

*A PROPOSAL TO REINVENT
THE CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENCE
AND
CREATE A COMMUNITY YOUTH CHARTER*

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DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

Youth Problems

Delinquency, dropouts, peer pressure, runaways, STDs, drug and alcohol abuse, unemployment, gangs, teenage mothers and fathers, suicide, identity, rites of passage, violence, alternative rock and rap music, vocational choice, anti-social behavior, alienation...

The above issues are associated with the term "adolescence." These problems and the solutions to them concern all who care about youth and our future. Many are confounded by the problems of youth and are left with the insight of John B. Priestly: "Like its politicians and its wars, society has the teenagers it deserves" as their only answer.

A Search for Structure

Although many in American society agree that puberty is the beginning of adolescence, there is no clear agreement as to when adolescence ends. According to youth specialist, Francis J. Ianni (1989), this typical disagreement causes conflict and confusion in youth because the home, school, work, and other societal institutions present different standards of adulthood and different ways to attain it. Thus, Mr. Ianni has coined the term "New Lost Generation" to describe today's youth in search for structure in a changing world.

Related Issues: Pre-adolescence and Post-adolescence

Today many pre-adolescents are pressured, for many reasons (television, advertising, peer pressure, poverty), to grow up too soon and move on to adolescence and adulthood without a childhood.

On the other side, a new post-adolescence has emerged as a result of prolonged dependency, educational needs, and a mixture of a psychological adulthood with an un-readiness to become involved in conventional occupational and family life (Goleman, 1988).

Questions Arise

These two phenomena have stretched the age span of "adolescence." This spreading of the youth culture and values has affected adults who have taken on the notions of perpetual youth: looking and acting young, freedom, material plenty, and of romance that will never have to settle down. How will youth mature with no adults around? As youth have become more like adults and adults more like youth, how will this affect adolescence as a distinct life stage? How will the young and adults too, find their bearings in this emerging system?

PROPOSED METHOD OF SOLUTION

As the 20th century is ending, many in the American society are taking a new look at past concepts, ideas, inventions, and issues. The automobile, energy sources, schooling, worker/management relations, government, and the environment are examples of ideas and issues being investigated, redefined, or reinvented. This new outburst of reviewing for change has occurred as a result of a natural progression of experience, testing, evaluating, and changing. This progress towards improving and perfecting can and should be applied to the concept of adolescence

Over a 14 month period a group of youth, parents, educators, youth-workers, social scientists, business and religious leaders will:

1. Discuss and evaluate the-present concept of adolescence
2. Understand how and why this concept was created
3. Look into the relationship of the concept to past and present youth problems
4. Create a new concept of adolescence for the 21st century
5. Formalize this new concept in the form of a local, Community Youth Charter.

Project Time Table

The calendar of events should be scheduled around dates available for youth to attend. The first half of the scheduled 8 week ends will be used for informing and the discussion of the issues presented in the first three proposed solution steps above.

The last four weekends will be used to rethink the concept of adolescence and the creation of the Community Youth Charter.

- Weekend 1 June Fri./Sat
- Weekend 2 July Fri./Sat.
- Weekend 3 August Thurs./Fri./Sat.
- Weekend 4 November Fri./Sat. Thanksgiving break
- Weekend 5 January Thurs./Fri./Sat. Semester break
- Weekend 6 April Thurs./Fri./Sat. Spring break
- Weekend 7 June Thurs./Fri./Sat.
- Weekend 8 August Thurs./Fri./Sat.

RATIONALE FOR SOLUTION

As stated in the solution section of this proposal, "...progress towards improving and perfecting can and should be applied to the concept of adolescence." If an individual looks into the history and meaning of the word adolescence, that person will find that the concept has not always existed in the American culture. That person will discover that many noted writers of youth history such as Frank Musgrove (1964), John Gillis (1974), Joseph Kett (1977), and Arlene Skolnick (1993) have argued that adolescence was an *invention*. According to these writers, the invention of adolescence as a stage of life occurred in all societies which became advanced technological societies. This does not mean there were no young people in the past who were between the ages of 12-20, but only recently did a *biological process of maturation become the basis for the social definition of an entire age group*.

