

What Does It Mean To Be Thirteen?

Chris Stevenson

"Each young person is confronting perplexing issues and dealing with urgent questions, conflicting priorities, unsteady expectations, unadulterated joys, and a complex of apprehensions and aspirations—just as we did. What we have in common is that the primary challenge of growing up remains the same as what we faced in our time: becoming the very best one can be."

Our adult perceptions and values are inevitably an outgrowth of experience, and my recollections of early adolescence seem halcyon to me today. At 13 I worked 20 hours a week at the pharmacy in a small Alabama town, and I loved it. Three years earlier I had begun as a delivery boy, bicycling prescription medications after school to shut-ins for \$2 a week. By eighth grade I had advanced to a \$22 a week half-time position in which I had heady responsibilities: ordering "sundries" such as candy, cosmetics, and gifts, decorating the store's front windows, working the soda fountain, and keeping customer charge accounts up to date in the ledger. School was OK—my friends were there and my grades were good and the teachers were nice and well-intentioned—but their offerings lacked the zip and zing I craved.

My life out of school was filled with real conversations with adults my boss, Mr. Maxwell, and co-workers, customers, business people who would drop in for a coffee or a Cherry Coke, and salesmen who called on "Mr. Max" who would introduce me as his "Chief Buyer". I also loved to read, and I can still recall lots of the many books I consumed. Communication with my parents and other relatives was comfortable and relevant. I remember family stories, talk about sports, the war in Korea, and the lyrics of Hank Williams' tunes. By no means had I figured out exactly who I was, but I felt secure in the knowledge that I mattered and that adults trusted and respected me. On reflection I realize how very blessed and protected that period of my life was and how different it was from so many of the kids I knew then as well as today. How much it matters to have clear, unfettered communication between interested adults and young adolescents!

But that was me and also then the 1950s. Today the cultural distance between adults and young adolescents seems especially large. Yet, I know that every young person still longs for adult relationships built on genuine interest and mutual respect. Each young person is confronting perplexing issues and dealing with urgent questions, conflicting priorities, unsteady expectations, unadulterated joys, and a complex of apprehensions and aspirations just as we did. What we have in common is that the primary challenge of growing up remains the same as what we faced in our time: becoming the very best one can be. There's no doubt how valuable supportive adults can be.

But this is a very different time, and the pressures and temptations youngsters face are considerably different and more consequential than what we knew. In many ways they do know much more than we did about what it means to be 13. Thus, before we can tell them the important things we know and believe, we must learn from them the actualities of their 13 year old world. We must first become very skillful at listening.

Authentic talk between young adolescents and nurturing, responsible adults is eminently valuable. When that talk is about matters of substance and is connected to kids' lives, it can become a powerful influence on their developing judgment and subsequent decisions. Middle level educators' initiatives to integrate curriculum studies reflect their understanding that far more meaningful learning occurs when students' questions, ideas, and perceptions are integrated with teachers' goals and teaching objectives. When kids

disclose their perceptions and speculations, it is because they see our interest as genuine. In turn they're much more likely to take us and our values seriously. For teachers and parents, true fulfillment lies in the realization that they are genuinely trusted by their children.

Sometimes there is an initial awkwardness for both generations in getting started on real conversation the kind one has with a trusted peer. As the older generation, however, there are some initiatives we can take to help cultivate a better quality of communication. That is what this piece is about.

Tell me about yourself

Often the most immediate problem that faces adults is finding a way to get into meaningful conversations with young adolescents. Countless interviews over the years have taught me that a simple invitation to "tell me about yourself" works well. They choose what they are willing to talk about, and that very action assures that they are in charge of where the conversation goes. Often they will respond with some version of, "What do you want to know?" I always counter with simply, "Just tell me about yourself." After all, the goal is to establish real communication. Real talk precedes and encourages real trust.

In my experience young adolescents tend to talk about themselves in three ways. For one, they usually comment about things they like to do ("I like to listen to music, read, hang out with my friends,") and/or things they do well ("I'm a good speller, a fast runner, a good snowboarder"). Often that description invites further inquiry, "Tell me about snowboarding." It has been interesting to me to see how such examples provide further self-definition, and sometimes the follow-up turns into rich discussion, especially when the youngster knows more than the adult. Since the focus is on having youngsters teach us about themselves, it is imperative for us to go where they want to take the conversation, even if we aren't particularly interested in his or her taste in music or proficiency in riding a snowboard. In terms of earnestly trying to get to know another person, this informal approach to building credible conversation is no different from what one does when seeking good communication with another adult.

A second way young adolescents often respond to the invitation to talk about themselves is in terms of things they have: a 10 speed bike, a baseball card collection, a pet, a Tommy Hilfiger sweater. Such connections between oneself and one's possessions should not be equated with materialism, although it may later prove to be an indicator of such a value. It has been very common in my experience for youngsters to talk comfortably about things they have. They will sometimes refer to siblings or other family members or a best friend. Again, this is a cue for us to follow with, "Tell me (more) about your tarantula/bike/sister." By and large, younger kids of 10, 11, and 12 may find it easier to talk about things they have than the abstraction of "personal identity."

