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BOOK CHAPTER

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From childhood to adolescence

Young children are cute and delightful—or they are having temper tantrums. Primary school children are eager and enthusiastic, gaining mastery of their world, defiant and difficult at times but still mainly wanting to please, responding to suggestions and requirements. Then comes adolescence, and the rules of engagement change. Young adolescents aged 10 to 14 years are still legally children, and parents/carers are responsible for them and their behaviour. However, these young people begin to see themselves as separate, independent individuals. Friendships become more intense, and the peer group becomes increasingly significant. External issues can be vital: clothes, hairstyle, make-up, activities, behaviour inside or outside school all come to signify to which group the young person belongs. Home and the family become less and less important.

Internally, of course, this is not true. The young person's significant relationships remain the parents/carers, siblings, extended family—grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles—even though these must be denied most of the time as other friendships become increasingly significant. But the home and

family can provide a sanctuary when outside relationships fracture and re-form. However, the family members may not appreciate their central position, as the young person argues and fights over most things. Contempt, sarcasm, and resentment at any restrictions escalate; mostly, nothing is good enough. This behaviour is, of course, a reflection of the young person's internal state—feeling inadequate, a failure, not good enough, frightened, uncertain.

Adolescent turmoil

What is unnerving for the young person and his/her family are the physical changes and also the changes in energy levels. At times the young person is full of energy, lively, restless, ready to go, to do whatever; at other times he/she feels exhausted, washed out, and very low. This lability, and the fluctuating mood that goes with it, is ordinary “adolescent turmoil”, but it is hard to adjust to the fluctuations. The young person talks about feeling out of control or all over the place. However, parents/carers can feel that the young person is in charge and doing exactly what he/she wants and that they are the ones who are out of control and all over the place. Each blames the other, and they find it hard to recognize that they are mirroring each other.

Younger adolescents repeat the struggles of the preschool child: they have temper outbursts, find it hard to wait when they want something, and expect to be the centre of the universe and that the family will revolve around them. This leads to conflicts with parents and siblings, and discipline becomes a problem; the young adolescent may be a large, quite strong person who can no longer be made to behave or be reasonable. There are issues that emerged early on, but the management of anger (in particular, being assertive but not aggressive) is

a huge problem for both the young person and the parents. Young people are emerging with their own identity, their own ideas. They have passionate beliefs but also have to tolerate others with different ideas that may be opposite to their own. Now that their bodies are bigger and stronger, they may be physically as powerful as their parents, and they have to manage to control their rage and fury when frustrated or when their wishes are blocked. Emotional storms are inevitable.

Intergenerational conflict seems unavoidable: young people need to kick against the standards and attitudes of the older generation, their appearance, how they live their lives. This conflict helps to define the young person, and to find his/her place in the intergenerational cycle, but it is not easy to bear. Parents can find themselves provoked—some of the comments can be very personal and hurtful. Parents may be hurt or angry, and the conflict can then escalate; verbal violence may spill over into physical violence unless the parents manage to restrain themselves. Some young people can be verbally and then physically violent to a parent, and this is very distressing. The young person needs, when calmer, to be advised that this is not acceptable; strategies must be proposed to avert rage when it becomes explosive. Other parents do not confront a difficult young person, preferring to back down, for a quiet life. Or if the rage is directed at one parent, then it is all too easy for the other parent to allow this to happen, to support and collude with the attacks and gain some satisfaction from being the “good” parent. This can, at the time, lead to emotional closeness, but in the long run it damages the parents’ relationship and leads to the young person feeling lost, confused, and dismissive of both parents.

Emerging sexuality

Underlying some of this tension is the emerging sexuality. Adolescents are struggling to confirm their sexual identity, their gender, their sexual orientation. They face the questions: Do I want relationships with the same sex, the opposite sex, or both, and what age of partner do I want? Do I feel excited by individuals older than me (parental generation), the same age as me, or younger than me? So, consciously or unconsciously, the young person may have sexual feelings for mother or father, aunts or uncles, teachers, members of their peer group, older pupils in school, or younger children. While these feelings are all part of adolescence, how they are managed by the young person and his/her parents or carers is crucial. Thoughts and feelings may be intense, but the young person usually is left to struggle with them as wishes and desires. If the object of desire—a teacher or aunt or uncle, for example—reciprocates and responds to these intense emotions, then the young person is not only aroused but may be physically involved. This can lead to intense pressure and need for future such gratification; if this or a similar relationship is repeated, then it is as though the need and the person desired become fixed in the young person's mind. Many young people have intense longings and needs for a range of individuals; as long as these remain as longings, then there is the freedom to change. Once the relationship has regularly become a physical relationship, exploring other relationships may be problematic, particularly if this would mean a relationship change from male to female or vice versa.

