

The Young Person of Fourteen - source unknown

George Bernard Shaw's complaint concerning the profligacy involved in wasting youth on young people is especially pertinent in the case of the fourteen-year-old. He has matured to the point of experiencing many of the drives and emotions, insights and understandings of the adult. Yet he is still close enough to childhood that, in a healthy family situation, he is protected by fairly well-defined boundaries. Parents continue to carry the burden of responsibility for keeping him within personal and interpersonal limits. From the point of view of Mr. Shaw's fellow adults this combination should produce a never-never land of dreaming dreams as wide as the horizon with little necessity of compressing the dreams into a casement of reality. Perhaps the fourteen-year-old, however, is more realistic than the envious adults. Just the necessity of taming his new sensations and integrating them into his personality is as large a burden of responsibility as he can carry. Without the strong support of understanding parents the tenuous process of working toward self-understanding and self-organization could become agonizing and even overwhelming.

His Physical Self

Physical development has striking consequences in other areas of the fourteen-year-old's personality. His nervous system has developed rapidly and is so close to maturity that he can become intoxicated with his mental abilities and sensational potentialities. Physical sexual development carries concomitants in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fields. Girls are still well ahead of boys in physical development. They weigh more and are taller. Their bodies, although lacking some of the soft roundness associated with the mature female body, are developing in a way that points to the necessity of fourteen's adjusting to new roles. Most girls have accepted menstruation and are becoming interested in the more complex aspects of reproduction.

While boys are still embroiled in the rapid transition from childhood to adolescence, they have crossed the watershed, as indicated by the slight abatement of appetites that, at thirteen, seemed insatiable. They continue to show marked growth in both weight and height, with much of their increase in weight coming from the growth of their muscles. Because of the development of muscles, boys double their strength between the ages of 12 and 16. (Children's Bureau Publication, *The Adolescent in Your Family*, page 17) Heart, lungs, and bone structure are developing rapidly, and perhaps unevenly, as may be attested by the boys who insist on forcing everyone to shiver by opening windows in the middle of winter. Too often both girls and boys display poor posture. Skin disorders may be a source of embarrassment to them.

His Emotional Self

The emotional drives that were latent in the pre-teen years are aroused and given such potency with the budding of sexual maturity that the thirteen-year-old often becomes strikingly introspective. By fourteen, however, he usually has strengthened his defenses to the point of being ready to begin experimentation in directing his emotions into overt channels. He increasingly asserts independence of parental authority, yet paradoxically he is quite happy for his parents to be in the background to rescue him when he begins to stray beyond the limits of his own self-discipline. Unless there is a residue of unresolved conflicts stored up from early years, he is pleased to abide by parental guidance although he goes through the motions of rejecting it. Usually the approved mode of action is followed under the guise of having been independently arrived at by personal judgment on the teenager's part.

"There is great comfort," Thornton Wilder has written, "in knowing that those who love you love you enough to take the responsibility for marking out the permissible." (*The Ides of March*, New York: Harper, 1948, p. 194) The fourteen-year-old desperately needs such help. His drives are so new to him that he must have some freedom to use the trial and error method. On the other hand, unless adults set boundaries for him he may, in his naivete, injure himself and others. If he is given either too much or too little freedom, the result for him may be guilty feelings that stunt his emotional growth and leave him unprepared for the next normal stage of development. He needs to have adults explain the reasons for the boundaries and the consequences involved in wandering beyond them.

Because his own self-structuring is not firm, he may appear to be inconsistent. Periods of assuming large chunks of responsibility may end suddenly with emotional outbursts and resolve into a period of intense animosity directed toward parents. He usually is as anxious to get through this period as is the parent. If he is given this reassurance he will confide increasingly with the parent concerning problems that concern him. In fact, a happy give-and-take between the fourteen-year-old and his parents often develops.

Girls are beyond the giggling stage with boys and are interested in developing an active social life. Boys of fourteen, however, usually force the girls to turn to older male friends since they still lag behind in emotional and physical development.

His Intellectual Self

The whole realm of abstractions seems suddenly to take form for a youngster around his fourteenth year. Overnight he appears to gain insight into words and the fascinating variety of concepts that they enable him to manipulate. He begins consciously to build his active vocabulary and he delights in placing ideas in new juxtapositions. The resulting insights often lead him to rather bizarre conclusions that may appear ludicrous to adults. Encouragement in his experimentations with ideas, however, can lead to habits of creativity that will enrich his personality for the remainder of his life.

The wide range of interests of the fourteen-year-old can bring him to explore numerous avenues of ability in which he may have leadership capacities. In fact, he may rush from interest to interest with such a voracious appetite that he may overtax himself if he does not have steadying adult guidance. Given a steadying hand, however, he may in adult years look back to this period as the one that started him toward his career.

Often during the twelfth and thirteenth years, the young person will slump in his interest in school. If his attitude has not improved by his fourteenth year, he may be giving evidence that he is embroiled in an emotional tangle with which he needs help.

His Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are especially important in the development of the fourteen-year-old since they are assisting him in the process of forming a self-image. He is keenly sensitive to the reactions of his peers, and he sorely needs the support of his parents in building his self-respect.

Often he appears to approach himself in an academic manner, desiring to discuss quite objectively his abilities and his inadequacies. He is not, however, as dispassionate as he acts. He takes the evaluation of others as being an accurate mirror of himself, and he is pleased or disappointed in what the mirror tells him.

The long and inane telephone conversations of this age group have become an open joke. Despite their ludicrous side, the conversations are a serious part of his experimentations at interpersonal relationships and of his learning to act as an adult. Everywhere he goes he is conscious of himself in relationship to other people. And the inane conversations are not inane at all. They assist him to establish his status in a status-conscious world.

A friendly relationship with significant adults are important to him also. They provide an image for him to identify himself with and to aim toward. They also offer him a foil against which he can test his own strength and against which he can temper his own judgments.

Implications for Christian Education

The fact that in some churches boys and girls are confirmed either before or during the fourteenth year means that they must be helped to assume new roles in the congregation. The blossoming intellectual capacities of the fourteen-year-old, furthermore, provides a tremendous opportunity to which the church, unfortunately is not always alert. If it can demonstrate to him that there are fascinating insights to be gained in the field of religion, the church can start him on a process of spiritual investigation that will be life-long. If, on the other hand, it refuses him the opportunity to be unorthodox, it can smother creative insights that could enrich both the growing individual and the church.

The church has the responsibility of assisting the fourteen-year-old in his effort at developing an acceptable self-image by providing admirable adult leaders with whom he can identify himself and who will assist him in his relationship to God. They can guide him toward a new understanding of himself as the selfish sinner rebelling against God and as the justified person receiving the grace of God and living in a loving relationship with Him.

The new insights of the fourteen-year-old, coupled with his newly experienced emotions, make Christian vocation of increasing pertinence to him. He can see in a fresh way the relationship between all areas of his life and the call of God to him. Special attention should be given to his sex role in the light of Christian vocation.