

NORMAL YOUTH AND ITS EVERYDAY PROBLEMS

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TO
MISS GRACE ABBOTT

WHO, AS CHIEF OF THE CHILDREN'S BUREAU,
HAS BROUGHT TO THE PARENTS AND CHILDREN
OF THIS COUNTRY MUCH THAT HAS CON-
TRIBUTED TO THEIR HEALTH AND HAPPINESS

PREFACE

IN an attempt to be helpful to parents, teachers, nurses, camp directors and counselors, leaders of recreation groups, and others interested in the training and development of youth, this book has been written. Particular emphasis has been placed upon that period of life which occupies the second decade, commonly known as the period of "adolescence."

The experience and material on which the book is based have been drawn from the varied sources constituting that large social environment in which the great mass of young people participate, including the home, public and private school, the college, summer camp, and other such places where these young people spend their time.

From the numerous and varied problems presented by these young people, there have been selected those which were considered as being most significant in their bearing on the welfare of the child and, for some reason or other, often least understood by those who are endeavoring to help the adolescent. An effort has been made to illustrate many of these problems with brief descriptive stories of actual cases, without, however, including those in which the boy or girl was brought before the juvenile court, sent to a correctional school or reformatory, or otherwise institutionalized because of delinquent conduct, parental neglect, mental deficiency, or other serious handicaps. This latter group has been excluded from the discussion not because their actual behavior differs in any fundamental way from that of the more fortunate group whose difficulties are

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dealt with privately, but because the opportunities and resources of the one group are so radically different from those of the other that it would prove impractical to include them both in the same discussion.

Certain questions relative to behavior have been constantly kept in mind. How much of the behavior under consideration has had its true motivation on a conscious level and how much on an unconscious level? What must be approved and what must be disapproved? What can be attributed to inherent tendencies and what can be considered in terms of environment? What portion of all human behavior leading to inefficiency and unhappiness might have been prevented had the knowledge at hand been utilized wisely? What may we expect or hope that the future will bring forth in the way of valuable knowledge as to the art of living? What type of behavior seems wise and expedient, and what type unwise?

These are just a few of the questions with which those interested in human behavior are confronted in their attempt to understand some of the driving forces behind conduct.

There has been no attempt to bring into the discussion of the case material the different interpretations of the conduct under consideration that might have been expressed by the exponents of the varied schools of psychology. This would have served a useful purpose to only a limited number of readers and undoubtedly would have been confusing to the majority. An effort has been made to keep in mind the question as to what were the factors most likely to have precipitated the problem under discussion, and what changes in the mental attitudes of the adult and adolescent; and what modification of the existing circumstances and conditions can be brought about with the facilities at hand that will tend toward the stabilization of youth during this

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important period of life. The responsibility of the training, education, and, to a large extent, the experiences to which youth is to be subjected is in the hands of parents and teachers, and it is for them that the book has been written.

The contents of this book represent not only the author's own experience with youth and its problems as seen in his private office, preparatory schools, and colleges, but are drawn freely from those who have had similar interests and experiences.

To Miss Mona Volkert the author expresses his appreciation for her untiring efforts in getting the manuscript ready for publication, and acknowledges his indebtedness to her for much original material and many ideas without which the book would be far less readable.

To Miss Margaret Saunders and Miss Betty Porter appreciation is extended for reading and criticizing the various chapters, while to Mrs. Evelyn S. Abbott and Miss Gertrude Dyer acknowledgment is made for their interest and effort in the actual preparation of the manuscript here presented.

D. A. T.

INTRODUCTION

OUR ancestors faced many of the facts of life more frankly than we do. Among other evidences of this are the manuals that have come down to us from the Middle Ages known among scholars as "Conduct Books." These interesting compilations dealt with a wide range of topics, from the proper training of a young prince for his future rôle of ruler down to injunctions against picking your nose or throwing the bone you had gnawed at dinner over instead of under the table. They were addressed to parents and children, to boys and girls; and while some were openly aimed at social and worldly success, others were more or less sensible hygienic instructions or lofty spiritual exhortations. The notable thing about them was that they candidly recognized the need of the young human being to be taught almost everything necessary for healthy and decent living, and cultivated no reticences on the tacit assumption that "nature" would look out for things.

With the growth of elegance and the increase (or change) of conventions, we began to hide the etiquette book at the back of the shelves, apparently assuming that a well-bred youth knew its contents by instinct; we banned the mention of many natural processes and phenomena; we took for granted more and more that most of what concerned the birth and nurture of children, apart from the purely intellectual matters entrusted to the schoolmaster, was instinctively known to parents or could be safely left to oral tradition. Thus, long after modern physical science had got well under way, and after centuries of discussion on the training of the mind, the facts and principles affecting our

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emotions and forming the basis of happy living in the family remained comparatively unexplored.