Younger adolescents experiment initially in their minds, imagining what any sexual contact would be like; then there is physical experimentation, starting with petting and heavy petting and followed by more intimate physical contact. If the object of sexual interest is an adult with his/her own sexual issues and needs, then the relationship can escalate

and become consuming so that the period of exploration is short-circuited, leading to a situation that is exciting but can increasingly become stuck. Young people need to allow themselves to find—and need to be allowed to find—the relationships that feel right for them.

Facing difference and conflicts

The young person has to accomplish the major developmental task of coming to terms with difference. While the peer group is imposing and demanding a rigid conformity and sameness, in reality the young person is faced with the complexity of difference, which he/she will attempt to deny. Male or female may be an obvious difference but at times can be hard to distinguish, and some young people present as neutral or androgynous. But there are many other differences: racial and ethnic; class, and all that goes with it; culture; views of the world; material standards; physical differences, which may be genetic but may also follow illness or disability. Religious differences may be limited to religious observances and holy days but may also involve fundamentally different views of the world, clothes, the role of women, diet; they all represent powerful allegiances. And all these impact on young people as they seek to arrive at their own identity—racial, sexual, and spiritual.

Young adolescents have two further important conflicts to face, the first being that of life and death. They still feel they have infinite time, that their whole life is before them, but death has become a possibility—pets die, grandparents die—and as they become more independent they are required to be more aware of danger. They begin to appreciate that life is fragile, that uncontrolled anger and hatred can lead to catastrophe, but also that there are external events, accidents, natural disasters that cannot always be avoided. Their parents' protection can achieve only so much.

As well as the recognition of death, that life will end, young people become aware of sanity and madness. They are aware that one can lose control during an angry outburst and that this is very frightening. Another sort of losing control can be even more scary—namely, losing one’s mind, one’s reason: seeing, hearing, thinking things that others do not. Becoming weird, doing strange things, is terrifying, and then one will be conspicuous, stand out, and not fit in.

* * *

All the above issues are discussed in more detail in this book—the pain and the struggle as well as the excitement, the fun, and the challenge of them for the young persons and for their parents and family.

The young person’s internal world

Young people have a vast amount of knowledge to acquire in school, and they also have to develop social skills, join a peer group, form relationships, renegotiate their position in the family, and develop their own identity as a person with his/her own thoughts, feelings, intellectual capacities, and sexual, racial, and spiritual identity. The foundations for this emotional and psychic work are built on significant attachments and relationships. This is thinking about the internal world. They have taken inside their minds, into their internal world, the repeated experiences they have had with their parents, and these coalesce into the “internalized parental object” or attachment figure. The two parents (or carers) are internalized, and they have a relationship in the young person’s mind in addition to their relationship in the external world.

Children have hundreds of thousands of small and large interactions with their parents. Those parents who are reasonably reliable and consistent become a “secure base” in

the child's mind, and this is the bedrock of the child's later emotional development. At the same time, a representation of each parent and each significant person is formed in the child's mind, in his/her internal world. However, this internal representation—or internal object—of “mother” or “father” is not a direct replica of the external person. The internal representation is a combination of the external interactions, but it is also shaped by the child's emotional responses, thoughts, and feelings about the person. The internal parent thus differs from the external reality that is the parent. For example, if, when the young person was a small child, a parent suffered from depression and then recovered, the parent might now be calm and thoughtful. But the internal parent in the mind of the young person would still be flat and low and irritable, just as the parent had been during the time he/she was depressed. There is then a discrepancy between the parent in the young person's mind and the actual here-and-now parent. Over time and with patience on the part of the parent, the internal parent will slowly change, but the young person may continue at times to expect the earlier response that was the familiar one, rather than how the parent currently feels and reacts.