

# Understanding and Appreciating the Wonder Years

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Growing Up Forgotten, thus Joan Lipsitz entitled her landmark study and captured the major reality revealed by her research. Subtitled, A Review of Research and Programs Concerning Early Adolescence, this 1977 publication was instrumental in bringing recognition to early adolescence as a distinct stage of human development. While our language limited the classification of human to infants, children, adolescents, and adults, the years of transition between childhood and full adolescence comprise a unique stage, one not well served by our society and its institutions. In fact, these years have not been seen as constituting an important period at all. Lipsitz' study documented the limited research, attention, and advocacy focused on young adolescents. The beliefs generally held about them have been largely negative and are more myths than realities. Gradually, however, in the last two decades society has come to acknowledge this stage of life as a period that warrants special attention. The booming middle school movement is focused on providing an appropriate educational program for 10-15 year olds.

## The Central Importance of Early Adolescence

Young adolescents do not just get bigger; distinctively different bodies emerge from these growing years. More extensive physical and personal changes now occur than at any other time of life. While the physical changes are the most obvious, profound changes are taking place in mental, social, emotional, and moral development.

The dramatic physical changes do not occur at the same time or at the same rate. The fact that girls mature a year and a half to two years ahead of boys is widely recognized, but the tremendous variation in the rate and timing of the developmental processes of both boys and girls is not so well known. Some boys have achieved puberty before some girls have started. And what one child accomplishes in growth in 18 months may take up to three or more years in another. As a result, a seventh grade class is likely to include men, women, and children. It is virtually impossible for young adolescents to keep their chronological age in conformity with their social age, physical age, intellectual age, and/or social/sexual age. The priorities of young adolescents tend to be on their social and physical development, a fact many teachers unwisely ignore.

Of all the types and kinds of development that occur during these early adolescent years, one kind is of particularly critical importance, yet it has seldom been recognized. No other age level is of more importance to the future of individuals, and, literally, to that of society; because these are the years when youngsters crystallize their beliefs about themselves and firm up their self-concepts, their philosophies of life, and their values - the things that are the ultimate determinants of their behavior. And having left these formative years, individuals change very, very little in significant ways in values and standards. Alfred North Whitehead proclaimed that these are the years "during which the lines of character are graven." Albert Schweitzer also considered that "The most important years in life are those between nine and fourteen. This is the time to plant the seeds of knowledge in the mind—afterwards it is too late. This is the time to acquaint the young with the great spirits of mankind." More recently the early adolescent years have been viewed as the second and last chance to influence youth, to set their direction for the future. In light of this reality, the case for declaring the early adolescent years as the most important period of life is clear.

## The Positive Potential of Early Adolescence

The statistics concerning youth crime, teenage pregnancy, and other forms of aberrant behavior are indeed frightening. The media have given ample play to reports of such conditions. As a result we have overlooked the fact that the vast majority of young adolescents do not smoke, drink, engage in sex, or take drugs. They sing in church choirs, visit the elderly, are active in 4-H clubs, and otherwise act responsibly both in school and out. They move through "the perils of puberty" smoothly with little of the "storm and stress" once attributed to this period of transition.

Young adolescents are a wondrous group, eager, enthusiastic, curious, adventuresome, full of life, fresh, and refreshing. They are genuine and do not shine in borrowed plumes. Their honesty is often disarming. They have a sense of humor, albeit one that is sometimes a bit weird. We should celebrate this stage of endless discovery during which youth come of age. Their capacities for thinking and reflecting are unfolding. Their outward behavior may belie the seriousness of their inner thoughts, but those who work closely with these young people know of their concern for the less fortunate, the environment, and other national problems. They worry about nuclear war, HIV, family disintegration, and moral issues. Their penchant for service is expressed in such things as can-a-thons, service learning projects, and campaigns to save the whales. They seek heroes and heroines, individuals of character and conscience, ones whose examples can be emulated. This is not the time for adults to abdicate their critically important guidance role, yet this is too often what happens as adults assume that the peer group takes over.

## **Education - A Family and Community Affair**

"The great American dream is universal education. The great American tragedy is that education is confused with schooling. "This statement, made long ago by William Graham Sumner, points to a truth that bears serious consideration. In recent times we have tended to narrow our understanding of the word education to what takes place in school, formal education. We have as a result isolated the school from other educational enterprises. Schooling is actually a relatively recent addition to the activities of civilized man. It is interesting to note the statement made in the Northwest Ordinance of 1778: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools AND the means of education shall forever be encouraged." (emphasis added)

We have exalted formal education and heaped upon it tremendous, even excessive responsibilities. Education goes on before and after school as well as in school. (In fact, much of school time is spent countering the education youths get in the classrooms of the community.) Education, inevitably and properly, is a family and community affair, a collective responsibility of school, home, and community. Whenever one side of that triangle fails, a child's education is shortchanged in a manner for which neither of the other sides can compensate.