Fortunately we are at last emerging from this period of neglect. During the last generation great strides have been made in the understanding of the causes of happiness and unhappiness, and many age-long misunderstandings are being cleared up. Physical ailments are often found to have mental causes, mental difficulties to have emotional causes, emotional disturbances to have social causes. The treatment of human ills, despite the growth of specialization, is more and more seen to require a view of the whole picture, and the letting in of light and air is found to be a wholesome essential, not merely for the diagnosis and treatment of disease, but for guidance in normal healthy living.

In this advance the psychiatrist has been a most potent agent, not merely through his personal practice, but through the influence of his point of view and his methods on a wide variety of persons concerned with the health of youth. The wise physician, whatever his attitude towards the various schools of psychiatry, is tending to increase the attention he has always given to some degree to mental and emotional factors; we of the colleges and schools have, through psychiatry, been led to see the need of counselors who are skilled in emotional matters if we are to be effective in the developing of mind and character; the church is welcoming the aid of a study with whose rudimentary stages it has long been in alliance; and, most important of all, fathers and mothers are realizing that there is a science and an art of parenthood which call for serious study and practice.

Among the psychiatrists who have given special attention to the problems of adolescence, Dr. Thom is distinguished for the range of his experience as well as the success of his efforts. He has had abundant opportunities for the study of

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family problems, has worked long and successfully in schools and colleges, and has observed the effects of various industrial occupations. For several years I have had occasion to watch his procedures in the handling of cases arising among the students of Smith College. I have been impressed with his sagacity, his insight, his freedom from the control of fads and panaceas. I have been grateful for his numerous successes. For these reasons I am glad he has written this book, giving to a wider public the benefit of his experience and his wisdom.

It is not a treatise on morbid psychology nor on delinquent or defective children. It is a volume of information about the problems that normally arise in the passage from childhood to the adult stage, and of advice about how these may best be treated to avoid unhappiness at the time and more serious consequences later. No matter how well-descended or how carefully guarded boys and girls may be, crises and dilemmas will arise which need wise counsel and tactful treatment. Parents and teachers who know enough to know their own ignorance will be grateful for the help Dr. Thom puts within their reach in this book.

WILLIAM A. NEILSON

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CHAPTER I

ADOLESCENCE

SPANNING the gulf between childhood and adulthood comes one of the most interesting and important periods in the entire life cycle. During these intervening years the individual stretches back and clings tenaciously to the pleasures and protection of childhood with one arm, while with the other he reaches out to grasp some of the privileges and responsibilities of maturity. Obviously there is no well-defined beginning or ending to such a period of transition; it can only merge imperceptibly with the past and the future and serve the purpose of coördinating the training, experience, and education of the former with the actual obligations and demands of the latter.

The term *adolescence* which is applied to this period is an unfortunate one because of its connotations. To some, the word refers to sexual development, and the behavior of this period is thought to be dependent on mysterious physiological changes. This is evidently due simply to confusion with puberty. To others, adolescence means a period in which strange ebullient forces work for the unrestrained behavior which is thought peculiar to that age. Still others speak solemnly of the "efflorescence of a new psychic force" and think of these

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years as possessing a unique spiritual quality for the individual. However, the word *adolescence* means in its Latin derivation merely "to grow to maturity." Beginning with puberty, adolescence is usually considered arbitrarily and purely for convenience as including the years from 12 to 20. It is with this latter meaning that the term *adolescence* is used in this book.

Even this concept of adolescence, as a period of years between and merging with childhood and adulthood, is essentially a concept for our own civilization. Among primitive peoples and peoples whose lives are little more than a following of instinctive behavior patterns there is no period of adolescence. A child remains a child until puberty, and then, as definitely as if he crosses a threshold, he becomes an adult. And though such a child might be tempted to cast reluctant backward glances to the "pleasures and protection of childhood," he has little opportunity for vacillating between his past and his future. For puberty marks his physical maturity—the only maturity important in a simple cultural group—and it is recognized as the sign of adulthood not only by his immediate family but also by his entire tribe.

As entering adulthood means assuming new duties and responsibilities, primitive peoples have certain requirements which the pubescent child must meet: the boy must learn to hunt and fight, and the girl to prepare the food and clothing required by her people; the boy has to be initiated into the folkways and tribal laws, the girl into the lore surrounding her function as wife and mother. But entering adulthood also means receiving new privileges—the privileges of mating and of membership in the tribe, and therefore the candidate has to meet cer-

tain tests: the boy has to give evidence of his physical strength and prowess, his skill in hunting, and his ability to endure pain and discomfort; and the girl, to a lesser degree, has to give evidence of such feminine tribal virtues as submissiveness, obedience, and possibly strength and endurance. These initiations and tests are not purely personal and private matters. They are participated in by the entire tribe, often with the exclusion of either sex, and they are formally celebrated with the addition of such special ordeals and rites as knocking out one of the candidate's teeth, tattooing his skin, or circumcising him. The celebration may be concluded with some symbolical performance as, for example, a dramatic representation of the pretended death and resurrection of the pubescent child to indicate the passing of his soul from his own body into the totem of his tribe.¹

Pubic ceremonies have been performed for centuries all over the world, and in this brief discussion no attempt is being made to survey the various practices, to account for their origin, to show how and why most of them have been abandoned, or to present the various interpretations of their significance. The purpose of this discussion is merely to point out that, although these ceremonies have long been regarded as indicating an early recognition of the special characteristics of adolescence, they can be interpreted far more simply as being merely the recognition of maturity and the preparation for adulthood.