To speak of the "invention of adolescence" rather than the *discovery* of adolescence, according to Kett, underscores a related point: adolescence was essentially a *concept imposed on youth rather than an empirical assessment of the way in which young people actually behaved*.

In a nutshell, this is the foundation of the rationale of this proposal: **if adolescence was invented, it can be reinvented.**

The History of the Invention of Adolescence in America (Kett, 1977)

In 1904, G. Stanley Hall's two-volume *Adolescence* made him the best known prophet of a newly conceived importance regarding adolescence—the period between childhood and adulthood. Hall felt a prolonged period of adolescence as necessary to protect youth from the pressures of adulthood and to ensure a safe passage into it. What surrounded his ideas were pre-twentieth century demographic changes, religious and moral judgments, parental and educational concerns, and the so-called child saving movement. All of these changes, ideas, and concerns were taking place at the same of Hall's study and contributed to the creation and the popularization of adolescence.

Factors

Demographics (1880-1900) Urbanization, caused by the movement from small towns to the cities and the increased immigration from abroad--combined with advanced industrialization, displaced young people from the labor market. The birthrate fell steadily; parents had

fewer children and had them closer together. Thus, families found at a certain point, all their children were in their teens. The small urban family gradually became more typical than the large brood of children on a farm. As health and nutrition improved, more people lived longer and more parents lived to see their children become adolescents.

Religious and Moral Influences According to the new argument for an adolescence of prolonged dependency, society and its institutions would shepherd its teenagers through the tempestuous years preceding adulthood.

This would protect youth from the vices of urban life and over-rapid social and sexual development which would lead to sin, degradation and possibly insanity. Historian Kett argues *that moral values, often masquerading as psychological laws, were at the root of the invention of adolescence in America.*

Educational Concerns Perhaps the most important concurrence of the invention of the adolescent was the American high school. The often private 19th century academies gave way to the new public high school and the number of 14 to 17 year old students increased. Job training shifted from the work site to the classroom. As well, the high schools helped the new adolescent "psychology" become as much a method for controlling the behavior, education, and extra-curricular activities of young people as it was a tool of description and explanation. As they desired to create noiseless, conforming, passive, and ingenuous students, the American high school promoted the paradox that youth must be separated from the real world adults know and in which they function. By trying to keep maturing youth ignorant of this world of conflict and contradiction, educators sought to promote a better transition to adulthood.

The Child Saving Movement Scholars have documented that before the 15th century, children and youth did not have a protective status. Only in the 15th and 16th centuries did the idea develop that youth should be treated in a special way in order to prepare them morally for adulthood. Religious influences were an important reason for this shift. In America, a second major shift occurred that would influence the creation of the adolescent's social and legal status. Instead of seeing youth problems as a sin—as in the past—these reformers viewed it as a result of family and community disruptions and disorder. Progressives enable child-labor laws, the juvenile court system, reform schools, and compulsory education. This era was also the social catalyst for after school programs and organizations for boys/girls in the form of "the Y" which in 1910 influenced the scouting movement.

CONCLUSIONS

A Commentary: The Invention of Adolescence in America (Kett, 1977)

According to Frank Musgrove (1964), adolescence was a European “invention” indirectly brought about by James Watt’s invention of the modern steam engine in 1765. The engine also helped bring about the Industrial Revolution. The steam engine lessened the need for the physical labor of mainly strong boys and young men, putting them out of work and into a less important role in society.

The American invention occurred indirectly as well. At the turn of the century, such factors as urbanization, industrialization, progressive politics, religion, and the social sciences were present, ready to mix, affect, and be affected by changes in society. Yet, adolescence and the later results of this creation did not arise from a clear and consistent social movement, rather this unprecedented phenomenon arose from a coalition of different types of people with different and often conflicting motives—all of which have been previously mentioned.

