Understanding the Adolescent Reader

**ARMIN GRAMS**

No one who observes children will deny that in our culture the adolescent is concerned with achieving independence. Yet this tendency does not appear *de novo* with the onset of puberty. A child is characterized by strong strivings for independence in the preschool years (one of many interesting parallels between the adolescent and the toddler) and also during the later elementary school years. Nor are strivings for independence found exclusively in pre-adult years. They emerge strongly again in the middle-adult period.

The onset of puberty makes a considerable difference in the life experience of the youngster, even though a substantial part of the difference results from the changing reactions of others, rather than from sudden essential changes in the self. Within the limits of this article, we can include only certain assumptions about what is happening to personality during this time.

*The Emerging Self.* In many respects this period of personality development is analogous to the period of toddlerhood. Certainly the problem of identity again looms large. Much of the adolescent’s concern is with himself, and while the years preceding puberty saw a heavy emphasis on personal achievement, the adolescent adds a highly personal dimension to the process of becoming an individual. One might say that the adolescent rediscovers his world. During childhood he absorbs a great deal of information in rather blotter-like, indiscriminate fashion; he masters many skills and acquires many attitudes in a rather unconscious way. By the time he becomes an adolescent he has a large store of experience acquired over the years, but the process of acquisition has been uncritical and relatively impersonal. With the advent of adolescence a more individual and self-conscious regard for experience begins to emerge. What has been
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accepted thus far and incorporated into self is re-examined in the light of an emerging individuality. Uncritical acceptance of the ideas and attitudes of those who are older and presumably better informed decreases and there is an increasing tendency to scrutinize experiences and information.

The development of a sense of identity is considered a key issue in adolescence. Questions like “Who am I?” and “What is my proper role?” although perhaps not consciously formulated in exactly those words are of central concern. To some extent such questions are both instigated and answered by the pronounced physical changes associated with puberty. There is, of course, something very final and irreversible about attaining one's mature physique. Young manhood and womanhood are undeniable facts, and their corresponding roles are now more than ever incumbent upon the individual. Our expectations of young people are influenced by their appearance. We revise them as soon as the rapid growth spurt begins. But these marked changes in physique do not automatically initiate more acceptable, mature behavior.

Physical appearance influences an adolescent's self-perception in much the same way as it affects the evaluations which others make of him. He is quite concerned about his rate of development and its timing as well as the degree to which his new physique is of the approved sort for his sex. While space does not permit a lengthy treatment of this matter here, the reader who is especially interested may consult one of the more extensive studies of this matter.

There is also the matter of accepting one's physique as it relates to one's sex membership. Both boys and girls may be somewhat confused about this, because the appropriate masculine and feminine sex roles in society are not as sharply defined as they once were. Rapid changes in our society have caused a marked shift in the roles of men and women, and in general the two are less sharply differentiated than they were in grandfather's generation. There is some difference of opinion among the experts regarding which of the roles is more difficult to learn to achieve, but all agree shifting societal expectations have complicated matters considerably. At this point, we are not so much concerned with the question “Who am I,” for as we have already said, the answer to this question comes with unmistakable finality to the young adolescent whose sexual development no longer leaves this to his imagination. The question is rather one of “Now that I am what I am (young man or young woman), what kind of
behavior is expected of a gentleman or a lady?" How dominant, how courteous, how aggressive, how understanding, how helpful, how domestic, etc., should I be? These are pertinent concerns of youth striving to achieve an appropriate masculine or feminine social role. These are some of the key issues in the task of sex role identification.

**Changing Relations with Parents.** This difficult and complicated problem of establishing oneself as a person in one's own right confronts the adolescent as a major conflict. In simplest fashion the emancipation conflict may be described as the drive to be free of parental control and domination; this is often coupled with the youngster's unwillingness and inability to shoulder the commensurate responsibility which such independence and freedom require. The first component in this conflict stems from rapid intellectual development and physical growth that tend progressively to blur the distinction between child and parent. In many ways the adolescent is becoming more like an adult with every passing year, and he is eager for any and all acknowledgement of this from the adult world. Hence the concern with his "rights" as a "grown-up." But only the unrealistic adolescent fails to recognize that although he is becoming more like an adult in many ways, he still is far from being their equal. Physical stature and intellectual acumen do not automatically supply vocational and economic security. Most adolescents, recognize at some level their need for some shelter from adult responsibility and for a fair amount of support and guidance. These are, of course, dependency needs and they conflict, as we have said, with the need for independence. All of this causes conflict in the family and contributes to the tension which characterizes a segment of the parent-child relationship during this period.