Accepting this very simple explanation of public ceremonies as marking the entrance to adulthood, our whole

¹ For a discussion of public ceremonies, see Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, pp. 689 ff.

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concept of adolescence takes on a new significance, vastly illuminating to the so-called adolescent problems. For even among some of those uncivilized peoples who have dropped their primitive customs and the observance of these special rites, puberty does not occur unnoticed. In describing the "coming of age" of Samoan girls, for instance, one observer writes, "There was no sense of shame connected with puberty, nor any need of concealment. Pre-adolescent children took the news that a girl had reached puberty, a woman had had a baby, a boat had come from Ofu, or a pig had been killed by a falling boulder with the same insouciance—all bits of diverting gossip. . . ." ² But in our own civilization the interesting bodily changes which the growing boy and girl experience are neither hailed as occasion for initiatory rites and ceremonies or mysterious isolation, on the one hand, nor for "diverting gossip" on the other; they are changes of which the community is politely unaware and which the child may experience with a confused mixture of glowing pride and shamed self-consciousness.

So it happens that one of our adolescent boys may be an "A plus" student in American history, a local champion on the tennis court, and a player of recognized powers of endurance on the football field; he may be using his razor with gratifying effectiveness, and his voice may have settled down to a stable basso profundo; yet, though he feels himself every inch a man, he must continue to attend "school," be economically dependent on his parents, and report to them on his activities, and he may be forbidden to smoke or remain out beyond a specified hour.

² Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, pp. 145-6.

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Our adolescent girl may be well aware of her complete physical maturity, her new physical attractiveness, and her desire for a closer acquaintance with the opposite sex; yet she must continue to attend the same classes she attended before all these changes took place, "play with girls," go to bed at "bedtime," and, in general, be obedient to the wishes of her parents. If the boy and girl find this lack of recognition of their adulthood incongruous and begin frankly to assert their independence, they are said to be manifesting characteristic adolescent rebellion against authority. If, on the other hand, they submit outwardly but rebel within and become irritable, seclusive, sullen, and apparently at cross-purposes with themselves and their environment, they are said to be manifesting typical adolescent conflicts.

Our society has fixed no one definite time at which a boy or girl is to be designated as adult by the various ways in which custom, fashion, and family circumstances dictate, whether it be with regard to wearing high heels or long trousers, using cosmetics or having a car, entering society or smoking in public, or assuming the title of "Miss" or "Mr."

Similarly the law shows no uniformity in designating the age of adulthood. It determines a maximum age for required school attendance, a minimum age for entering industry, a maximum age for receiving public pensions as dependent minors, and a minimum age for culpability for unlawful conduct; it fixes the age of parental responsibility, the age at which a child may drive an automobile, and it sets a minimum age for making valid contracts, for marrying with or without parental consent, for inheriting property, and for voting. But even within the bound-

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aries of one state and one community these various ages do not coincide. Indeed, they often range over a period of more than ten years.³

Thus the recognition of adulthood which primitive man accords his child at puberty is withheld from our boys and girls through a long series of years during which they must constantly struggle to differentiate between those things which they are sufficiently grown up to do and those for which they must wait until they are "a little older." And many of the difficulties which we have come to think of as the difficulties inherent in this mysterious developmental process called adolescence are really difficulties characteristic of and created by our form of civilization.⁴

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS

In describing his early childhood,⁵ E. F. Benson wrote, "The minds of children as they grow have the diseases incident to childhood much as their bodies have. I had had my measles of sentimentality, and having got over that I developed during this year a kind of whooping cough of lying." Mr. Benson is not a specialist in behavior problems, but his comparison is useful. For lying—and rebelliousness, home-sickness, whining, over-demonstrativeness, over-dependency, lack of respect for other people's property, pugnacity, poor school work, shyness, and all the other forms of undesirable behavior

³ This observation is made with a somewhat different point of view by Leta S. Hollingworth in *The Psychology of the Adolescent*, pp. 31-34.

⁴ This is obviously an anthropological rather than a psychoanalytic point of view and should perhaps carry with it an acknowledgment and reference to Franz Boas' excellent introduction to Mead, *op. cit.*

⁵ E. F. Benson, *Our Family Affairs*, p. 83.