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Parent Handbook for Surviving Adolescence

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PARENT HANDBOOK FOR SURVIVING ADOLESCENCE

A Project Report
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty
Central Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by
Kay Fuson
July, 1990

PARENT HANDBOOK FOR SURVIVING ADOLESCENCE

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The purpose of this project was to gather information for a parent handbook for Sterling Middle School, which spoke to the following issues: 1) general characteristics, 2) parenting skills, 3) communication, 4) study skills, 5) parent concerns, and 6) community resources. These six areas were determined with input from parents after looking at parent handbooks from middle schools across the state. Research was done in the area of adolescent development and material was compiled for a comprehensive handbook for parents of adolescents.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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CHAPTER I

Background of the Study

Introduction

Parents of middle school age students often feel a need for more information about the changes their young adolescents are going through. This period of time in a child's life can be a very difficult one (George & Lawrence, 1982). Parents are sometimes at a loss as to how they can help their children move into adulthood with the least amount of pain. This handbook was designed to give parents a resource in which they could find that information.

Problem

This project came into being because of the need expressed by a group of parents at Sterling Middle School, East Wenatchee, Washington, to have a resource with accurate information about the middle school child. They wanted confirmation that the behaviors they were seeing in their own children were normal and could be documented by the observations of researchers. They also wanted a document that would give them suggestions on how to deal with their adolescent children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gather information for a parent handbook for Sterling Middle School, which spoke to the following issues: 1) general characteristics, 2) parenting skills, 3) communication, 4) study skills, 5) parent concerns, and 6) community resources. These six areas were determined with input from parents after looking at other parent handbooks from middle schools across the state.

Limitations

The limitations of the project were two-fold. First, the issues dealt with in the handbook were the suggestions of a small group of parents at a single middle school. Secondly, very few middle schools had handbooks specifically designed for parents.

Definition of Terms

Middle School. For the purpose of this study, middle level school shall refer to a school which houses any of the grades five through nine, in any combination.

Adolescent. One who is in the period of life from puberty to maturity, specifically a child age 10-15 who is in the beginning and middle stages of puberty.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Related Literature

Introduction

The organization of this chapter will follow a similar sequence outlined in the handbook. The areas to be covered are: 1) characteristics, including physical, intellectual, and social/emotional, 2) parenting, 3) communication, 4) study skills, and 5) parent concerns. The section on community resources was a separate issue and did not require literature research.

Characteristics

The physical, intellectual, and emotional changes that a child goes through during the period we call adolescence is more rapid than at any time except infancy (Hornbeck, 1989). Physical development often makes children awkward at this age. Rapid growth in the brain allows for more advanced levels of thinking. Social emotional development is often polarized causing mood swings and what may seem a dual personality (George & Lawrence, 1982).

According to the Carnegie Report, these changes take place at an average of 3.5 years earlier now than they did 150 years ago. However, physical maturity is sometimes more

advanced than intellectual and emotional development, resulting in emotionally and intellectually immature 10-12 year olds with sexual choices to make that will affect their entire life (Hornbeck, 1989).

Physical Characteristics

The physical changes of the body during adolescence are more dramatic than at any stage of life except fetal development and during the first two years of life (George & Lawrence, 1982). Children at this age are often preoccupied with their physical selves. They tend to talk about their new strengths and changing appearance. "At no other time in life are feelings about the self (self-esteem) so closely tied to feelings about the body (body image)" (Silverman, 1986, p. 19). George and Lawrence (1982) said, "Considering the magnitude of the drama, one wonders how the adolescents manage to think about anything but the physical self..." (p. 26).

Awkwardness at this age may be due to uneven growth. Adolescents are often self-conscious about their bodies and feel uncoordinated and disproportionate, with large hands and feet that have grown before the rest of the body (Tanner, 1962). According to Elizabeth Einstein (1979), the fatigue during adolescence is due to poor diet, sleep, and health habits rather than physiological changes going on in their bodies. Aggressive and rough play is typical of the

adolescent as the muscular strength is experiencing rapid growth (George & Lawrence, 1982).

Physical appearance also affects the way others treat adolescents. Adults tend to expect adult behavior from a 15 year old boy who is six feet tall but are willing to accept more childish behavior from his peers who may not have had a growth spurt (Silverman, 1986).

Children at this age are very interested in what is happening to their bodies. Individuals move through puberty at different times and at different rates. Girls generally begin puberty two years before boys. But the whole cycle for girls may take from six months to six years. The first menstrual cycle may occur 6 months after the first breast changes or as much as five and one-half years later. Girls may get a growth spurt prior to beginning their menstrual cycle or just after, whereas, boys whose genitalia are just beginning to develop can be assured that an acceleration in height will come soon (George & Lawrence, 1982).