Emancipation from parental domination is considerably more complicated today than in former years. In the first place, the adult role today is more involved and ambiguous. Technological progress and social change have created greater needs for training and preparation, and adolescents need additional time to acquire these. This situation, plus the fact that puberty is arriving earlier, has lengthened the period of adolescence and complicated the problem of emancipation.

Another complicating factor in the emancipation process is the attitude that parents take toward the child who is growing away from them. The principal function of parents as parents with regard to their children is to make themselves increasingly unnecessary. This
means that there must emerge over time a new relationship between parents and their children. The process of becoming increasingly unnecessary as parents has been going on for some time, but during adolescence it is likely to become much more obvious.

If it happens that the parents' own security and self-esteem as individuals is linked primarily to their function as mother or father, rather than to their function as wife or husband, we can readily understand how they might resist rather than encourage the emancipation process. Before children can cease being children their parents will have to put aside the role of parents. This tests the parents' level of maturity. Are they able to say (as many of them are after twenty or more years of child-rearing) "We just can't wait to get the house all cleaned out so that we can just be alone again with one another?" Or do they secretly dread seeing the last child leave the nest, because with him goes the major source of their personal gratification?

Parental unwillingness to modify their relationship to their children is serious for yet another reason. The relationship which husband and wife have to each other serves as the child's most important model in learning appropriate sex role behavior. Youngsters reared in a home where mother and father have made it quite clear that they have a very special and different relationship are able to learn about the priorities and loyalties so fundamental to their own future happiness. Children who see that their parents are still very much in love with each other and desire frequently to be alone with each other, especially as their children's growth frees them from the necessity of spending many hours tending to their needs, are children likely to look forward with positive anticipation to an adult relationship with a spouse.

Learning "who and what I am" requires space and time and freedom to make mistakes. Certainly this is one reason the adolescent needs parents, although he would probably be the last one to admit it—at least publicly! He needs to try his wings in a sheltered place where he can afford to fall flat on his face without crushing embarrassment. His parents and his home are his sounding board and laboratory, and this, for parents, is a privilege, not a penalty. What better function could parents serve than to absorb the shock of early rebuffs and failures of a child's quest to establish his own identity? Since a certain amount of crudity, misbehavior, and emotional turmoil is inevitable at this time, it would seem better for the youngster
to unload these at home than in settings where he is more visible and there is less freedom for error and greater likelihood of enduring or unfortunate consequences.

It is pleasant for parents to share the limelight with their children, and if there is ever a time when this is likely to happen, it is during their children's adolescent years. But such sharing means that the child can claim less of the accomplishment and sufficiency that parents should want to foster at this time. Thus, parents discover that at the time in their child's life when they might normally expect to receive considerable gratification from sharing in their children's achievements, they are for a number of reasons in a less advantageous position to do so.

Some parents may think they are being repaid evil for good. Even in the best of homes, friction between parents and children will intensify during adolescence. Commonly we find that adolescents are openly critical of their parents' shortcomings, and their remarks, insinuations and attitudes may convey a lack of gratitude, to say the least. But youth's hypercritical attitude and behavior is usually a defensive reaction. The adolescent is aware that his parents have seen him at his worst. Because they know his weaknesses and frequently witness his lapses into dependency and immaturity, they represent a threat. Parents are at the same time his valuable allies and something of a nemesis! Small wonder, then, that ambivalence toward parents is a persistent corollary of the emancipation process.

Changing Relations with Peers. The high school peer group is a vital support or crutch on which the young adolescent leans for support when the going gets rough. It serves somewhat the same function as the home, in that it protects the young person from broadside attack by forces which hold an unfair advantage. The old saying that "in numbers there is strength" certainly applies. By identifying first with his peers he obtains temporary shelter while he works away at discovering what his true identity and function are. I think of the peer group as a large and leafy tree that protects adolescents from the elements of the adult world as they emerge from the shelter of the home.

Because the high school peer group serves this protective purpose, it of course receives high priority from the adolescent. Rejection from the peer group is dreaded by every adolescent fortunate enough to be a member of one in the first place. Those who are not in a group know the emptiness such exclusion brings. At this age, considerable
conformity is understandable and even healthy. Thus appear the fads and fashions: the trademarks of the group. At the same time, this courting of the favor of the group must raise the question of the quality of leadership in the group. This is an impressionable age. Adolescents are rather easily influenced, and they respond enthusiastically to departures from “the old.” Many a capable and responsible leader of young people has capitalized on this tendency and literally worked wonders with individuals and even with the group as a whole. On the other hand, certain ends and goals toward which eager adolescents have been steered by less responsible leaders are less desirable.

