

# ADOLESCENTS: OUR MOST VISIBLE MINORITY

*Photo: Bev Pearl*



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*L'auteure parle des différents problèmes associés à l'adolescence. Elle remarque que la puberté est une période brève de changement social et émotionnel qui va de l'enfance à l'âge adulte. Les nord-américaines entrent et quittent cette période sans vrais rituels. L'exploration sexuelle et sociale introduite auparavant par le bal des débutantes est maintenant complétée à partir de l'âge de treize ans.*

Poor adolescents! Sociologists and psychologists poke and prod, then big business consults them as major consumers and they are sometimes feared by ex-adolescents for whom adolescence is now something of a social disease. Many parents would like to understand what mysterious ailment has transformed so many "nice children" into herd-oriented, noisy, ill-mannered louts.

Many, yes, but not all. And not even the most "objectionable" adolescent remains so all the time. Indeed, rapid and intense changes of mood are typical of the adolescent, a source now of despair, now of hope for long-suffering members of the family. Dramatic changes in the level of sophistication are also

typical; a child of fourteen may suddenly reveal the poise and insight of an adult of 41.

In Latin, the word *adolescens* means "becoming an adult." What is this curious phenomenon, this state of "becoming"? It is related to, but not identical with, "puberty." Puberty is a relatively brief period of physical change that signals the end of childhood and is common to all races. Adolescence, on the other hand, is that longer transition from childhood to adulthood that begins with puberty but lasts several years and is perhaps more descriptive of social and emotional change than of physical. Most traditional societies simply cannot afford the luxury of so long a transition to adulthood. Hence, adolescence is largely a product of wealthy Western, urban societies.

Because adolescence is, in contrast to puberty, largely a social phenomenon, estimates of its length and significance understandably vary. However, different theoretical approaches — biological, psychological, sociological, and anthropological — all stress that adolescence is a period of transition and development. So the contemporary Western world, and North America in particular, has assigned special

status to the phase "adolescence."

How difficult this period of life can be may be seen in the tumultuous behaviour displayed by many adolescents and in the frequently intense and painful conflict between the adult and adolescent generations.

For behind all the theories and analysis are the young people themselves, adolescents only to educators, psychologists, and Madison Avenue (and more of that anon). To one another they are "the kids," "my friends," "the gang," "we," and "us." In the "pop lit" written by individuals of "adult" status they are almost universally "teenagers," or yet more simply "teens," with a careless disregard for the fact that chronological age is not the controlling factor in the attitudes and behaviours of the youths they are describing. I would like now to consider more closely the lives of adolescent girls.

One of the most striking characteristics of adolescent girls (and boys, for that matter) is their tendency to cluster in groups and to seek contact with group members in an expanding chain of telephone conversations when face-to-face contact is not possible. Group markers and insignia are common, such as "school colours," sports and activity "letters," formal and informal school uniforms — whether military oxfords, skirt, blouse, and blazer with a curious use of that customarily masculine attire, the necktie; sweater or blouse with skirt — or the ubiquitous "blue jeans" and "top." All are dear to the heart of the adolescent, but have little to do with individual taste. There is an overall tendency to follow a group norm in dress and so declare the identity of "we," against a rather vague but hostile "you." A single adolescent often adheres so closely to group norms of dress that the knowledgeable observer can identify the group immediately. The one evokes the many and is mightily relieved to do so! Some contemporary labels for group styles are the "preppie," the "hoser," the "punk," and the "skinhead."

From a slightly different point of view adolescent girls share some

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characteristics in common with what anthropologists recognize as an "age set," described in studies of tribal groups such as the Karimojong of northern Uganda. That is, girls share an esoteric language, replete with innuendoes fully understood only by group members, and forms of dress and behaviour that culture feels appropriate only to them. But unlike the tribal youth whose life in the age set is clearly bound by rituals of entry and exit, the North American girl must enter and leave adolescence with what grace she can muster, with no recognizable assistance from ritual whatsoever. Even the socialite debut is nearly abandoned today because its original purposes have been accomplished so much earlier in life. The sexual and social explorations of "post-deb" traditional courtship are now often complete by age thirteen or fourteen for many girls.

The group both supports the individual adolescent and contributes to potential problems by encouraging behaviour that runs counter to adult expectations of the adolescent, but not always adult practice. Are we overlooking the fact that the single parenting reflected in the rising divorce rate of "adult" partners may serve to some extent as a role model for teen mothers? Sexual freedom may be a group norm, but sex-gone-wrong is a sad condition — unplanned pregnancy and/or abortion, prostitution (an increasing problem for youths of both sexes), venereal disease, rape, and incest.

