

UNDERSTANDING  
THE ADOLESCENT  
GIRL

BY GRACE LOUCKS ELLIOTT



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## FOREWORD

THIS book aims to be of help to teachers, leaders, parents and other adults who are related to girls in the period of adolescent adjustment as well as to the adolescent girls themselves. The aim is to point out, as simply as possible, some of the common problems of adolescent girls, to analyze the pertinent factors that produce them, and to indicate the equipment necessary for leadership.

Every stage of learning how to live as a person among other persons has its difficulties. Adjustments commence with the time the baby first tries to get along with her parents, and continue through the time she learns to live with schoolmates, in community groups, and in home and professional relationships. While most of these adjustments are common to both sexes, there are for the girl, at the adolescent period of development, problems which need special consideration. This is not to say that girls are inherently different from boys in their development, but rather to recognize that to be a girl in the midst of the assumptions and conventions of the present day is to have to face certain kinds of difficulties that boys do not meet, at least not in the same form.

The material in the book gathers up the author's experience with national and local groups in the Young Women's Christian Association, the Girls' Friendly

Society and similar agencies. It includes the experience gained through contact with college groups, girls' clubs, church school classes, young people's societies, and in interviews with many individual girls.

The assumptions and interpretations in this material are based on the best available psychological knowledge. There has been no effort made to include all of the material germane to a psychology of adolescence, but rather to consider those problems which have been found most frequently recurring in the author's actual experience with girls. There has been an attempt to avoid as far as possible the technical terminology of any school of psychology, in the belief that technical terms often confuse the lay reader, and that it is more useful to describe than to label difficulties. Extreme abnormal conduct, both neurotic and psychotic, has been excluded, both because more data are available for understanding those types of behavior than those which are characteristic of the average girl, in clubs or groups, and because handling such problems is the function of the professional expert in those realms. The bibliography at the end of each chapter is not an exhaustive record of research or reading, but is rather a list of the material which will be of most practical value to the leader.

GRACE LOUCKS ELLIOTT.

*New York City,*  
February, 1930

## CONTENTS

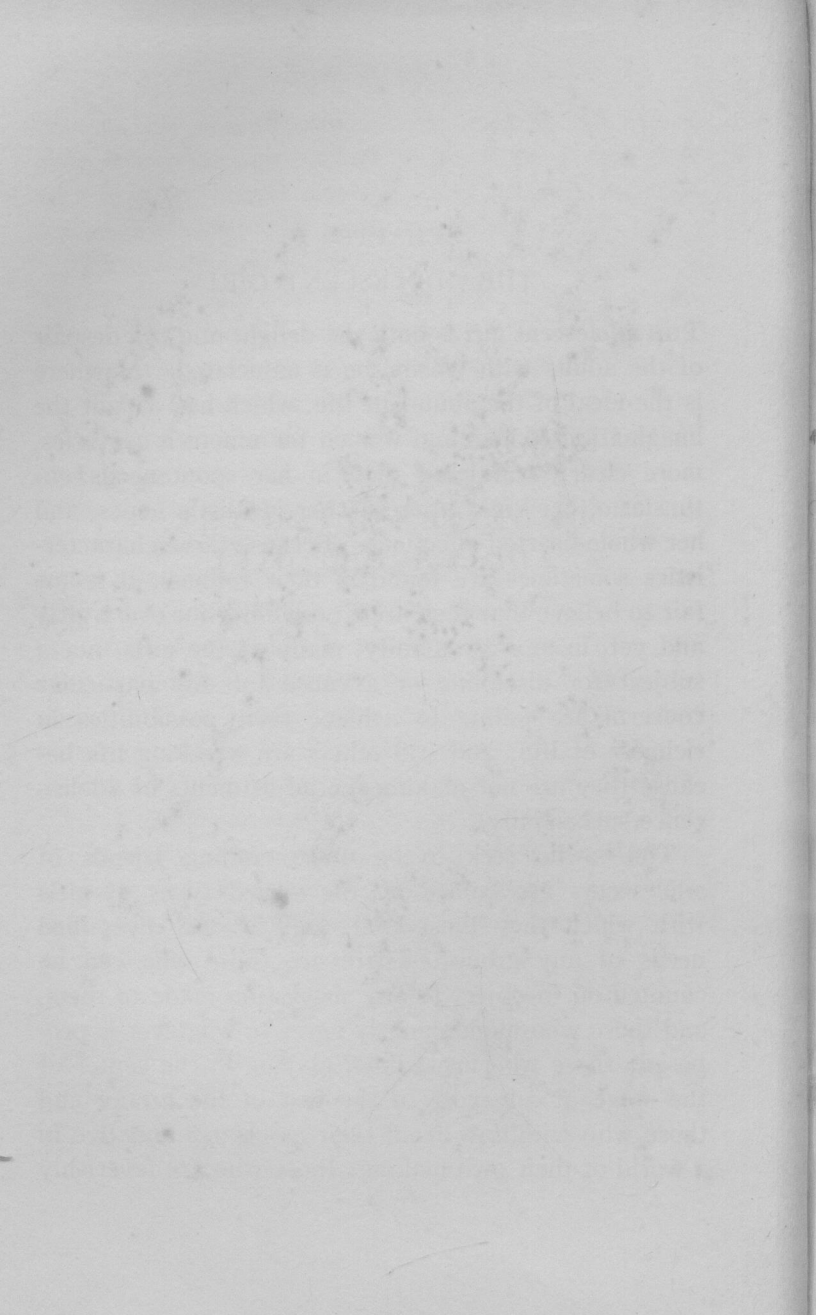
CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE ADOLESCENT GIRL . . . . .	3
Periods of Adolescent Development . . . . .	5
Physiological Factors . . . . .	6
Decrease of Creative Activities . . . . .	11
II. UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT BE- HAVIOR . . . . .	14
Symptoms <i>vs.</i> Roots of Difficulty . . . . .	14
The Origin of Adolescent Habit Patterns . . . . .	21
Original Nature . . . . .	25
Stages of Development . . . . .	27
Fundamental Needs of Personality . . . . .	32
Attitude Towards Emotional Difficulty . . . . .	36
III. THE MAJOR ADJUSTMENTS OF ADOLES- CENCE . . . . .	40
Establishing Relations with Boys . . . . .	48
Choosing a Vocation . . . . .	54
Arriving at a Philosophy of Life . . . . .	60
IV. COMMON ADOLESCENT DIFFICULTIES	65
Crushes . . . . .	65
Masturbation . . . . .	74
Idealization—Playing a Part . . . . .	76
Being Sorry for Oneself . . . . .	81