With increased maturity comes a recognition that liberty is not license and that the freedom of individuals in a society is limited by consideration for the freedom of others and by concern for the common good. Inherent responsibilities and the authority of the adult which youngsters find less and less tolerable must take on new meaning, and become more acceptable.

Adjusting to a Worthy Way of Life. What is a “worthy” way of life? To answer the question requires a choice, a decision that one set of life goals is superior to another, that certain means to these ends are more desirable than others. The problem for the adolescent is to accumulate, organize, and evaluate enough ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and values to enable him to arrange these into a priority system uniquely his own, yet not entirely incompatible with the accepted standards and values of his society.

Studies of how children and youth develop moral and spiritual values, religious beliefs, moral character, and values during the developmental years tend to focus more on descriptions of existing circumstances than on the antecedent-consequent relationship. Certainly there has been no more widely used method in character education than that of informing children and youth of how they ought to behave. Our methods in religious education have been equally didactic. The emphasis placed upon conveying information reflects an implicit assumption that knowledge is likely to issue in action. Parents have long believed that their words will affect appreciably their children’s deeds. Although verbalization may be an effective means of conveying ideas to children, most parents have their honest doubts at times about its efficiency. It is commonplace to find a child (or even an adult, for that matter) who knows very well what he ought to do, but seems unwilling or incapable of doing it.
Adolescents are given to reflection about ideas, to a critique of what has already been absorbed, to trying out this knowledge in vital everyday life. In order to make such evaluations the adolescent must be well supplied with facts, for he cannot think without them. To the extent that this information is true, his parents and others who have supplied him have nothing to fear from the "airing" it will receive at the hands (or better, the minds) of youth. If the verbalized beliefs are provincial and even prejudiced half-truths, they will, of course, be subjected to rather rude treatment by the questioning adolescent. The more he discovers the falsehood in elements of what he has been told to believe, the more he is likely to wonder how much—if any—of the information about moral and spiritual matters, which through the years has been implanted in him by others, deserves serious consideration.

Because most of us suspect that "preaching" has its limitations as a means of developing moral and spiritual values, we may well ask whether research can shed any light on how such development might be better nourished. Increasing numbers of social scientists are doing research in this area at the present time. Direct answers have not emerged in large numbers, but some interesting suggestions or guiding principles have. Unfortunately, the matter is further complicated by some of the evidence which does not point in the expected direction. Let us consider some of this briefly.

In the first place, adolescence is not marked by rejection of religious faith. Parents at times panic because they interpret the disinterest of youth in certain aspects of formal religious practice to mean that their faith is disintegrating. Gilliland3 studied the attitudes of students toward God and the church and concluded that there seem to be very few atheists among high school and college students. At the same time it must be admitted that religious doubt reaches a high point in the teens, and a strong trend toward religious humanism is seen during the college years.4

The re-examination of ideas, which occupies much of the adolescent's time and serves to stretch his maturing intellectual powers, will include his religious beliefs and practices. One study reports three developmental trends which are normally associated with such reflections: (1) increasing uncertainty regarding certain issues, (2) shift from concrete belief to general and abstract concepts, and (3) increasing tolerance of the religious beliefs and practice of others.5 Because these rumblings are such a universal characteristic of the

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mind coming of age, parents who are prepared for them might well interpret them as signs of intellectual and spiritual vigor rather than weakness.

Most of the evidence which is gradually accumulating from studies in this area indicates that example is more effective than any other single method. Living with people whose lives are meaningfully organized around a purpose which grows out of a firm religious faith profoundly influences the manner in which any of us relates his life to the world in which he lives. Recently two writers have stated it this way:

The very little child will respond to our embodiment of virtue, but as he grows up he will find in us, we trust, a more complicated ethical pattern—that of strictly observing the best we know while we restlessly seek better understanding. This, too, the child will learn not as we verbalize the problem, but as he sees us actually living the double life of stability along with a questing mind. The verbalizations will mean relatively little to him without the concrete symbol of our doing this before his eyes.

It appears that in quest for meaning in life and answers to basic issues, the adolescent is aided most by the patterns of action and relationships which persistently characterize the behavior of those with whom he is most intimately associated. We do not mean to imply, of course, that adolescents reared by parents whose value systems are rather clearly defined, coherent, and relatively consistently demonstrated will accept passively such attitudes and standards of behavior. Quite often the tests to which they put these parental convictions take them rather far afield. There are moments when most parents are tempted to despair of their efforts, since adolescent children occasionally appear to believe in and stand for ideas and philosophies which contrast sharply with those the parents have tried to model and reflect in their own lives.

