

She's Normal, She's Just Twelve

by

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Several years ago during the holiday season, I was frantically searching for the "perfect" gifts for family members. Somewhat frustrated, I called my niece's mother to obtain her advice on what style of clothing to purchase for my seventh grade niece. She quoted her daughter to me over the phone in the following manner: "I prefer not to have stripes, prints, and absolutely no flowers. The legs should not be too short or long, tight or baggy. And don't get anything that looks 'generic.'" Shaking my head to cure the acute daze, I asked, "What is generic?" I could hear her mother ask, "Aunt Barb wants to know what you mean by 'generic,'" and the inevitable answer in the background, "Anything that Barb wears that looks like an old person." Keeping in mind that I was only 27 at the time, I immediately recognized a cold war developing. At that point I was contemplating sending the Blue Bird of Happiness over my niece's house rather than the traditional Santa Claus, but decided to further inquire, "What is her problem?" Her mother's reply is forever engraved in the cells of my brain, "SHE'S NORMAL, SHE'S JUST TWELVE."

Those very words have provided the impetus for my lifelong search in understanding the adolescent. Adolescence historically has been recognized as a difficult period in child development. As early as 300 years before the birth of Christ, Aristotle described this age group as "passionate, irascible and apt to be carried away by their impulses." While some modern psychologists have characterized the adolescent time period as stressful and full of parental turmoil, research shows that such negative characteristics have been greatly exaggerated.

It is logical to define this growth period as one of major change in terms of physical, sexual and psychological maturation, but also a period of investigation and exploration. Young people within this age group are caught between the maternal strings of *childhood* and the independence of successful young *adulthood*, not knowing in which category they belong because they don't really belong in either. Thus, the term adolescent was invented.

Historically, Indiana has been a leader in implementing successful educational programs for this age group. The country's first junior high school opened in Richmond, Indiana prior to 1920. For over half of the twentieth century, the junior high school system included grades 7, 8 and often grade 9. As the age span for maturation shifted to the upper elementary grades, educators soon realized a need for an educational setting to be totally exclusive of both the traditional high school and elementary settings. Thus, the middle school evolved. The philosophical foundation for the middle school setting is to create an educational environment that promotes the identity of this age group, self-esteem of the individual student and active exploration of learning. Curricula should be broad to include the basics, technological, health based, fine arts and practical arts areas for infinite exploration. Facilities should be designed to house both current programs and future programs mandated by children and community needs.

Because this time period is a major turning point in the adolescents' perceptions of the future and success in that future, it is important to provide education and home environments that meet the demands of the group.

A teacher friend was writing on the board when she heard a child blurt out, "This thing is driving me nuts." As she turned, she saw a sixth grade young lady lay her bra across the top of her desk. So much for the psychologists who define this as a stressful period of time. Below are some suggested strategies for both educators and parents.

Strategies for Educators

Provide for laboratory experiences.

Practice methods that encourage "scavenger hunt" type exploration for infinite data gathering.

Encourage creativity and individualism.

Encourage student input.

Listen and care.

Strategies for Parents

Take the time to explain "why." Children are very intelligent and inquisitive. Knowing why encourages a proper value system.

Assign tasks within the home for which the child is responsible. Explain the proper way to accomplish those tasks.

Demonstrate how to organize time and work to become efficient and quality oriented.

Allow your child to have input and take part in decision processes.

Give praise.

Love and hug.