For others the problem is drug abuse: the truly "dirty trick" is to slip a "coke" (the *real* thing) into a handful of look-alike (mostly caffeine) pills available through advertisements in various macho-oriented magazines. And there are always the standard overdoses of narcotics, sedatives, and psychiatric drugs, potentially lethal, whether taken intentionally or accidentally. Drugs of most types for illegal use tend to be readily available at a price in the variety of pinball "joints" and quick-food outlets that mushroom into existence near large junior and senior high schools. Some experienced teachers con-

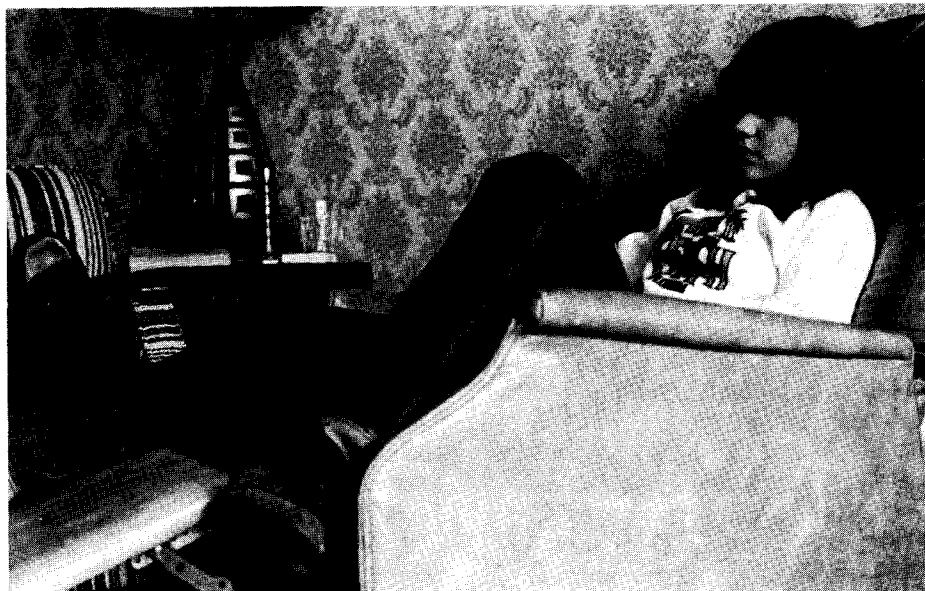


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sider that they can tell by their students' behaviour when it is "delivery" day in the neighbourhood.

Physical abuse is another problem for adolescents. If a child is under sixteen years of age in Ontario, the Child Welfare Act grants her (or him) protection through the Children's Aid Society or its counterpart, the Catholic Children's Aid Society. Now it is required that even the reasonable suspicion of abuse of a child must be reported to one of the Aids and Ontario maintains a roster of known child-abusers and their victims. The names of those who report abuse are not revealed to those suspected of abusing a child.

But after the sixteenth birthday any youth must be responsible for laying charges against the assailant (who is frequently a family member) with the police. This is an obvious "Catch 22," in particular for the sixteen-year-old girl, who is generally less well prepared to make her own way independently, even with the help of student welfare. In such an instance the assaulted teenager is damned if s/he does prosecute (about 99 per cent sure to be "kicked out of the house") and damned if s/he does not (the beatings may continue).

"Nice" society is quick to condemn the youths who roam the streets, but for some this may be a form of "hunting and gathering," a strategy for a survival of sorts; "home" may be little more than "bed" and maybe "breakfast."

Others are concerned with the problems experienced by teenage girls as mothers. Dr. Diane Sacks, Paediatric Lecturer and a member of staff at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, reports that at present the number of teen pregnancies is decreasing, because these girls are using contraceptives more effectively. But there is still a substantial number of teenage unmarried girls who get pregnant. Dr. Herb Sohn, currently the Coordinator of Children's Aid Society Programs under the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (who worked for a number of years with the Ontario Child Abuse Registry) says, "In my experience, teenage mothers are reported to the register as alleged child abusers less frequently than mothers of other age groups, although this is not to say that they are necessarily good parents."

