

## *Routes to Adulthood*

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*Adolescents use various routes to progress into adulthood. From the adult point of view, some of these routes are acceptable while others are not. Although most youth make a successful transition into adulthood, others cling to their peer groups and defy the adult society which awaits them. The author defines five subgroups of adolescents—mainstreamers and conformers, the entrepreneurs, the uncommitted, the half-socialized, and the unsocialized—and discusses the kinds of leaders and programs that are most successful in working with these five groups of youth.*

EVERY SOCIETY has to work out a set of procedures for helping youth pass from childhood to adulthood. These procedures vary among societies. Educators, including those who work with youth in informal settings (such as Extension), need to recognize the routes by which young people progress into adulthood. Some of the routes taken do not lead to an assimilation into the mature society.

The American society, with its affluence, rapid rate of technological change, and high degree of geographical and social mobility, gives a setting for adolescence with the following characteristics:

1. Encourages *independence* rather than *obedience to authority*.
2. Provides a pervasive sense of change in economic, social, and political institutions.
3. Permits and encourages a wide variety of sexual behavior.
4. Channels the instrumental roles leading to adult competence into high school and college except for a subgroup of 15 to 20 per cent of youth who find stable jobs or marry before age 18.
5. Enhances *play* roles at the expense of *work* roles.

The boy or girl who grows up to be a successful adult in this situation generally does the following:

- Accepts and uses the school and often the university as a place

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where he can prepare effectively for the adult roles he wants to perform.

- Learns from early family training to work independently and with effort to do his best on any task which appeals to him as important; applies this achievement motivation to school work.
- Identifies with his parent of the same sex and follows the lead of this parent in performing certain adult roles; may also identify with and model his behavior after young adults who are his teachers or group leaders.
- Participates in one or more adult-led youth organizations (scouts, church youth groups, 4-H, YMCA, etc.) which provide adult leaders who set an example of the values of the society and teach these values both explicitly and implicitly.
- Participates in an adolescent peer group. This participation may consist partly of membership in adult-led youth organizations. However, it is likely to outlast his interest in such youth groups.

#### THE PEER GROUP

The peer group is the only aspect of the adolescent's experience that is not aimed at achieving adulthood. The family teaches adult family roles by example and precept, and sometimes teaches adult occupational roles (if the youth is to follow a parent's occupation). The school explicitly prepares the adolescent for adult roles. The adult-led youth group teaches adult social values and often tries to direct a youth to an adult role in such an institution as the church or the Farm Bureau. The economy provides a limited number of jobs which teach adult occupational roles.

These nonpeer-group experiences are generally *instrumental* in character, as distinguished from *expressive*. They are aimed at accomplishing something in the future. They are a means to an end. Even the family becomes instrumental in its approach to the adolescent. It can no longer offer him sheer emotion—pleasure, satisfaction—without an eye on the future. The adolescent must free himself from emotional dependence on his parents, and he wants to free himself from family discipline. He wants interpersonal relations of a more intimate nature than those found in his family. He also wants expressive experience—excitement, pleasure, games, companionship. He wants to be judged by other people in terms of his personality, not in terms of his scholarship or promise for adult roles.

The adolescent peer group does these things for him. But the peer group cannot give him adult status. It can only give him self-confidence as he works for adult status. He must outgrow the peer group.

and grow into adult roles. This is one meaning of the achievement of identity—the basic task of adolescence.

The adolescent peer group may be useful or it may be harmful from the adult point of view in a complex, changing society. If adolescents are in a vulnerable position with respect to finding a secure place in society, they may form deviant and troublesome groups. Some subgroups of adolescents come from subcultures which do not provide for them a feasible transition from family to adult community participation, i.e., a number of Negro youth from lower working-class families, or some Puerto Rican immigrant youth. In this situation, adolescent peer groups may provide a defense mechanism that helps their members to avoid finding an adult social function and achieving an adult identity. This kind of peer group will be expressive rather than instrumental in behavior, working for the gratification of the immediate wants of its members—excitement, sex, money.

A boy or girl in the normal process of growth through adolescence first takes part in and draws sustenance from a peer group and then outgrows it and leaves it behind. But some groups of youth cannot do this. Those who do not see a clear way to adulthood, and who lack identification with people in successful adult roles, tend to work for the solidarity and the permanency of the adolescent peer group. They try to heighten and sharpen the difference between their peer group and the adult world, by adopting certain forms of dress, hairdo, and cosmetics. They develop a language which separates them from the adult world, and may go in for flashy cars or noisy motorbikes.