Despite these differences, between 1900 and 1920 both the concepts and the institutions which have dominated youth work took shape. G. Stanley Hall's views on adolescence were important, yet they were just one element in the process. The facts, issues, people, and ideas described seemed to have stumbled coincidentally on to Hall's study of adolescence. As a consequence, the popularity of this study accentuated the Victorian removal of youth from premature contacts with adults. Twentieth-century middle-class youth would have to stay in school even longer, would enter the job market even later, and would be far less likely than youth of the past to work or live with adults outside their family. Like those earlier youth, they would associate with peers, but now only in special youth institutions managed by adult professionals. Athletics, student activities, and casual play were to fit into an adult-regulated system that would discourage spontaneity, autonomy, and self-formation.

Finally, the invented concept of adolescence not only discouraged adult contacts, but adult concerns such as issues of religion, vocation, and intellectual life. This was a change from what had been expected of youth before. The common thread that ran through the invention of the adolescent was the hostility to precocity, to adult behavior in youth. According to Kett, the origin of this antagonism was the earlier American desire to shield young people from contamination by the

alien culture of big cities, immigrants, and the working-class youth who, in many instances, had to avoid “adolescence” to survive socially and economically.

As this acquired institutional form, the long standing fear of precocity changed its shape. The avoidance of precocity no longer meant merely the removal of intellectual pressures and social stimulants from the everyday experiences of youth, but the creation of a self-contained world in which prolonged immaturity could sustain itself. *The perfection of adolescence did not mean maturity. Adolescence became less a time to prepare for adulthood than an attempt to delay or prevent it.*

However, a self-contained world can become self-educated as well, shaping its own culture and mores. Here the strategy of separation from control by adults ran into a wall. The new ideology of adolescence had made possible a new youth community--a teenage subculture characterized by its own language, fashion, music, and values--with a powerful influence that could surpass any outside influence on its member's lives. The invention of the adolescent remains one of the profound legacies of American life.

No sooner had the inventors of adolescence converged than they parted company, going off in separate directions and to new interests. The institutions they created in the early 20th century have survived to become an enduring form of custody for youth long after the ideas and impulses which created them were laid to rest; and, they have left our modern society, as well as its youth, holding the bag.

A COMMUNITY YOUTH CHARTER

The final step of this proposal/project is the development of a Community Youth Charter. After the concept of adolescence has been reviewed and refined, the creation of a set of believable and attainable expectations and standards from the community to guide the movement from child to adult status will be implemented.

Adolescence is a demanding period for youth and the demands come from many directions. Most of these demands come from their own physical, mental and emotional development, from family and peers, and from the environment and institutional settings of the community such as schools.

This project will emphasize the influence of the community setting. Adolescence is made up of a changing complex of physiological, emotional, and social processes which are not necessarily synchronized to chronological sequences or biological development. As well, *the changes that occur during adolescence are not coordinated by any socially agreed upon agency or "institution."*

This is fertile ground for conflict. Many conflicts do arise from the unevenness of social and biological maturation, or from inner turmoil and intra-psychic problems and the influences of family versus the peer group. Yet new and tentative relationships to a variety of institutional worlds, which alternately compete for primacy in authority and protest adolescent discrepancies, also play a major role in a youth's search for identity and structure.

The *Community Youth Charter* concept belongs to Francis J. Ianni (1989). He argues that there is no "caring community"--a supportive network of social institutions working together to create a common community-based locus for socialization. One result has been the fragmentation of the adolescent experience, as the various social environments function as independent, sometimes isolated, and at times competitive or even conflicting settings for youth. He states, "It is this community-level dissonance, and the disaffection which develops because of it, rather than any nationwide rebelliousness toward adult society, that exacerbates the conflicts of the adolescent identity crisis into the 'adolescent problems' we hear so much about." What he is saying is although the so-called youth subculture/peer groups play a major role in youth development and attitudes, *teenagers look to local communities and its adult members for the major support and guidance they need to mature.*

The problems teenagers face is indeed refining a self-concept. However, as far as the community is concerned, for youth it is where to look for personal guidelines that will allow an adolescent to satisfactorily relate the sense of "self" with the social structure they must negotiate. Ianni notes, "Congeniality among their values and clarity and consistency in their guidance are essential to the adolescent, who is *engaged in a search for structure*, a set of believable and attainable expectations and standards from the community to guide the movement from child to adult status."