# CONTENTS

	PAGE
"Busyness" . . . . .	83
A Boss or a Slacker on the Job . . . .	85
 V. GROWING OUT OF ADOLESCENCE SUCCESSFULLY . . . . .	88
Understanding the Girl's Environment . .	90
Conflicts from Past Experience . . . .	92
The Place of a Coach . . . . .	94
How to Determine Right and Wrong . .	98
 VI. ENRICHING THE LIFE OF ADOLESCENTS . . . . .	105
Making Friends . . . . .	105
Clothes and Things . . . . .	108
Dramatics and Dancing . . . . .	110
Music and Literature . . . . .	112
Ideals . . . . .	114
Religion . . . . .	115
 VII. ADULTS AND ADOLESCENTS . . . . .	121
Use of Authority . . . . .	122
Objectivity Toward Herself . . . . .	126
Willingness to Confess Ignorance . . . .	127
Absence of Condemnation . . . . .	129

UNDERSTANDING THE  
ADOLESCENT GIRL







## CHAPTER I

### THE ADOLESCENT GIRL

THE adolescent girl is both the delight and the despair of the adults with whom she is associated. Nowhere is the ideal of the abundant life, which has caught the imagination of men and women for nineteen centuries, more clearly validated than in her spontaneous enthusiasm, her vivid interests, her idealistic hopes, and her whole-hearted affections. Because these characteristics sometimes are found in their fullness, it seems fair to believe that they are a possibility for every girl; and yet, in any community, many of the girls, not a subject for discipline or a cause for any particular concern, are failing to achieve their possibilities in richness of life; and still others are wrecking life because they are not making the adjustments of adolescence successfully.

Those who seek to be understanding friends of adolescents are baffled by the varied types of girls with which they must deal, and by the diversified needs of any group. There are those who can be counted on to object to any suggestion made to them, and those who monotonously agree to whatever is proposed; those who insist upon playing in the center of the stage at any cost to the rest of the group, and those who withdraw from their associates and live in a world of their own making; those who are feverishly

gay, and those who are listless and *blasé*; those who are naughty children, and those who are "examples"; those who are "boy-crazy," and those who are uncomfortable in the presence of the opposite sex. Even the dominant mood of any individual girl may vary so widely that the girl who is the life of the party one evening may have a sense of hopeless depression the next; the girl who makes strong assertions of affection for a friend on one day may find herself saying bitter things to her on another; the girl dependable in most situations may act in a wholly irresponsible way in a special one. Every adviser has to deal with sudden flare-ups of emotion which are quite out of proportion to the circumstances from which they arise. Many a girl has liked or disliked another at first sight; many a girl has expressed her affection for an adviser with the persistent intensity of a little child. Why she should behave as she does is an even more baffling question to the girl than to the leader.