Thus they declare their defiance of the adult society with its roles waiting for them. Whether they are mainly youngsters of immature personality is not an easy question to answer. Some of the things they do about their personal appearance suggest a high degree of narcissism (egoism). Some boys have their hair "done," and others spend much time combing their hair. But the majority of them seem to go to the other extreme of personal untidiness. Whatever the clinical psychologist might say about the ego-structure and personality of these young people, it is clear that many of them use the adolescent peer culture as an escape from the effort to grow up into responsible adult roles.

#### SUBGROUPS OF YOUTH

There appear to be five definable subgroups of adolescents, from the point of view of their position and prognosis in their transition

from childhood to adulthood. It is useful to consider the differences among them in the achievement of the basic tasks of *identity formation* and *social fidelity*. From the adult point of view, the adolescent *should* become a person in his own right (achieve his identity) and should become a loyal supporter of the values and procedures of our democratic society (achieve social fidelity). It is also useful to examine the quality of their moral conscience—their ability to control their behavior—and to ask what part their peer group plays in their lives.

#### *Maintainers and Conformers*

This is the majority of all youth—some 70 per cent. They go through the modal process. They accept school and family and look ahead casually to adult roles for which they are being prepared. They are in the process of achieving identity without special problems. They think in conformity with their social environment and will carry on the society pretty much as it came to them, but with adaptations to the economic forces that mold society. For a period in adolescence they participate fully in the peer group, in dress, language, and other forms of expressive behavior. Then they outgrow the peer group and move easily into adult roles. Members of the group come from all socioeconomic levels. Some enter college, and some go to work or marry without finishing high school.

#### *Entrepreneurs of a Changing Society*

This group exists in all modern democratic societies. Members have solid family backgrounds, varying from working class to upper class, and come to adolescence with an unusual amount of intellectual and emotional energy. They are more curious, more critical, and more creative than youth in the “maintainer” group are. They are also likely to have somewhat more abrasive relations with parents and teachers. They work harder at the task of becoming emotionally independent of the older generation. They show more rebellion. Their tendency to be critical of the status quo makes it harder for them to achieve the task of social fidelity.

Members of this group tend to go in for social action while in school and college. They make up much of the membership of the National Student Association, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and other protest groups. It is an unsettled question whether similar youth go into right-wing youth organizations such as the Young Americans for Freedom.

Youth in this group gain personal strength and support from their peer groups, which tend to be college student groups. Some of them grow beards and develop unconventional dress patterns, though this is not typical. Their rebellion and drive for independence are not satisfied by the expressive activities of the peer group, and they form instrumental groups that deal with problems of the adult society. In this way they move into adult roles with some commotion to all concerned. Eventually they form the leadership elite for the society. It is hard to define the boundaries of this group, but presently it contains at least 10 per cent of all youth.

#### *The Uncommitted*

Members of this group have much the same range of socioeconomic family backgrounds as the "entrepreneurs" but are very unlike them in personality. They suffer from an unusual lack of self-esteem and self-assurance. Probably many of them lack a secure identification with a competent adult of the same sex, and have had little emotional support from their families. This description applies fully to only a small fraction of 1 per cent of American young people; but it probably applies to a considerable extent to a group as large as 5 per cent. They are so seriously uncommitted that they are not doing well in school or on the job, and they cannot get started into adult roles. Parents and teachers of middle-class youth have become increasingly aware of and concerned about this group.

One reason for interest in this group is that it is a product of our particular society, and its existence points to serious weaknesses in this society. Our society is changing so rapidly that it breaks the continuity between children and their parents; it has fragmented life so that work and play and family living do not go together; and it places on young people the burden of making decisions about themselves and their lives with so much freedom that some of them become frightened and confused.

#### *The Half Socialized*

This type of adolescent youth has come to public attention in all modern countries since World War II. Group members have definitely immature personalities and are exhibitionists, with just enough impulse control to avoid serious crime. Boys wear long hair, girls have fantastic cosmetic habits. Some of the group go in for leather jackets or black shirts.

Members of this group are extremely visible and disturbing to

adults. Their visibility is heightened by a tendency to collect in public places in city centers and to travel together with motorcycles, etc. They have a strenuous peer-group life, with excitement, sex, and conflict with police. Most members have dropped out of school, more through lack of interest than lack of intellectual ability. Employment is not wanted. There is not much external social pressure in the U.S. to get jobs, since unemployment runs high in this age group and there are plenty of "maintainers" to fill available jobs. A few of this group get into college, where they are likely to be sources of disturbance.

Family backgrounds are inadequate, and family control and discipline are weak. Socioeconomic status ranges from middle class to working class, with the majority from working-class homes.