Intellectual Characteristics

One of the goals outlined by the Carnegie Report for exiting middle schoolers was "...an intellectually reflective person" (Hornbeck, 1989). This includes the areas of problem solving, thinking skills, self-expression, including persuasive writing and articulate verbal expression, and a basic understanding of the arts, mathematics, and science.

The students are also expected to have an understanding of cultures different from their own (Hornbeck, 1989).

During this stage of intellectual development the brain reaches its adult size. At the age between 11 and 16 adolescents decide how to use and whether to use the mental capacities that they now possess (George & Lawrence, 1982).

They move through six areas of cognitive development:

1. from concrete to abstract
2. from an egocentric into a sociocentric perspective
3. from a limited to a broad perspective
4. from a simplistic to a complex view of human motivation
5. from a reliance on slogans toward a personal ideology
6. toward a capacity for concepts and high order complex thinking (George & Lawrence, 1982).

George and Lawrence (1982) made an important point for parents to consider, "Functional intelligence is not fixed at birth or any other age, and it is profoundly influenced by individual experiences, especially the experiences that come under the influence of significant persons in a child's life" (p. 43).

Social/Emotional Development

The Journal of Adolescent Health Care stated that "The development of positive self-esteem and self acceptance is a fundamental component to healthy social psychological

development" (Resnick, 1985, p. 102). Being a part of a peer group is a very important part of the adolescent experience. Peer interaction is critical to the development of positive social competencies. The peer group acts as a social support system apart from the family.

George and Lawrence (1982) suggested that adolescents often have competing values that may cause them confusion. They have a desire to be accepted by peers, yet they want to stand out as being unique. They need to stake out their own beliefs yet they are reluctant to tear down the values of their parents. They need to explore relationships with members of the opposite sex yet they fear rejection and have feelings of inadequacy. They have a desire to use adults as role models but begin to see flaws they had not seen before. They have a strong need for supporting relationships with peers but a reluctance to break away from the supporting family unit. They are attracted to the adult world but still find comfort in old childhood habits.

Two goals set forth by the Carnegie Report were good citizenship and becoming a caring, ethical individual. The social/emotional development of adolescence is full of decisions to be made about citizenship and ethical behavior. Several goals suggested by George and Lawrence (1982) allow the adolescent to work toward more mature social/emotional growth. They are: 1) development of leadership skills, 2) socializing in low pressure, noncompetitive situations, 3) development of expressive skills, 4) clarifying personal

values, 5) development of skills for independent self-management, 6) development of an appreciation of their own strengths and accomplishments, and 7) developing trust relationships. The Carnegie Report also suggested that adolescents be given an opportunity to learn citizenship and a sense of social responsibility through community service (Hornbeck, 1989).

Parenting

Children at this age need a balance between autonomy and dependence. Parents need to set limits, offer guidance and provide support for their growing adolescents. The Carnegie Report pointed out that parents often withdraw their guidance as they see their pre-teen moving into independence. "They (parents) do not realize that their child's need for autonomy requires not rejection of filial bonds but a realignment of roles and relationships within the family" (Hornbeck, 1989, p. 22). The young adolescent is moving from dependency to interdependency with parents, friends, and relatives. This may be a difficult time for all involved, but it is important to maintain strong ties with these people.

The importance of strong parenting skills during the adolescent years cannot be overemphasized. There is a growing amount of work being done in this area. In an article on self-esteem, Bredehoft and Hey (1985) pointed to four indicators that parent education programs were important

and would continue to grow: 1) government agencies, churches, and social services have all become involved in developing programs for parent education, 2) there has been an increased enrollment in parenting programs in the last ten years, 3) there has been a growing interest by college and universities concerning parent education, 4) there has been an increase in the amount of research being done on parenting.

All of the programs analyzed by the article emphasized the importance of a democratic parent-child relationship. Parents were taught behavior modification and social learning techniques to help them shape their child's behavior. The use of reinforcement, extinction procedures, and punishment were all discussed (Bredehoft & Hey, 1985).

The program "Self-Esteem: A Family Affair" outlined a process that included the following components:

1. building positive self-esteem in others by modeling esteem building
2. encouraging responsibility by giving clear messages
3. hearing, giving, and accepting positive messages
4. helping children and adults respond to criticism
5. becoming responsible for your own self by asking for what you need
6. offering encouragement for your child (Bredehoft & Hey, 1985).