It is encouraging at this point to recall that this period in personality development is normally characterized by vacillation and relatively extreme reactions. The "heresy" of which youth is so very capable is an integral part of their "limit testing." To some degree it may represent a deliberate attempt to shock parents or to bait them into argument. It is a fortunate adolescent whose parents, as we have already said, are good "shock absorbers" and who understand the need which adolescents, with their rapidly maturing intellectual capacities, have for discussion and debate.
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There is also some evidence that although young people may occasionally espouse views which diverge substantially from those of their parents and teachers and often persist in behavior which is markedly discrepant from that which their elders might have hoped they would demonstrate, in the long run they tend to manifest attitudes, beliefs, and commitments which are strikingly similar to those which prevailed at home and in school during the developmental years. The return to the viewpoint of parent is usually occurs during the young adult years when the matter of establishing one's own home and family life is receiving top priority. This is far more likely to happen where parents have resisted the temptation to be excessively dogmatic or authoritarian in their rearing of youngsters; such excesses are likely to create a rebelliousness which may smoulder on for years and for all practical purposes preclude the effective adoption of the very life philosophy they intended for their children to have.

Changing Relations to the Opposite Sex. Boy-girl interaction is an important aspect of the trial and error activities which were referred to earlier. In part, early heterosexual behavior, as it is called, emerges as a response to cultural demand. Many young people display an interest in their age mates of the opposite sex because they feel called upon to do so. Such behavior is expected of youngsters who are growing up in our society. In part, of course, this behavior emanates from maturational sources, since newly acquired abilities force us to seek adequate settings and circumstances where they can be exercised.

Close friendships in early adolescence are still among members of the same sex. Only gradually during the college age do loyalties trend away from the same-sex clique to the opposite sex. This movement is accompanied by the growing identification with a new generation. It is in later adolescence that individuals come seriously to see themselves as those who have the responsibility of the future on their shoulders. It is only in these years that youngsters begin to understand the equal responsibility which is theirs in being entrusted with their heritage.

But with all this preparation, with all this self-aggrandizement, there is still a large gap in the system. Somehow, "it is not good for man to be alone." Independence, valued so highly in early adolescence—that goal with which our hope for the future was closely bound up—is now obviously a blind alley. Adolescents sought self-fulfillment in independence from older and wiser persons only to find that self-
fulfillment is to be found only in self-emptying relationships. But with whom?

During the course of later adolescence the selective process goes on. The field is steadily narrowed; the number of truly intimate acquaintances diminishes until it stands at just a few, even just one. In order for this to happen, however, love is required. I do not mean here romantic love, although this certainly plays an important part in the selective process, but rather love in the sense of contribution and self-sacrifice. In the process of finding the mate with whom one may hope, in time, for personality completion, many demands are made upon the repertory of skills and abilities which has developed over the years. For the first time output is as important as, if not more important than, intake. But simultaneously, the gratifications which come from the giving of oneself within the framework of a complementary relationship are beginning to be realized. Once again some signs of things to come are seen in the developmental course.

Adjusting to the Idea of Work. Another major developmental task is that of adjusting to vocation. Not so much to a vocation as to vocation, or to the idea of work itself. We have witnessed in the past two decades remarkably rapid growth in the vocational counseling services in our high schools and colleges. I have no quarrel with these services, but I believe that we must provide more than appropriate and accurate information. There seems to be a need to counteract a growing attitude among people today that work is something to be avoided as much as possible.

Today many factors combine to reduce personal incentive, effort and dedication to the task, whatever its nature might be. Should this tendency dominate the thinking of increasing numbers of people, we are likely to see some rather unfortunate effects in the personalities of large segments of our working force.

We need to remember that work is not a curse. Man was made to work, and without the sense of well-being which he can derive from successful encounter with a variety of tasks, he can never hope to arrive at anything near the fulness of stature of which he is potentially capable. To the degree to which he disengages himself from work, he deprives himself of one of his chief sources of personal worth and ego integration.

There is, of course, a distinction between work and drudgery. One could scarcely contend that all forms of human activity are ennobling, and this is where vocational planning and guidance can be of con-
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considerable help. What may be basically toilsome and dissatisfying to one person may be a suitable form of activity for another. The important thing is the meaningfulness of the job for the individual worker. The consideration of a meaningful vocation is one of the characteristic adolescent decisions that must be considered by those who are attempting to fulfill the reading needs of young adults.

References


2. The findings of the Adolescent Growth Study at the University of California at Berkeley are reported in numerous articles. Some of those which bear on the relationship between physical growth and the development of the self-concept are:


