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The Baffling Eyes of Youth

Fred M. Taylor, M.D.*

During the last fifteen years I have had to learn, with the wise guidance of my wife, the kind of things now embodied in the recommendations of your Parents League. But innumerable families have done the same thing, for they take child-rearing seriously and evolve what might be a list of "recommendations" simply into a way of life. The movement of the Parents League indicates an increasing willingness to face up to the serious consequences of unnatural social practices widespread in childhood and try to manage in an educative way the attitude that have served to create teenage problems and that interfere with the development of responsible parenthood.

WHAT IS NEW

Most parents want to do what is right for their adolescents, and most adolescents want to please their parents. Most parents want to rear their offspring decently, and most offspring are grateful to parents who rear them properly. There is nothing new about this sort of relationship nor is there anything new about this relationship occasionally becoming upset and out-of-kilter. What is new is the number of parents who do not have confidence in themselves as parents. What is new is the number of parents who are confused and afraid to do anything wrong regarding their child and adolescence. What is new is the number of parents who rely not on themselves individually to make decisions, but follow the advice of experts on family and children and educational processes and organizations outside the home. Thus, they avoid thinking on their own and do not assume responsibility for what they do or chose.

What is new are the parents who rear children and adolescents not for what they know is right but for what their neighbors and society feel is right.

The result is that children and adolescents fail to grow up. They fail to mature psychologically. They become Frankensteinianorganized, over-grouped and over-socialized, seldom allowed reasonable opportunities to make their own mistakes, to get their feelings hurt, and to feel rejected. Their parents miss the main purpose of childhood and adolescence, as well as the meaning of adult maturity and happiness. Social practices become social idolatry and girls and boys must either engage in them or be out of the running entirely. The question is not one of either/or, the question is what is morally right and naturally right. What may be considered right for one family and adolescent may not necessarily be the best for another; what parents with honest conviction really feel toward a child and adolescent is the final determination.

Healthy, average 10 and 12 year olds are not by nature interested in dances and parties, or in club activities with the opposite sex. They do what is interesting to them, but not to adults. Boys still hunt turtles and collect snakes, and are involved in hobbies and athletic activities. Both sexes establish their own peer groups and their own pace in doing social things.

The sophomorish 15 year old boy, at times, not unlike a barbarian, amused by the coarsest kind of humor and often totally uninterested in anything, "talks about girls, but never to them." Furthermore, boys often are described as "just horrible" and as "pests." They are restless and uneasy with girls, and they upset parties and dances by throwing food and decorations, and occasionally wreck the very interior of a house. As one boy put it, "Every time I throw a spitball some stupid girl has to stick her head right in the way."

My point is this—why impose on young persons the kind of social attitudes that for most are basically unnatural, thereby creating problems instead of preventing them.

WHAT YOU WANT

I believe in and acknowledge candidly the aims of the Parents League. But what We Believe (a booklet of recommendations of the Parents League of Houston, Box 35554, Houston, Texas) can be a source of tension. Unlike regulations and codes which often are distasteful, the formula of We Believe can deceive. It is quite easy to lay down a list of recommendations for the behavior of someone else's children. They often are guides who help greatly but they also may provide no satisfaction for individual parents facing personal decisions and family conflict. And for parents to choose and decide what to do solely on the basis of a rule book is to court failure. Parents must realize that parenthood is a continuous series of individual choices and personal decisions. It depends upon what kind of offspring you want, not what your society wants, nor your neighbors, but what you want. You have to in-

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Innumerable parents, however, do not lead lively, exciting and challenging lives. It may look that way to neighbors, school, and Church, and perhaps even to the Parents League. Some parents may not smoke, swear, or drink. They do not even beat each other. But they may be pervaded by distrust and doubt. They not only fear to deny their young but they constantly choose and decide for them. They plan their time, and organize their ideas. But planned childhood denies children and adolescents certain natural and important personal prerogatives—the right to be oneself and the right to think and know.

Persons acquainted with the problems of family living agree that family health is not measured by such a superficial sign as absence of divorce and separation, but by its maturity—its maturity of attitudes and its social and moral responsibilities. One of the most serious problems today in family living is not a nagging grandparent, nor sexual incompatibility, financial income, fear of nuclear annihilation, and so on, but emotional immaturity. Immaturity is an elusive word, and it has many meanings. In summation, it really means childishness. A man and a woman still children in heart and mind do not make a good husband and wife. A man without a clear idea of what he is and what he should become does not make a good father. A woman without a sense of maternal responsibility and without control of behavior dominated by selfishness does not make a good mother.

The casualties of our society, indeed of any society, are the young people—average, normal, healthy boys and girls—who fail to cope successfully with their childhood, or who simply learn to reflect the monotony of the doubt, fear, and distrust of confused parents. The casualties are the boys and girls who rebel not against high levels of standard but against the attitudes of parents who continue to tie them to childhood. As they try to solve their problem they often rebel not against the parents primarily but against school and society, or they often find themselves in situations which they have neither experience nor maturity of judgment to handle. We label this as immature behavior, or rebellious behavior even delinquent behavior. But it is a conformity to the example set and practiced by immature elders. These young normal adults in turn prove incapable of contributing to the own maturity, or later to any improvement of their own family.