It is trite to say that adolescence is a period of turmoil and confusion, yet few have really analyzed the factors that make for the increase or decrease of the confusion so often perplexing.<sup>1</sup> We notice the girl's self-consciousness, her inconsistent and often exaggerated behavior, her conformities and her revolts, her

<sup>1</sup> It will be interesting, as a contrast to the study in this chapter, to compare the data presented by Margaret Mead, in the record of her work with a primitive group in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, the conclusion of which is, "with the exception of a few cases, adolescence represents no period of crisis or stress, but was instead an orderly development of a set of slowly maturing interests and activities." Her analysis of the factors that account for the differences between the civilized and primitive girl, in her chapter on Educational Implications, will be very stimulating to those interested in the building of an educational program for modern adolescence.

depressions and her enthusiasm, sometimes with condemnation and sometimes with admiration, but often with little understanding of the meanings of all such gropings toward selfhood. The girl often demands the right to express herself, only to be baffled by the unsatisfying result. She does not understand that from the "ensemble of all her selves" she must achieve a self to express. When the adolescent is awkward with her hands or feet, when she develops unhappy habits of manner or speech, when she plays disconcerting rôles, and poses, it is not useful to try to find out from her why she does it. Could she answer, she would probably be less a problem to herself and to her elders. It is just because she does not understand herself and her actions that she is so baffled and so baffling.

#### PERIODS OF ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Much of the material dealing with adolescence divides it into early, middle, and later periods, describing the characteristics of each period. This does not seem practically useful, because of the number of factors other than age which tend to determine problems faced by the individual girl. The most constant factor may be said to be the time of physical maturing, but even this varies as much as four years. The accompaniments of that physical development vary with the environment and the experience of the individual girl. The awakening and the maturing of the physical, mental, social, and religious life may be so accelerated

that the span of the development may cover as many months for one girl as it does years for another.

One girl with limited contacts may go through her experience of "puppy love" at twenty-five instead of fifteen. Another girl may have carried so much responsibility before sixteen that she has the understanding and the intellectual and emotional poise usually found in one years her senior by chronological reckoning. Many a girl in a city high school is more sophisticated, and has tried out more phases of life than a girl of more limited background who has finished college. Because so many of the problems that girls face are due to the kinds of stimulus to which they are subjected, it is important to understand the type of experience and the problems each has had, rather than to know her chronological age. The basis for understanding any particular girl will be the leader's knowledge of the whole range of adolescent development, her realization that any characteristic may appear early or late, and her ability to recognize conduct at whatever time it appears.

#### PHYSIOLOGICAL FACTORS

No attempt will be made to discuss at length the physiological changes of adolescence. Data relating to this aspect are within easy access. It is sufficient to say that those whose physical organisms have already attained their full growth may need to remind themselves of the feelings that accompany especially rapid muscular and bone development. A girl sud-

denly gets too big to be held just when the holding seems very important. She calls attention to herself by dropping things just when she would like to be least conspicuous. Her feet are noticeably large (to her) just when she begins to be conscious of her physical characteristics.

In addition to the anatomical development, there are the glandular changes which influence the whole tone and affectivity of the organism. They are accompanied by strange feelings, for which the girl has often been entirely unprepared. The degree of difficulty in adolescent adjustments is often in direct proportion to the lack of understanding the girl has of herself and of the new forces functioning within her. One of the most apparent of these developments is within the area of sex. The facts of menstruation have often been so inadequately explained to the girl that it may be accompanied by a sense of mystery or feelings of shame and disgust that may have far-reaching effects on her later sex attitudes. Not only must she come to understand the external functions of the sex glands and organs, but she must also learn to live with the feelings that accompany the internal secretions of these glands; that is, not only must she adjust herself to the external fact of menstruation, but she must begin to deal with or to evade the periodic recurrence of sex desire, which is related to the external process, but may not have been included in the explanation of the visible function. There seems to be a definite relation between restlessness, tension, and sex desire, and the monthly functioning of the sex organs. Certain types of depression and

of creative urge seem to have their roots in the physical functioning of the body instead of in some spiritual adjustment or lack of it. For many girls, there are certain days in the month when it is easier to do things that require initiative, and others when the threshold of irritability is unusually high. When we know more of the relation of the functioning of the sex organs to the repulsion or attraction of certain activities, we shall have a sounder basis for the building of individual and group programs. This is not to say that the feelings connected with sex functions are always recognized as such. Many girls have never discovered the relation of the emotional urges they feel to their physical accompaniments.<sup>2</sup>

This, which is more directly observable in the case of sex development, is equally true of the functioning of all the glands of internal secretion. The rapid growth of adolescence is likely to make heavy demands on the whole metabolism of the body, and any tendency to glandular maladjustment may be aggravated at this time. There is in adolescence a quickened sensitivity in all the body, and a more marked acceleration in reaction time to stimuli of all kinds, because of the changes in the structure and function of the organs.

