

The Young Person of Twelve - source unknown

Twelve is the threshold of adolescence - a period which will carry into the twenties and will be marked by many dramatic changes in development. As twelve-year-olds slide gradually into this stage, one is impressed as much by their differences as by their similarities. Adolescence is a time of sudden spurts of physical and emotional maturing in which one child may, at least temporarily, leave other of his age mates far behind. After a period of slow growth, a child amazes himself and us by growing several inches in a single year, perhaps. By and large, it's the progress toward adulthood that can't be seen and measured in inches or pounds or growth of vocabulary that is surprising and mysterious. This growth often shows up in flashes. A boy reveals the stuff he is made of by standing up for a friend under hard conditions. When her mother falls sick, a girl takes over responsibilities no one guessed she was capable of carrying. By voluntarily shining his shoes a boy lets us into the secret of his awakening interest in girls; as a girl shows her interest in boys by coming down to breakfast with lipstick on. (Children's Bureau Publications, *The Adolescent in Your Family*, p. 7)

Gesell feels that twelve is a time of particular significance in this process of reaching toward adulthood, for it is a stage which "brings into being an assembly of behavior traits which clearly foreshadow adult maturity." (*Youth*, p. 109) This is not so much a matter of outright achievement in the twelfth year as it is an indication of a "capacity to mature."

His Physical Self

Nowhere does the diversity among twelve-year-olds become more apparent than in their rate of physical growth. Many of the girls are taller and heavier than the boys which gives their social gatherings a strange appearance. Among the boys themselves, however, there is considerable variation. Some are already in the adolescent growth spurt while others are still quite small and childlike in appearance. (cf. *The Adolescent in Your Family*, pp. 17-20)

Girls are usually more than a year ahead of boys in sexual development at this stage. (cf. Garrison and Gray, *Educational Psychology*, p. 43) Frequently the girl's rapid growth occasions concern about the nature of the bodily changes which are occurring.

Although rapid growth may turn him awkward in some respects, the twelve-year-old is actually mastering motor skills which were beyond him at an earlier age. Boys, for instance, have an interest in sports and will work long and hard at trying to become proficient in some sport skill.

Enthusiasm may drive the twelve-year-old to over-exertion in physical activities. His flurries of extreme energy are often followed by periods of fatigue which adults may interpret as laziness. (Gesell, op. cit. p. 110)

His Emotional Self

The degree of physical maturity of the twelve-year-old has considerable relationship to his emotional development. (Kearney, *Elementary School Objectives*, p. 141) Those who are more advanced physically frequently tend to be more mature in their emotional life. All twelves, however, are subject to fluctuations between being very "grownup" and extremely childish, and this swinging of the pendulum between adult and childlike responses is quite understandable. As the twelve-year-old grows, he is forming a new image of himself as a young person, but he is not always ready to comply with the emotional demands of this image with the result that he may retreat at times to what he feels was the greater emotional security of childhood.

Havighurst points out that one of the major developmental tasks which occurs during the adolescent period lies in achieving a masculine or feminine role. (cf. Havighurst, *Human Development and Education*, pp. 115ff) The importance of this is already being felt in the twelfth year, particularly among the girls, although initial attempts at coping with the task are likely to be awkward and ineffective.

His Intellectual Self

One of the most significant advances in the intellectual development of the twelve-year-old is his transition from an interest in the mental cataloguing of concrete facts to an ability to think abstractly. (cf. Havighurst, op. cit., pp. 90-91) While this ability involves a greater use of abstract terms than before, it also extends to the point of seeing the relationships among events and interpreting them. (cf. Russell, *Children's Thinking*, pp. 41, 120ff.)

The twelve-year-old reveals many other educational potentials. He is capable of more prolonged concentration on some project and usually will see a task through to completion but becomes more readily bored with repetition of the same activity. He can now set standards for himself and assumes greater responsibilities. (cf. Kearney, op. cit., p. 65) He generally enjoys

doing things that give him a sense of achievement and self-improvement.

Gesell feels that twelve is a particularly good time for learning because of an eagerness and zeal which pervades everything the child does. He likes to discuss, debate, plan group projects, as well as work on his own to develop basic skills. (*Youth*, p. 106)

His Interpersonal Relationships

The twelve-year-old is evidencing much greater maturity in his interpersonal relationships than he did before. He is able to take many things in stride which would have provoked an explosions a year ago. The smoothing out of his relationships shows up clearly in the family where much of the earlier tension with parents and siblings is beginning to disappear. (cf. Gesell, op. cit., pp. 125-126)

The role of the peer group is becoming exceedingly important in the life of the twelve-year-old. "Whereas it tended to supplement the home and school in middle childhood, in adolescence the peer group often takes priority over these institutions in its demands for the allegiance of its members." (Havighurst, op. cit., p. 111) Indeed many of the most significant social learnings and adjustments during the next few years will occur within this peer group structure.

At the same time the young person has a tendency to admire wholeheartedly some older person who is symbolic for the girl of what is feminine and lovely, and for the boy of what is masculine and strong. These "crushes" are a way in which the twelve-year-old gains a vision of what is desirable and grownup. Frequently he develops his most altruistic attitudes in this way. (cf. Frank and Frank, *Your Adolescent at Home and in School*, pp. 44-45)

Implications for Christian Education

The enthusiasm of the twelve-year-old should be channeled into his church activities as well as his school life. His desire for variety and adventure, his wide range of interests, his increasing capacity for comprehending abstract concepts, his desire to plan projects and to discuss problems, his need for control and firmness, his respect for good teaching - all should be considered in planning for and teaching the twelve-year-old in the church school.

On the whole twelve-year-olds will be co-operative with teachers and will admire those who can achieve the fine balance between respecting them as persons and letting them get the upper hand. The twelve's boisterousness and enthusiasm may carry him too far in the classroom, however, and in such instances he needs a firm, controlling hand.

The wise teacher will use to advantage the readiness of the twelve-year-old to engage in new and challenging ventures when he can use his enthusiasm and energy to advantage.

The growing importance of the group for the twelve-year-old also has its implications for Christian education. The wise leader will try to develop a wholesome group climate within which learning can take place. He will seek to be accepted by the group with which he is working as an understanding and sympathetic adult without attempting to be merely "one of the gang."

Gesell indicates that about this time in life there is an important shifting in the individual's ethical sense. The twelve-year-old is less likely to make ethical decisions spontaneously and is more likely to choose between right and wrong on the basis of considered judgment. (*Youth*, pp. 134-135) If this is true, it means that the Christian educator will be able to go much more deeply into ethical questions than he could with the younger child.

Since he is capable of more abstract and philosophical thinking, the twelve-year-old is likely to be asking probing questions about religion and voicing some sincere doubts. Rather than feeling that these are dangerous signs which must be suppressed, the Christian educator should welcome these questionings as opportunities to guide the learner beyond childish concepts to more mature religious views.