As the communication grows over time into conversations that are credulous and reflect confidence, young adolescents often talk about themselves in a third way that comes closer to existential awareness. The realization that "I am who I am" may be reflected in safe statements such as "I'm a Yankees fan," but these may also grow into more parochial self-definitions such as, "I'm opposed to nuclear arms" or "I'm a vegetarian." Much of the substantial social and psychological change that occurs during these years is a transition from relatively simplistic thought about who one is to the considerably greater complexities of recognizing one's fuller uniqueness, individuality, and ties with family and others that constitute identity and character. Such realizations can lead to increasing engagement in talk with trusted others, including adults. This is also an area where the quality of communication with parents is so urgent. When such connections between adolescents and their parents or other adult authority figures thrive, kids exhibit a much stronger

internal locus of control, i.e., they make decisions and exercise judgment based on personal standards learned from significant adults in their lives. They become personally stronger and are less vulnerable to indiscriminate peer pressure.

Matters of interest

An infinite number of topics and issues are on the minds of contemporary young adolescents. We can anticipate some of those conversational possibilities, so it is worthwhile to contemplate the shared social context as a source of possibilities. For example, the scoutmaster assumes a youngster's interest in being successful in scouting and can naturally invite conversation about "your thoughts about merit badges." Similarly, a coach can ask, "What about the Red Sox this year?" Getting into conversation around a mutual interest is generally less difficult than starting from scratch.

Music is almost always a good entree to conversation. Most young adolescents have preferences for types of music or genre and performers. Don't be surprised if you find that your own favorites even if they include the Grateful Dead or Rolling Stones are passé. I have enjoyed ongoing dialogue with adolescents about their musical preferences, and I am certain that those conversations have served as a path to other talk about matters of considerably greater consequence.

There are numerous topics youngsters write about at school, and sometimes those may become a basis of conversation. An eighth grader recently told me about a paper she had written in which she compared the structure of music to that of a house. Given my limited understanding of the structure of music, I can't judge how well her concept worked. However, I was captivated by the thought, precision, and enthusiasm of her explanation. I asked her to "tell me about other things you're writing or thinking of writing," and our talk intensified. We were both genuinely interested, and I already look forward to our next encounter.

A selection of topics of substance that kids have usually thought about and which they may be willing to discuss with adults includes:

Of course, it would be imprudent to abruptly initiate conversation on any of these topics without having previously built a credible interpersonal relationship. But most of these are real issues in the contemporary lives of youth, and they are within a sphere of present and eventual decision-making that begs for careful analysis and responsible personal resolution. There is arguably nothing of greater concern to parents than the choices and decisions their children will make at this critical transition stage of life.

Self-Knowledge

To the extent that it is possible to generalize about adult society, it appears to have ruled that kids' primary responsibility is to be successful at school. High grades, high test scores, and academic honors are the indicators of success that most adults seem to trust. Likewise, we celebrate athletic achievements. We are particularly good at affirming youngsters' accomplishments at the extreme, and such achievements naturally lead us to engage those kids in dialogue about what they have accomplished. However, do not be surprised if such a high achiever prefers to talk about other things; they are often but not always disposed to elaborate their conquests. Further, for every exceptional achiever, there are numerous less celebrated, even overlooked or ignored kids. And they matter, too. So our initiative should be to go into one-to-one conversations with a completely open mind. I have learned over the years that first impressions are more influenced by my own expectations than by the actuality of the young person I am engaging.

Young adolescents know they are changing. They have to make many adjustments as they move from childhood toward adulthood and confront physical, emotional, and social changes. They speculate a lot privately about what is going on. Some of them are afraid of it all, and self-confidence is especially vulnerable. Some of the questions they think about and which can provoke helpful discussion with trusted adults follow:

What do I know about ...

- myself as a learner?
- my special abilities and talents?
- what is excellent work?
- how I can produce excellence?
- how to organize my learning?
- what is difficult for me to learn? to do?
- how I can get help? give help?
- most effective ways for me to learn?
- teaching that helps me learn?
- teaching that doesn't work for me?
- working alone? working with others?
- how I can become more successful?
- how I am growing? changing? improving?

A century and more ago most young adolescents were not in school; universal schooling is a relatively recent invention, and specialized schooling for this age group is even more recent. Kids worked on farms and in factories and shops, and we know they were often grievously exploited because they could work long hours for little pay without rebelling against adult authority. Leaders of that time responded to that form of child abuse with laws to protect them, and that was without doubt the right thing to do. However, it did not come without some loss. As children spend more and more of their time in school and other activities provided for their age group, they have less opportunity to interact with adults, working and talking together. In reflecting on my own early adolescence almost fifty years ago, I recognize that my daily interactions with adults had inestimable impact on my developing values and self-confidence. That is one of the reasons why I believe I was so privileged in growing up, and it is the chief reason why I advocate now for adults to engage youth in real talk about what it means to be their age. Only through their telling and our listening for understanding can we presume to know what it means to be 13 or 14 or 12 or 11 or 10. And our youth very much need our understanding and advocacy.

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