The creation of a Community Youth Charter--a set of believable/attainable community expectations and standards--has the possibility to do the following:

1. Offer hope that communities accept their local responsibility to treat adolescence as a period in which the child, becoming adult, requires a stable, consistent environment in which to grow and develop.
2. Show how a community can, given the will, develop and proclaim a structure through which youth can move from dependence to independence, from ego-centrism of early adolescence to the social competence of the young adult, and from definitions of "self" provided by surrounding social contexts to those arising from within.
3. Over time, it can become a personal possession of the maturing adolescent as it serves to organize the emerging "self" of adulthood.
4. Can serve as the community's "mind" for thinking about, imagining, and planning the adolescent transformation by imposing some cultural form on otherwise incomprehensible material and providing a structure within which various roles and relationships can be experienced and evaluated by a congruent set of standards.
5. Provide a stable, but broad enough base to give room to explore relationships at increasing distances from the self-perceptions worked out in childhood: at the same time, provide role models and standards for mastery.
6. Provide a basis for integration so that teenagers have more opportunity to explore identities and think longer about decisions with less need to commit early.
7. Will eliminate the conflict and confusion that occurs when the home, the school, the workplace, and other institutions present different standards of adulthood, at different times, and have different means to attain it.

8. Will emphasize identity formation not length of adolescence, integrating this transitional status into the life course as a time in which teenagers seek personhood rather than independence.
9. Will make explicit what the community expects of youth and why, as well as what the youth expect from the community.
10. Provide a basis for reducing the unnecessary uncertainty which affects adult's definition and expectations as well as the behaviors of adolescents.
11. Provide a legitimate avenue for youth participation and input, involving youth in planning the future in which they will live. Encouraging young people to participate in defining the community's Youth Charter will also facilitate their movement by accepting the definitions of who they should be, as offered by themselves and a variety of others, to gaining a sense of control over their own individual identities. If youth are helped and encouraged to explore and experiment, this liberating potential for self-development and self-management can and should provide for a healthy diversity in developing adult personalities.
12. Will act as youth's declaration of independence and the constitution for a new transitional state, which should provide an unhurried migration from childhood to adulthood as an integral part of the life journey—a rite of passage "ceremony" and community/self recognition.
13. Will show adolescents their community cares.

POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF A COMMUNITY CHARTER ON YOUTH PROBLEMS

Delinquency (Trojanowicz & Morash, 1987)

In considering ideas about crime prevention, one finding stands out: Crime is predominantly a youthful phenomenon. It is concentrated so heavily in the adolescent and early adult years that it is obviously the function of a crucial phase in the life cycle. Thus, if that crucial phase could be affected in such a way that crime played a less important part, delinquency might be highly reduced.

Alienation and Identity: Providing youth a stake in conformity

The primary goal of prevention of adolescent crime, it would seem in the present transitional period, should be to develop a legitimate identity among youth and a belief in the importance of conforming to social rules. *To seek only the avoidance of a deviant identity is to approach prevention negatively.* The more important task is to insure youth will acquire a productive, satisfying, and legitimate self-concept. Lacking institutional-constraints of a rewarding kind, *youth have not acquired a stake in conformity.* A Youth Charter representing a coherent community plan for youth to attain adulthood can be/describe that stake in conformity. In support of that notion, consider the general principles that might govern the acquisition of such a concept:

1. A legitimate identity among youth is most likely to occur if they develop a sense of competence, a sense of usefulness, a sense of belonging, and a sense they have the power to affect their own destiny, and define their own reality through conventional means. This can give youth a stake in conformity via the Youth Charter which will state what the community expects and how to achieve adulthood.
2. The cultivation in adolescence of a legitimate identity and a stake in conformity requires that they be provided with socially acceptable, responsible, and personally gratifying roles. Such roles can be delineated through a Community Youth Charter and have the effect of creating a firm attachment to the aims, values, and norms of the basic institutions and of reducing the probability of criminal involvement.