Today there is an extraordinary need for parents to think critically about the pattern of social action they encourage and allow their children to follow. There is a need to reconsider the wisdom of the late Daniel A. Lord, S.J., "If I had my life to live over again, I'd work for peace instead of young people themselves. For if adults are right, boys and girls will be better still." If adults are right—these key words would settle everything for children and adult kids. Therefore, if there has evolved a growing need for a movement such as the Parents League, let us admit that adults are not right. Let us also admit that it perhaps is not too late for innumerable adults to grasp the business of parenthood, as well as the art of living and of rearing offspring. Young people need to be prepared for adulthood and to earn a living, but also for marriage and parenthood. Boys need to learn how to grow from boyhood into manhood, but also into husbands and fathers. Girls need to learn how to grow from childhood into womanhood, but also into wives and mothers. Nevertheless, persons who choose not to marry should not be made to feel that something is wrong with them. Thus, boys and girls also need to learn that there is nothing unnatural and abnormal about not marrying, nor about choosing the life of a school teacher, or of a religious vocation, or of a scientist, and whether by choice or not, remaining unmarried.

Although parents need to think on what they expect of their child, and what they would like him to be, a young person is entitled to discover and know the range of choice. This does not mean he does exactly as he pleases, nor does it mean his maturity is measured by how soon he does adult things. In Switzerland a child is told over and over again, "You must make something of yourself in this life." A son is expected to study, work, play and prepare himself for a useful career. The same holds true in a domestic way for a daughter. The Swiss honor their school teachers; they consider them important and pay them well. Swiss primary schools are coeducational but the parents do not believe a son should start dating girls until age 16. Nor do they believe in a society where sex is more important than work, and this is imposed upon the children. Young persons are banned from motion picture theaters until age 16. But for innocent entertainment of the Walt Disney kind, the age requirement is lowered to 12. In addition, young persons do not obtain a driver's license, or even a minor bicycle license, until they are at least 18. The Swiss believe that an automobile is a deterrent in a young person's educational progress, and this development of a skill, or of a profession and vocation. The automobile also is considered an unnecessary aid to premature dating and promiscuity. Indeed, driving tests in Switzerland are said to be extremely difficult, purposely so, and few young people possess a driver's license before they are 19. However advantageous the foregoing restrictions, young people in our country have the advantage of a choice greater than in Switzerland, and they have an opportunity to cross boundaries of familiar and provincial social and economic groups.

**HOW WILL THEY GO**

Young men and women are human beings: they have a will that is free, a mind that thinks, and a soul that is immortal. Adolescence is a time of growing—a time of learning and a time of maturing; a time of creating and a time of developing; a time of developing spiritually, and a time of nurturing individuality. It is a time to develop character. Therefore, it is a time for restriction and limitation. For in the context of individuality and of trust and respect young people need limits—they expect them, they want them. They are even known to invent restrictions that parents overlook making. But restriction does not mean constant supervision, nor organization of their time, nor does limitation mean putting them in a cage to watch them all the time. This is not the point—"the important question is: How will they go?" Will they go with a firm sense of continuing, growing maturity and of self-discipline and self-denial? Will they go with an awareness not only of their individual selves but also of the limitless individuality of man? Will they go with a sense of respect for people with a different color of skin, and with a different way of religious worship? How will they go? Will they go as trained animals—masters of social graces, but deficient in the qualities essential for manhood and womanhood? Or will they go with a sense of anger, revenge, and guilt and act out against their parents in August, 1964
SUBSTITUTE ADULTHOODS

Young persons reared without respect as individual human beings and without a sense of belonging to a family, or simply unwanted and detested by sick, selfish parents do not mature into adulthood. They plunge into a wide variety of substitute adult-family, or simply unwanted and detestable as individual human beings and unlicensed sexual activities, both heterosexual and homosexual. They drift into gang life and choose easy power rather than the discipline of the career. They prefer easy money and buying cars to the more arduous task of studying and going to school. They marry and become parents but do not grow up to become mothers and fathers.

Young persons indulged too much but protected too little become social and moral cripples. Yet innumerable parents see no potential harm in the social activities they organize for children between 10 and 14; they proclaim the naive belief that their offspring would never do anything wrong. Were this so there would today be a greater number of mature adults and parents. Were this so there would be nothing but geniuses and saints. Were this so there would not be innumerable teen-agers in blanket parties on the beach and in pornographic orgies. These practices are not of the civilized and educated, but of the primitive and ill-bred. Unless children are taught their potential for good, they cannot be expected to learn it well in the future. A young man or a young woman not reared to learn before marriage the virtue of chastity, and denied there by the opportunity to learn self-denial and self-control, will not learn it in marriage.

A young man or woman not reared to learn the difference between pleasure and happiness will not learn it in adulthood. Yet the virtue that deny impulse and control instinct, and allow a person to develop character and to face efficiently and morally the demands of daily living, and accept life as a challenge and not as a burden or a threat, are essential not only in sexual matters, but also in social, marital, and business matters.

Adolescents need to struggle with the problems of right and wrong, and good and evil. They need some way to bring about self-control to their new-found drives, impulses, and passions. But their limits of self-control and self-denial, as well as the own sex standards and attitudes toward sex are shaped by the attitudes and standards around them. No data, however, has ever confirmed the notion that free sexual expression and tribal ways of living are beneficial in our civilization. 

Literate advocates of such practices serve to further the kind of naive attitudes that characterize the jabbed and primitive and that result in the need for aroused parents to organize Parents Leagues. Therefore, it is repeatedly necessary to remind ourselves that sexual frustration and psychological conflict are themselves not necessarily bad. Persons frustrated and in psychological conflict are often in this state because of basic psychological and psychosexual problems.

The matter of teen-age pregnancy, for example, often is not just an accident of teen-age ignorance, nor an urge to adventure, and seldom is a love—but a deliberate psychological attempt to shame and embarrass one of both parents. It is a way of getting even with a mother who may be overly dominating, or with a father who is especially disliked, or hated, or more importantly with parents who never really cared anyway. Psychological problems also account in part for the phenomena of premature steady dating—a practice often insisted on, or encouraged, by American mothers who are confused, sick, and vicarious. Worse still are the parents who not only encourage teen-agers to use, but even provide them with, a variety of contraceptive materials.

In the absence of actual, or very possible, courtship in the anticipation of marriage, there is no justification for steady dating. Early dating and steady dating without intent to marry serve to slow down the maturing process. Emotional growth is stunted and development of individual responsibility is retarded, yet the age of marriage is accelerated. Either early dating or steady dating is not the way to learn healthy social skills. Nor is it the way to increase one's popularity, nor one's love of the opposite partner. It serves instead to increase immaturity and individual selfishness—the very opposite of the kind of maturity and love necessary for a successful marriage and parenthood, and the very opposite of the kind of ingredient needed for popularity. Indeed, steady dating very often is the admission ticket to cheapness, to exploitation, and finally to marital failure. These are the children and young adults who are society's casualties. In large measure, however great their material and social advantages, they become the de-taxed and the deprived.

RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD

Parents turn away from social, moral and spiritual values only serve to spread and increase their numbers. Parents who blame schools, churches, and communities, federal government and child welfare programs, atomic weapons and automation miss the whole point. Were schools to uphold the Parents' League's recommendations and inculcate the kind of social and moral values essential to a school's social patterns, such support would be enthusiastically accepted. But until individual parents, even with Parents Leagues' recommendations and a school's social practices, are willing to take personal responsibility for their own children—not only for their social and dating practices but also for the movies they see, the schools they attend, and the streets on which they drive, along with their attitudes toward police officers and minority groups—no young person no matter how well reared will really be safe.

A way of responsible parenthood that "lays no claim to fame" is well described by Ebaugh; it is as old as time and very easy to understand:

The parent must be a person himself, with ideas, goals, moods, desires, and aversions all his own. He must live within the context of what he is and consider this so important that he cannot live vicariously through his children.

As a person in his own right, the parent can guide his child, . . .

The parent establishes authority. There is no room in this vale of tears for any more uncertainty than necessary.

Social adjustment is taught, and whether we wish to admit it or not it is taught almost exclusively by parents who are the most enduring influence in a child's life. . . . [A child] should know the limits, and know they will be enforced.

As he grows, each new set of limits should be well-defined. He has a right to the security of being able to "tote up the odds" if he plans to transgress against parental authority, and of knowing that his initiative and individuality will be respected within established limits. If he thinks his parents are uncertain about right and wrong, why should he trust them any more than he trusts his best friend or his own momentary impulse? And if he doesn't trust his parents to...
control him until he can control himself, his security lies shattered at his feet.

children demand varying degrees of privacy in their inner lives and activities.

the problems children solve within themselves build individuality, the hurts they "live through" alone build internal controls; the resolutions they discuss with their friends aid the emancipation process and increase their relationship skills. . . . they will come to you as parents when the problems seem insurmountable . . .

The parent should remember that seeing the mentor of reality, and responsible for him as a vile traitor .... the parent is . . .

agreement with it, even if the child pillories the resolutions they discuss with themselves build individuality; the hurts . . .

problems seem insurmountable .. ..

Within the limits of practicality and the requirements of education, and home training, let him develop his own interests and use his own time. A fabulous modern round of dancing lessons, sports

lessons, camps, parties, and other planned recreational activities leaves most children limp with bewilderment and frustration. . . . Lying on one's back, staring at the sky, doing nothing — absolutely, totally nothing — is one of these activities. There must be a reason why time and childhood go together.

I should like, in closing my remarks, to quote Carl Sandburg

One thing I know deep out of my time youth when lighted and alive an gives a sporting chance is strong for struggle and not afraid of any trials or unfortunes or dangers of deaths.

What shall be the course of society and civilization across the next hundred years?

For the answers read if you can the strange and baffling eyes of youth.

Yes, for the answer, read, if you can, the strange and baffling eyes of youth.

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