The most important teachers one ever has are one's parents. In addition, every citizen, by his or her behavior, "teaches" someone something. School teachers, although formally trained as such, can never by themselves successfully educate youth for effective living in today's world. Adult models and informal instructors operating outside the classroom must share in the responsibility of educating youth. Such "teaching" does not call for specialized training. It only requires a sensitivity to the lessons children learn in home and community activities. In these experiences it is hoped that they will require positive attitudes and standards of behavior that will support formal education in the school. The curriculum of the home, it could be said, is a chief determinant of success in the curriculum of the school. Deficiencies in students' attitudes about learning are more the problem than deficiencies in their abilities. Education Secretary Richard Riley recently made this statement:

Thirty years of research shows that when family and community members are directly involved in education, children achieve better grades and higher test scores, have much higher reading comprehension, graduate at higher rates, are more likely to enroll in higher education, and are better behaved.

Improving the performance of our schools requires improving the quality of life outside of school. Our view of education must encompass that broader concept. Formal schooling is an increasingly important factor in achieving a satisfying and productive life, but without the active support of informal schooling it will be insufficient. The education of our youth is America's biggest and most important job. It calls for the active participation of all.

## **Building Schools for Young Adolescents**

As family and community come to understand better young adolescents, support for the schools will increase. This will enhance the likelihood that the school will be able to fulfill its primary responsibility for intellectual development and achievement. The middle school movement has sought to create educational institutions that recognize all we know about 10-15 year olds and design programs accordingly. This calls for developing the skills of critical thinking and problem solving along with continued emphasis on increased competence in reading, writing, and speaking. The mastery by all students of mathematical and scientific concepts in keeping with the demands of today's world requires more than simple arithmetic and basic biology. Varied instructional strategies are being introduced to accommodate diverse learning styles, levels of mental maturation, and the range of students' prior achievement.

Middle level educators seek to involve students in the entire teaching/learning enterprise in lieu of the passive learning so prominent in the past. Students are challenged and motivated to learn when they are participants in educational activities rather than mere compliant followers of others' directions. As students assume increased responsibility for their learning, they are able to evaluate their own progress. Through exploratory and enrichment activities they are able to identify their interests and aptitudes.

Teaching in the middle school is especially difficult and demanding. Given the nature of young adolescents, middle level educators inevitably are involved in more than the acquisition of information. They must be cognizant of varied levels of development, existing attitudes, diverse cultures, and give sufficient attention to the non-cognitive aspects of student growth in order that the cognitive aspects can be achieved successfully.

While the middle school movement in the last three decades has achieved remarkable success in developing schools that challenge and educate fully this unique group of students, much remains to be done.

## **Key Generalizations About Young Adolescents**

Based on recent research and analysis concerning this age group the following generalizations can serve as guideposts for deciding on ways that young adolescents might be served better by school, home, and community.

- Early adolescence is a distinctive developmental stage of life.
- The general public has limited understanding of these 10-15 year olds.
- The accelerated physical and personal development that occurs during this period is the greatest in the human life cycle and is marked by great variance in both the timing and rate of growth.

- These are the years during which each individual forms his/her adult personality, basic values, and attitudes—those things that determine one's behavior.
- They reach physical maturity at an earlier age than their grandparents and they acquire apparent sophistication earlier than in previous generations.
- They seek autonomy and independence.
- They are by nature explorers, curious and adventuresome.
- They have intellectual capacities seldom tapped by traditional schooling.
- They learn best through interaction and activity rather than by listening.
- They seek interaction with adults and opportunities to engage in activities that have inherent value.
- Their physical and social development become priorities.
- They are sensitive, vulnerable, and emotional.
- They are open to influence by the significant others in their lives.
- A significant portion of today's teenage population is alienated from society.

## Conclusion

All adults should be advocates for young adolescents, ready, willing, and able to capitalize on the positive possibilities of students. Adults should be sensitive to the enduring importance of the experiences youth undergo during these formative years and fully conscious of the influence they have as examples.

The Month of the Young Adolescent will provide never before available opportunities to achieve that goal. Information about 10 to 15 year olds will be widely distributed. Suggestions for parents and other adults on how to be supportive of early adolescent development will be available. Through the efforts of the many collaborating agencies and organizations, this celebration of young adolescents will be carried to constituencies far beyond those tied primarily to schools. The Month of the Young Adolescent could make a real difference in America's future. Join the celebration.

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