Many governmental, labor, and business/corporate entities can provide youth opportunities to affect public policy, determine programs and labor strategies, and sit on boards. Our public schools and classrooms can provide such "gratifying roles" through student voice/student government activities. All children must acquire the skills, knowledge, and civic values needed to perpetuate American democracy. Educators

can actively engage youth as citizens in their own schools via morning class meetings, weekly whole-school meetings, and viable student councils. By the time students reach high school, they can be prepared to be involved in education decisions concerning rules, curriculum, assessment rubrics, school climate, school rules, scheduling, curriculum, budgeting, and hiring decisions. Preparing high school students to help run their schools prepares them to help run their country.

3. Since social roles are a function of institutional design and process, any strategy of delinquency prevention must address the present state of community disagreement and lack of coordination. Means must be sought by which roles and passageways to adulthood are more clearly defined, by which they are reinforced by significant others, and by which they expand the range of opportunities and responsibilities open to youth. See number 2 on page 12.

The purpose of a Community Youth Charter is to provide a coherent and united plan for youth that will define and realize the stated principles mentioned above. The Youth Charter can provide legitimate roles staged to adulthood, a non-delinquent identity, common expectations and a sense of belonging to a caring community--working with youth through the adolescent period to a defined and shared set of adult aims, norms, and values.

It would appear, therefore, that until ways are found to re-organize that crucial phase in the life cycle called "adolescence," giving youth a greater stake in conformity defined through a Community Youth Charter, society will continue to bear the exorbitant costs of juvenile crime.

Gangs

As social beings, humans want to feel important, worthwhile, accepted validated, and regarded. We have needs for loyalty, status, affiliation, family, economic opportunity, pride, fun, choice, and identity. We seek situations where we can test our personal limits and prove ourselves.

One of the main theories concerning gangs states that youth join such groups because gangs fulfill certain needs that the family and society have been unable to meet. The Community Youth Charter proposed here may not meet the needs of all youth that are necessary to prevent gangs; however, an exploration of possible relationships is discussed below.

Most people fill these needs and desires in a normal fashion. Yet, if we

can not find normal means, we will find some way. Youth who do not have their needs met normally may turn to gang membership.

Rites of Passage

Youth gangs require new members to go through rituals much like normal rites of passage in tribal societies and in religious rituals such as the Bat/Bar Mitzvah. Going through a gauntlet of gang members, stealing, drinking, having sex or other acts are necessary to prove their bravery, show that they are "down" (loyal) to the group, and most importantly proving they are not children anymore. They may even take on a new identity, moniker, and dress differently. Membership in a gang can fulfill all or most of the above stated common human secondary needs. Since the society, the community and/or the family do not meet these important needs, how can we blame youth? *Perhaps gangs are necessary in a non-caring world.*

What if a Community Youth Charter incorporated in all its suggested pathways to adulthood a common rite of passage—a commonly defined and supported ceremony whereby youth know that from that point on they would be treated differently and be expected to act differently? Old behaviors would be left behind and their journey "on the road to adulthood" would begin. A general rite of passage will give the community support that is lacking so a sense of belonging and other gang-fulfilled needs can be met.

As well, a Community Youth Charter could provide the impetus the community needs to create other viable options to gang membership where youth can test their limits, face their fears, prove themselves, be loyal, feel worthwhile, and meet these all too human needs in a healthier more productive manner.

Along with this approach, the Community Youth Charter must make it very clear that monies spent to fight present gang activity must be relocated fight poverty and improve educational and employment opportunities. A closer relationship among school curriculum, youth participation in decision-making at the high school level, and social justice actions must be demanded. See page 11. Only if the community really cares will any changes be forthcoming or it will have ".....the teenagers it deserves."

