

Important Issues in Dealing with Today's Children & Youth

—Based on observations of juvenile delinquency today—

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Abstract

This paper describes change in today's children and adolescents based on studying qualitative change in aggressiveness of juvenile delinquents. Aggressiveness in children can, as they grow, potentially lead to problematic behavior (e.g. delinquency, bullying, etc.), or can lead to positive self-assertiveness as they advance into young adulthood, depending on the quality of interaction with adults close to them including parents and teachers. Working from this standpoint, I have examined important issues that can be taken up by the adults concerned to ensure sounder growth of children and adolescents.

Discussion

1.

The incidence of extremely childish behavior in young adults has been on the rise in recent years, while there is an increasing tendency for children, on the other hand, "not to act like children." The numbers of children who act in an oddly adult manner are also believed to be climbing. Assuming that this phenomenon reflects changes in today's children and adolescents, we can attribute the cause to qualitative changes in the trait of aggressiveness, as indicated in clinical testing involving several thousand juvenile delinquents.

It should be noted, however, that the essence, or sensitivity, of being a child is something that is never lost. It is precisely because children possess such subtle sensibilities that they are extremely sensitive to the circumstances around them, e.g. related to their parents, school, local community, etc., and they act and express themselves based on what they see. As such, what appears to be change in children and adolescents is, in fact, change in us the adults.

Examining the issue from this angle, it is clear that the currently popular phrase "the turn toward viciousness amongst juvenile delinquents," or "the tendency of youth toward viciousness," should be re-phrased as "youth encouraged to tend toward viciousness." This would prompt a change in adult awareness of youth issues.

From the "intra-psychic" perspective of what is termed by some the "tendency toward viciousness of youth and children," the problem is defined as having to do with the children themselves, and the discussion is reduced to one in which the children are the ones who must undergo "reform." In contrast, by shifting the focus to "interpersonal" relationships between youth and adults, the issue is re-defined, with the solution to be found in the youth-adult relationship. In so doing, the issues that we, as adults, should focus on in resolving the problems of youth are clarified.

However, in shifting the focus to a relational one, we should not ignore the possibility that this could spark a "search for the scapegoat," whether that scapegoat be parents, teachers, society, etc. Hence it should be acknowledged that there is distortion in the child-adult relationship itself, and that therefore there exists a need to "repair" that relationship.

2.

In clinical testing performed on several thousand juvenile delinquents, developments in their aggressive nature stood out amongst changes in character. This revelation holds significance in the context of dealing with today's children and youth, and must be understood if child-adult relations are to be improved.

Carefully examining juvenile delinquency from the postwar period through the present, changes in the nature of aggressiveness become very apparent from a certain point in time—the year 1983—onwards. That

year saw the highest postwar incidence of juvenile delinquency. The perpetrators were mainly 14 and 15-year old junior high school students, with their actions encompassing numerous incidents of what is termed "for fun" delinquency as well as in-school violence.

The defining characteristics of juvenile delinquency during this period, and the words used to refer to it, accurately reflect the situation faced by the children and youth of the time. As it became impossible for children to play outdoors in nature beginning in the 1980s, they turned to stealing items readily available to them simply for entertainment; hence delinquent behavior "just for fun."

During the same period, in-school violence among junior high school students, which had become a social issue, reached a nation-wide peak, followed by a decline in the number of cases of juvenile delinquency by approximately the years 1992-93. On the other hand, masked by the drop in in-school violence and other forms of delinquency, children began to display changes in aggressive behavior as of 1985. A clear example of this is the rise of the phenomena known as "ijime," or bullying, which was recognized as a problem as of 1985.

Aggressiveness or defiance among youths prior to 1985 was generally characterized by tension between the generations or, to put it in more formal terms, as direct resistance to power and authority, as epitomized by the campus strife of the 1970s. The trend was taken up by high school students in the latter half of the 1970s, and by junior high school in the 80s. This type of defiant behavior, known as "oedipal resistance," is both logical and goal-oriented, which means that the reasoning behind such behavior can be expressed by the youth themselves, if only in their own words.

After 1985, however, youthful defiance metamorphosed into "pre-oedipal resistance." Because their defiant behavior cannot be expressed in words or using logical reasoning, such children, unable to express themselves, exhibit extreme frustration. Hence it is characteristic of these frustrated individuals that communication with them is a difficult task.

3.

Such change and distortion of childhood aggressiveness is reflected in a variety of problems of today's youth. It should be noted here, however, that, if channeled properly, the energy behind children's

aggressiveness can be an important factor in developing the qualities necessary to move on to adulthood, i. e. self-assertiveness, positivity, and self-initiative. The dividing line between positive and negative development of aggressiveness in children is clearly described in the words of three scholars, outlined as follows.

It was A. Storr who emphasized most the positive side of aggressiveness in children, encapsulated by his assertion that the issue is whether adults "believe" in the children or not.⁶⁾ H. Kohut, meanwhile, strongly asserts that the secret lies simply in the "sparkle of the eye" of a parent or teacher, i.e. whether or not children are given a sense of hope.²⁾ D.W. Winnicott attributes positive or negative development to whether children are acting in proper accordance with the patterns of dependence appropriate to their stage of growth.⁷⁾ In other words, he asserts that the emergence of aggressiveness is nothing other than shifting patterns of dependency of children on adults. To illustrate still further, the two aspects of aggression and dependence are like the "two sides of a piece of paper."

If, between the ages of zero to five or six years, aggressiveness and dependence are not properly handled, mainly in the relationship with the parent, both factors, the latter key to relationships with other human beings, become distorted. For instance, when an infant less than a year old shows aggressiveness or negative emotion, i.e. in the act of crying or getting angry, parents should be able to read the emotions of the child, checking whether the baby is hungry or feverish, and take proper action without reacting to such negativity. The infant then feels secure in the arms of the parent and, through unconditional dependence, basic trust in others develops. This in turn forms the basis of relationships between people.

Then, during the first rebellious stage of childhood, at the age of three to four years, children experience further growth as they go through a repeated pattern of rejecting their parents. At this stage, the double-sided nature of aggressiveness and dependence is clear. For instance, when toddlers make statements like, "I hate you, Mom," this is an expression of aggression toward the mother characteristic of the first rebellious stage. It is here that parents can attain a keen sense that this behavior is actually dependence more than it is aggressiveness and, acknowledging the dependence that accompanies such aggressiveness, hug the child instead of punishing

them.

I have used the example of the first rebellious period as an illustration of the parent-child relationship, yet the basis of the relationship during the second rebellious stage—that of puberty—is identical to that of the first stage. For adolescents with serious problems or issues, it is particularly important to bring the frustration or impulses that underlie negative actions to the fore, and to put into words the inner confusion such children experience, yet this applies to relationships with all of today's children. In short, it is very clearly the job of adults to effectively communicate with children and adolescents. Yet examining the range of circumstances faced by children today, we see that adult handling of problems is often illogical and neurotic, with only superficial change being sought.

At the same time, it must be mentioned that it is absolutely essential that adults properly scold children when they do something wrong. While not to advocate a blanket rejection of punishment, the issue of whether or not parents are deeply involved in the relationship with their child, and the condition that the child never feels abandoned, is critical.

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