that he may be of maximum service to his country. Military experts have dramatically pointed out that if the United States is to compete successfully with communistic countries, one American must be the equal to ten of the enemy. This can be achieved only by developing the intelligence and technical skill of all our people to the point that knowledge plus intricate and powerful machines in the hands of a few will surpass the masses of lesser skilled and more poorly equipped fighting men of those nations which have embraced communism and are now devoting themselves to our destruction. The achievement of such an objective rests today in the balance.

Although the United States has developed the greatest system of public education the world has ever known, it still falls far short of its responsibility to help *all* young people achieve *maximum* educational development as efficiently and as effectively as is possible.

Developing Competence in Citizenship

Democracy is the most difficult form of citizenship to learn. It is likewise the most difficult for the individual to practice. Democracy demands more self-discipline, more individual initiative,

more self-direction and more voluntary cooperation with others than any other way of life. In a democracy the individual must learn to assume responsibility both for himself and for his group.

Inasmuch as a democracy places a high premium upon the exchange of ideas and upon the search for and appraisal of facts by each individual citizen, it is paramount for all adolescents to learn, before leaving school, to read, to spell, to write, to speak, to listen, to figure. If individuals are to be able to contribute to others the results of their thinking they must be able to perform these skills clearly, concisely and correctly. Without competence in these skills of learning, they will remain always mental slaves and inadequate citizens.

It is perhaps impossible for children to attain complete competence in these skills before reaching adolescence. This objective must be pursued continuously throughout the secondary school years and, if these skills are to be useful, practice must be persistent throughout life.

Adolescents desperately need to gain a clear understanding of the growth and characteristics of our democracy. A natural period for the molding of good citizens is during adolescence. At this time young people are seeking to break the parental ties of childhood. They grasp for independence and are open for assistance in growing to be self-directing, responsible adult citizens. Their interest in shared relationships with other youngsters of similar ages provides a natural motivation for growth toward self-government. The transition from childhood to adult-

hood, however, must be gradual. It must be accompanied by the growing ability and willingness of each individual boy and girl to assume responsibility. Sensitive teachers and parents can do much to encourage and guide the growth of behavior that is demanded of democratic citizens. To provide such leadership, teachers and parents, themselves, must be thoroughly conversant with the basic tenets of our democratic faith and must set good examples as citizens who are able to assume full responsibility for themselves and who can work cooperatively with others in maintaining the democratic way of life in our communities.

Maintaining Wholesome Personal and Group Adjustment

Personal and group adjustments of adolescents seem to be complicated by three factors today. First, young people are living in a world in which adult behavior is less consistent and reliable, where parental control is shaky, where the home may be failing to provide the proper climate for happy living, where individual contact with organized religion may be sporadic, and where adults, themselves, are facing pressures with which they often cannot deal successfully. Secondly, adolescents are reaching adulthood earlier than was customary during the first part of this century. In many instances the plunge into adult responsibilities comes suddenly without appropriate preparation and with insufficient maturation. Unlike their grandparents, adolescents today do not have opportunities to learn to work, to try out their capacities, to share in running the family farm, store or factory before making the final step

into adult life. It is not uncommon for young men and women today, who have never held permanent employment in their lives and who may never have done a day's work for pay, to move far away from their parents and friends, to plunge into full-time employment, establish homes, become parents, and to purchase an automobile and a television set—all within the brief span of a calendar year. Thirdly, world conditions that make the future uncertain for all impose themselves upon adolescents who are old enough to recognize their implications but too young to be permitted to help solve them. Eighteen-year-olds are "of age" to go to war, but too young to help decide the foreign policy of the nation that may bring about war or peace. They must pay taxes, but may not help decide how much taxes or which taxes they will be required to pay. A few will have children before they are old enough to vote.

Such factors influence both the personal and group adjustment of our young people. They are the source of both frustration and motivation. They cause boys and girls to strive to grow up faster in a world that denies them the experiences by which maturation is attained. They cause personal maladjustment at a time when the individual most needs to be in full command of himself.

Becoming a Good Member of the Military Forces

All able bodied adolescent boys and many girls face the expectation of becoming members of our military forces for an indefinite number of years. Those who are now adolescents and

others approaching this stage of growth can be given no encouragement that this expectation will be altered. On the contrary, it is rather to be believed that in our time all young men, except the physically and mentally ill, will undergo some form of military training.

The ultimate induction into a military unit bears increasingly upon the adolescent as he grows older. This influence is particularly sharp at the present time as long as actual fighting is being prosecuted and all-out war may be strongly anticipated at any time. The prospect of military service bears particularly upon our adolescent youth, also, because it is a new condition for achieving adult status in our country. Other nations have long before us grown accustomed to providing universal military training to all youths. The step is a new venture for the United States, however, and parents and adolescents may be expected to meet it with varying degrees of difficulty.

To the credit of our adolescent youths, the advent of military training tends to raise questions concerning how well they will adjust to service responsibilities, more so than does it create a fear of or resistance to such service. Young men in their late teens quite appropriately wonder if they will get along well when separated from parents, friends and civilian life. It is to be expected that they may show some anxiety over the type of fighting men they will become. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that adolescents today are not facing their responsibilities to serve their country with vigor, courage and loyalty equal to that displayed by their grandfathers, fathers and older brothers in preceding wars.

Planning for the Future

Uncertainties in national and world events, the prospect of a period of prolonged military service, the complexity and changeableness of an industrial and business world in process of being geared to war and hoping to re-convert, at a moment's notice, to peacetime production—all complicate the task for the adolescent of today to plan systematically and intelligently.

Many young men who entered college this year are uncertain as to how long they will be permitted to continue their studies. A sizeable proportion of college enrollees are choosing programs of study adapted to war-time needs rather than to their own lifelong professional or vocational plans. An appalling number will follow no educational objectives at all. They will be in college because they were able to pass the tests with sufficiently high scores and their parents have enough money to send them.

College enrollments will find missing this year, however, many qualified and intellectually superior young men who were either unable to finance college attendance or who chose immediate military service rather than postponement of this obligation. For the youths with ability but no money or assistance, no choice existed, of course; but for the boy approved for college attendance and with the financial means to attend, the choice was difficult in a surprising number of instances according to the testimony of teachers and parents.

Another type of adolescent finds it difficult to plan for the future in these times. He is the lad who did not plan to go to college, perhaps did not even

seek to qualify, but who must, or desires to, work while waiting to be called to service. For such youngsters, good jobs are not open since employers do not want to have to refill their positions when they are inducted. Thousands of such young men are actually out of school and out of work or else they are carrying temporary jobs unrelated to future vocational ambitions.

Difficulties in planning for the future faced by adolescent boys are to a lesser degree and with some variations being experienced by girls in this age group. As far as marriage and the establishment of homes, uncertainties that confront boys affect girls as well. On the other hand, girls find ready employment with salaries that frequently tempt them to forego college study for work. Jobs are typically artificially the product of war-time conditions, however, and must be looked upon, on the long range basis, as temporary. Military service beckons, also, to young women and many are faced with the decision as to whether they should serve in one of the women's auxiliary forces, accept employment in war industries, or go to college.

As a consequence of the difficulties faced in planning for the future many youths are likely to develop the attitude of "let the future take care of itself." Frustration and disappointment in planning easily discourage further effort. Parents and teachers carry a positive responsibility of helping young people face the discouragement that comes when well-established plans cannot be carried out. Like adults, adolescents need help in learning to live with the uncertainties that beset the present and the foreseeable future.

Copyright © 1951 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.