Teenage Fathers and Mothers

Most experts agree: given the emphasis our society places on sex, abstinence is simply not realistic. Non-industrial societies do not demand abstinence because they do not demand that youth postpone

adulthood throughout their teenage years. The modern American society, while commercially emphasizing sexuality, desires youth to ignore their sexuality just when this sexuality is growing. The mixed messages American society sends, confuses both youth and adults. This confusion is illustrated by the scenario where a teenage boy in a high school health class is encouraged to use abstinence in his relationships, while at the same time he receives encouragement from society to "get involved" associating sexual activity with being "manly."

The Community Youth Charter provides a rationale and opportunity to rise above the issue of abstinence vs. birth control solutions. A late 1980's National Academy of Science report (Hayes, 1987) noted, "...that self-perception (not self-esteem)--that is, the sense of what and who one is, can be and wants to be—is at the heart of teenagers' sexual decision making." This issue now becomes not "How do I avoid pregnancy?" but "who—and what—am I?" Youth who have clear goals and a positive education, occupational, and family expectations may be less likely to risk a bright future. A clear idea of who they are and a capacity to feel that they can define their own reality and success may empower youth to act more responsibly.

One of the major purposes of a Community Youth Charter is to help confused youth to acquire such an identity. Through community and institutional consensus, the adolescent identity process can be normalized in the Youth Charter's clear expectations, purpose and avenues to adulthood. For example, high schools could begin to encourage youth participation in the decisions that deal with educational, behavioral, and political issues—both inside and outside the classroom/school. Youth who have a real say in student government can graduate with the feeling that they are responsible and able to control future successes. See page 11.

To summarize: The despair and sense of worthlessness, which can occur during adolescence, can be changed through true democratic participation in school and community decision making. Additionally, *as adolescents search for structure*, providing clear, multiple avenues to adulthood can challenge the present lack of opportunities and provide compelling alternatives to irresponsible sexual behavior.

Dropouts

Many youth have felt and many still feel that by/when they drop out of school they cease being a child--skipping adolescence--and somehow entering adulthood. Historically, there is some truth in this. In the past when the period between puberty and adult life was shorter,

youth could "leave" adolescence by leaving home, getting married, joining a church or apprenticeship/employment opportunities. Could dropping out of school be a sign youth are tired of being or treated like adolescents?

However, with no real options to a prolonged adolescence and associated dependency, what are today's young adults to do? To some, being labeled a dropout must be worth it. Perhaps a Youth Charter must contain a specific pathway to adulthood for those who wish to "drop out." This would be a community agreed upon option for those who have no desire or need of an extended adolescence or traditional schooling or for those who—if given the opportunity—could graduate from high school at 15 or 16. At least youth would have it better than they do now—doing it alone, being labeled, having to take minimum wage work or no employment, changing jobs, living at home, or looking to delinquency and crime to get money.

Peer Pressure

According to Leslie S. Kaplan (1987) peer pressure is defined as, "Groups offer social roles for interacting with others, thereby providing confused young people with acceptable guides for action and a sense of security." Kaplan's definition sounds very much like the purpose of a Community Youth Charter—to provide confused youth (and a confused community) with acceptable guides for action and a sense of security for youth on their way to adulthood. A community supported Youth Charter could provide viable options for youth by creating positive peer pressure--fulfilling the same needs for social rules, guides for action, and a sense of security through community-based support.

Ianni notes that contrary to ideas that teens look toward peers and away from the adult community for guidance, he has found important congruence between the world view of teenagers and those of the adults in their lives. The extensive separation of youth from adult society and the resulting increased peer influence could be challenged since *youth do look to adults as role models for guidance*.

To summarize: Peer pressure and peer groups are not the problem as much as it is the adult community. Although the lessons learned in peer interactions are a necessary preparation for adult social relations, it is the wider community and its institutions which must meet their social obligations and provide young citizens a variety of pathways from childhood to adulthood through a Community Youth Charter.

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