One constructive attempt to help young mothers to become good parents is the Montrose Project,

currently underway in Toronto. The project, which opened in Montrose Public School in September 1980, offers daycare to the children of students in the City of Toronto Public Schools. In addition, the young mothers are offered parenting classes and participate in a variety of social groups. Any necessary referrals to community agencies are made by staff members, all of whom are experienced in infant care and have Early Childhood Education qualifications.

Across Canada it is not unusual for both parents to work outside the home and for children, particularly males, to be recognized as potential workers. Female children too are potential workers, but biology also prepares them for the "work" of maternity and motherhood. In many ways Western society has fastened leech-like upon this aspect of female life, in what Alice B. Kehoe (in an article in *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1973) has described as the "maternal metonym," or definition of maternal characteristics. Kehoe argues that the female is not fully defined as "woman" until she acquires these maternal characteristics — pregnancy and mothering — which, of course, biologically she cannot do herself. Furthermore, it is socially sanctioned, proper maternity which matters. In the past and generally today, this means marriage and/or a continuing partnership with a single mate. The consequences of the "maternal metonym" are particularly harsh for the female, since in North America she is expected to take time "out" for maternity and child-rearing at a critical time in her professional development. Time "out" can be time "lost" and she may not have equal opportunity to compete with males for the top rank in her work or profession. Indeed the Science Council of Canada has much prejudice to overcome in its attempt to get and keep girls in maths and sciences classes *en route* to higher education and professional status!

One resolution of the dilemma is for girls to refuse maternity. The technology is certainly available to make this possible, but a better way

lies in the social acceptance of maternity as a biological event not to be punished with social isolation and restriction, but rather assisted through good, readily available childcare and the adoption of some consciously modified social patterns such as more flexible work schedules and the creation of group-oriented responsibility for child-raising such as the kibbutz.

And what has this to do with adolescence? A great deal, because for the female it is in the adolescent years that the full impact of the "maternal metonym" is felt. For the adolescent female, adolescence is usually the marriage market, a time to see and be seen in the business of mating. This may be the reason why females often exhibit (as late as their mid-twenties) types of behaviour that we as a society characterize as adolescent; the period of adolescence lengthens, in fact, with the increasing delay in the age of marriage or mating.

Finally, a few comments on the adolescent as exploited consumer. In many high schools there is a known population of students who can never attend a sports practice or serve a detention after school hours. Why? Because the final bell of the school day magically transforms this type of adolescent into a quite different category of person, the worker. Often students hold full-time jobs by working permanent evening shifts. They live a kind of schizophrenic existence governed by the clock: nine to three students/adolescents, three to twelve adults. With the Canadian economy in severe recession and with high home mortgages, even a small contribution to family coffers by a working youth can be a critical factor in family income.

Some families, as part of their strategy for survival, are forced to remove an adolescent from school to take a job, however low-paid. Faced with this decision, they are highly likely to choose a girl as the worker, often to the keen regret of the entire family, since they feel that she, as a female, is less likely to be able to get the education necessary for a profession or a highly paid job and that, once educated, she is less likely to get a job in the work

for which she has been educated. Alternatives might involve the loss of the family home (with the attendant blow to family esteem) and family fragmentation and so prove worse in the long run. Every family has its own point of view. As another alternative economically pressed families may encourage some young people to find part-time work. Whether they earn money mostly for themselves or for their family, adolescents are prime target for overt and covert (subliminal) advertising. No fools, marketers expend much money and effort on bending adolescent twigs in the way they grow by attempting to form values and attitudes now that will pay the marketers in the future. A prime example is cigarette "lifestyle" advertising, which has as its major target the girl of approximately ten to fourteen whom advertisers consider most susceptible to this type of sexual fantasy imagery.

It is time to recognize that adolescents are and will remain our most visible and audible minority and that, as usual, we the majority must bear much of the blame for their exploitation and isolation on the fringes of society. When news is scarce the adolescent is society's scapegoat, providing a safe object of scorn and fear at which both fingers and tongues may safely wag. The socially maladaptive (and sometimes horrifying!) behaviour of the few is used to condemn the many steady and just plain "nice" adolescents who struggle through the difficult years (without harm to anyone) to emerge as competent young adults.

We could begin by enjoying rather than bemoaning their "difference." We could help them understand and resist the exploitation to which they are subjected by Madison Avenue, the business interests which promote their addiction to nicotine and turn their cheerful participation in surveys of colour-taste-smell preferences against them in ever more subtle ways of capturing their consumer dollars. I am frustrated that my generation (as their parents) supports those interests. Perhaps in their generation as adults, they can do better.