The peer group is the most influential force in the lives of these young people, and peer-group activities maintain them in a hostile stance toward adult authority. Some of them go into the Beatnik peer group, and others into juvenile gangs. Most of the much-publicized vandalism in suburbs is committed by this group.

Two generations ago there was no opportunity for this group to become large enough to be socially visible, since all of its potential members were put to work as soon as they left school. Though they were probably as immature and had as little identity achievement then as they have today, society had a place for them and put them in their place, in a situation that required progress toward adult roles.

Members of this group are the most numerous in cities—perhaps as much as 10 per cent of the youth population in larger cities. Rural communities still have jobs for them and little tolerance for their peer-group activity.

When we speak of this group as "half socialized," we mean that its members have received a bare minimum of the kinds of discipline at home which, combined with affection, produce a strong moral conscience. They operate mainly on a level of social expediency, and control their behavior enough to stay out of serious trouble with the police.

### *The Unsocialized*

The "unsocialized" differ from the "half socialized" in two respects: (1) They have less intellectual ability and poorer school achievement and (2) they have less access to the wider society. They are more confined to slum areas, and their social horizon is limited to their own subcommunity. They are mainly from the lower

working class and often do not have stable family life. Generally, their parents are marginal to the economy and do not provide them with models of adult competence.

There are two subgroups. One is a hostile, defiant group whose members have very poor control over their own impulses. The other is an apathetic, intimidated group whose members have been so severely and irrationally punished in family, neighborhood, and school, that they have ceased to make the effort to succeed.

In an earlier generation, members of this group would have been put to work as soon as they dropped out of school, and would have adapted to adult roles without creating much of a social problem because there was enough work for unskilled juveniles and because those who lived in rural areas were cared for by the family economic unit. Now, with a large part of this group living in cities, there is no economic role for them as adolescents, and they are thrown together in peer-group activities.

The hostile and aggressively maladjusted boys of this group become active in juvenile gangs, while the apathetic ones become fringe members of gangs or do not participate much in peer-group activities. The girls in this group attach themselves to the male gangs, or live in apathy until they can escape from adolescence into an early marriage.

Except in farm families, no form of instrumental activity leading to growth toward adult roles is available to this group. The peer group offers expressive activity—mainly excitement and escape from the drabness of family and school. The group does not dress as flamboyantly as the “half socialized.” It does not symbolize as much rebellion against the older generation, except when the boys engage in gang fights and crimes; and the police generally control this.

The tasks of identity formation and social fidelity are not achieved by these group members, and will be achieved only to a minimum degree as they grow older, feel the social pressure to take on adult roles, find more acceptance in the labor market, and experience the responsibility of family life.

This group makes up about 5 per cent of the youth population. It is found in all sizes of community, but is most prevalent in city slum areas.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR INFORMAL EDUCATION

For the majority groups of “maintainers” and “entrepreneurs” of a changing society, current informally-conducted youth-serving and youth-directed organizations probably serve quite well. Leaders of

high-school-age and college-age youth groups have learned to work more nondirectively with these groups so as to adjust to the greater demand for autonomy, especially by the more active organizations. Four-H Club leaders are probably more skillful now than ever before in cooperating with rather than dominating their groups.

Probably a shifting of program materials is indicated for the informal youth groups that are sponsored by Extension Service programs. The shift might be toward greater "relevance," to use a term that is preferred by the young activists today. Topics to be discussed and projects to be undertaken might deal with the social and economic problems of the local community, as well as with problems of our foreign policy.

For the "uncommitted" and those bordering upon this condition, the informal group activities of adolescents with positive and attractive young adults as leaders may be the most effective means of encouraging the self-esteem and the social fidelity which the members of this subgroup lack. When extension leaders are relatively young, attractive, and positive in their attitudes toward making our society more truly democratic, they are likely to serve as models to young people who need this kind of emotional support as they grow into their adult identity.

Most difficult are the "half-socialized" and "unsocialized" subgroups, whose contacts with schools and other agencies of a stable, productive society have generally been unsatisfactory. These groups need adult leaders who are patient, skillful, and well-trained in working with boys and girls of these types. Some of the recent and current urban Extension programs are reaching these young people. Especially in the Negro ghettos and in lower working-class neighborhoods of the big cities, the new responsible leaders of youth are learning effective combinations of tolerance and creative stimulation to bring some of these young people into fruitful study and discussion. An award-winning article by Lawana Trout in the April, 1967, *NEA Journal* (Journal of the National Education Association) describes the author's experience in teaching a unit on *prejudice*, *propaganda*, and *protest* to classes of disadvantaged adolescents. The title of her article, "Not Unteachable—Just Unteachable," might well describe the rebellious adolescent of today.

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BEING YOUNG is a fault which improves daily.—*Swedish Proverb*