<sup>2</sup> Blanchard, *The Adolescent Girl*, p. 132. "The adolescent longs for great emotional experiences to which the awakening sexual life inclines, but having no real experience by which to gauge an idea of the specific sensation for which the being craves finds complete satisfaction in the ethic glow of religious ecstasy, or in æsthetic appreciation, or creative ardor, which surrounds intellectual work whatever form it takes. Especially is this true of the girl, for much less than the boy does she realize that her vague longings and aspirations have anything even remotely sexual in their composition, and she turns so much the more readily to the emotional outlets of religion and art as a means of satisfaction."

"Pleasure and pain are more keenly and widely felt. The skin becomes a new organ of the mind. Is that not the reason our young people turn to cosmetics and baths and all the dermal stimulation to which young people are so prone? Then there is the sense of taste. There are the new drinks, those horrible chemical stimulations, sweetened and colored, which young people drink. This is a mark of desire, an attempt to satisfy new hungers. There is an increased sensitivity to smell with all that it means to love life, the perfumes, the musk with which youth saturates itself."<sup>3</sup> All feelings are more intense whether they are joyous or depressing, and they are likely to give rise to meditations of unexpected profundity about life and death. This explains why youth can give itself to its ideals and its desires, its salvation or its destruction, with an intensity and abandon characteristic of no other period of life. It is probably the most strategic time in determining whether the ways of life for the future shall be those that lead on to ever-increasing development, or those that tend to close the personality in upon itself.

Not only must the adolescent learn to live with the new urges of her being and the emotions that accompany them; she must deal also with the feelings of insecurity and strain that are likely to come with all new experience. She may find it necessary to make changes in many areas of life at the same time. She may go away from home to school. There she must adjust herself to different living arrangements, food,

<sup>3</sup> Van Waters, Miriam, *Youth in Conflict*, p. 224.



and hours. She may make new friends, and face different standards of value. She may take a job for the first time, with its new demands of responsibility and its accompanying weariness. She is no longer isolated and protected, as were many of her elders. There are few secrets hidden from her. The knowledge her parents refuse her, she can have from her companions, from the movies, from magazines, and even from the billboards. The old controls of fear no longer have the meaning for her which they had for her elders. She knows too much of celestial geography to be frightened by the threats of hell. In the light of post-war history, she sees too many of the mistakes of the past to hold in reverence the codes of her elders, or to be moved by their ideals. She knows too much of preventive and prophylactic measures to control her sex life on the old basis of fear of consequences. In the words of *The Younger Generation*, "Our curiosity is at once terrible and divine. And we pride ourselves on having few inhibitions when it comes to finding out those things we want to know. We are told that sex is dangerous and sacred and vulgar and taboo. And we are just as curious to find out why it is sacred as why it is vulgar."<sup>4</sup> In all this experimentation, she does not have the incentive of standards and ideals suited to the world in which she lives. Her new knowledge usually outruns the development of an understanding or purpose that would assure its wise interpretation or use.

The adolescent today is also constantly exposed to the pressure of the complex life of which she is a part. In the house in which she lives there is little time for

<sup>4</sup> Benson, Eleanor, *The Younger Generation*, p. 80.

her or her contemporaries to be alone. She has little chance to live any part of her days without surveillance. She is continually played upon by the interests and emotions of whatever other members make up the household. At school the girl studies and reads and recites with other people, all of whose personalities in one way or another influence her. Even in the best-equipped college dormitories, suites of rooms are often so arranged by the girls that all the cots are in one room, all the dressing tables in a second, and the study tables in a third. She is not alone even when she is asleep. Such extra-curricular interests as sororities, competitive athletics, annuals, elaborate social events, which were once largely restricted to college, are being rapidly pushed down into the high school years. Stimulating recreation is open to all, with no age limitations. Even the best of recreation and of culture is available prematurely. The development of the girl, in the midst of all this, is likely to have the quality of a hothouse plant and to result in the tired or bored girl of eighteen or twenty, who sees nothing interesting ahead for the rest of her life. There could well be applied to her the response of a three-year-old who, when she had been irritable and fretful, was asked what was the matter, and answered, "Mother, you are giving me your tiredness."

#### DECREASE OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES

This increase of stimuli is made more difficult because it is accompanied by a decrease in the opportunities for creative expression. There is so little for