In the article "Childbearing Practices and the Development of Prosocial Behavior," Keith Swanson (1988) outlined three factors that fostered prosocial development. They were: 1) a nurturing environment, 2) teaching techniques that produce prosocial behaviors, and 3) corrective measures that modify behavior.

Swanson (1988) found that parents who modeled a nurturing, caring attitude were more likely to have children who exhibited prosocial behavior. The addition of verbal encouragement resulted in even better results. An overall atmosphere for prosocial behavior included tenderness, involvement, interest, and empathy.

Along with a positive nurturing environment came the need to set firm boundaries. Swanson (1988) suggested that, "Boundary setting and reasoning should be used within the context of a nurturing environment...Without the acceptance and understanding of a loving environment, correction becomes less effective in promoting prosocial behavior" (p. 33).

In a study comparing parenting between teenage runaways and nonrunaways, Loeb, Burke, and Boglarsky (1986) found that teenagers ran away most often because of conflicts with parents. Those conflicts included differences in values, needs for independence, and issues of control. When nonrunaways were asked why they might run away, their responses were very different. They included parent abuse, lack of trust, and family breakdown (Loeb, et al., 1986).

Huhn and Zimpfer (1984) recognized parent education as a preventative program. They emphasized the need for parent training that included: 1) strong communication skills, 2) respect for children, 3) seeing the child as a contributing part of the family, 4) the child assuming personal responsibility for his/her behavior, and 5) punishment in the form of natural consequences.

Communication

Good communication between parents and adolescents is a key component in alleviating conflict and promoting better understanding. The parent-child relationship is changing during this period of time and requires that communication skills be fine tuned in order to meet the needs of both parent and child.

In an article written for the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service, Norine Barnes and Billie Frazier (1987) pointed to listening as essential for building a solid communication base. They stated, "Listening means more than just hearing what a person is saying. It means letting him or her know you recognize the feelings behind what is being said and, at times, what is not being said" (p. 33). Some of the benefits of good listening were that it: 1) promoted understanding, 2) was non-judgmental, 3) promoted warmth and closeness, 4) helped the problem-solving process, and 5) demonstrated respect.

Barnes and Frazier (1987) suggested several ways a parent can show their understanding of the changing adolescent:

1. adjust to the changing adolescent
2. define rules clearly
3. stay calm
4. be accepting
5. give child privacy
6. be supportive and encourage independence

They stated that parents continue to need the skills of patience, love, and a sense of humor.

In an article entitled "Seeing the World Through your Teenager's Eyes," Bethe Miller (1987) told parents not to lecture their children but to listen. She said, "Acknowledge your child's budding adulthood, appreciate his inner struggles, give him appropriate responsibility, and be flexible" (p. 5). She went on to say that parents should avoid power struggles by giving choices. A definition of acceptable and unacceptable behavior should be made clear so that both parties know the guidelines.

The need for parent training in the area of communication has been documented in an article by Stephen Anderson and Paul Nuttall (1987). After studying the communication skills of three separate groups of parents before and after training, they concluded that "Communication

skills can be taught successfully regardless of the specific parenting task which may vary from one parenting stage to another" (p. 43).

Three goals of the parent workshop were to: 1) communicate their ideas, feelings, and values more effectively to their children, 2) develop or improve their ability to use positive communication skills, and 3) feel better about themselves as parents. The specific skills taught were responsive listening, firmness statements, reaching consensus and compromise, and positive acceptance (Anderson & Nuttall, 1987).

Study Skills

A child's attitude toward learning begins at home. The statement that parents are a child's first and best teachers does not end at adolescence. It may even become more important. The Carnegie Report challenged parents to become involved in their child's education. Parents should "encourage their children to apply themselves diligently to their school work, maintain good health, and engage in youth service" (Hornbeck, 1989, p. 69). The report also suggested that schools design home learning activities that involved parents and grandparents in a meaningful learning experience.

In an article for the Maine Department of Education and Cultural Service, Charlotte Sawtelle (1985) outlined four ways parents could foster a positive attitude about school and learning:

1. talk to your child about school
2. show your zest for learning; be a role model
3. encourage your child to ask teachers for help
4. be supportive of schools and teachers

The important thing for parents to remember was that their interest in their child's education made a big difference.

Sawtelle (1985) made suggestions to parents about homework. First of all, parents must not let homework become their responsibility. Let the child know that homework is between child and teachers. Parents can, however, provide a strong support for the completion of homework by providing materials needed at home. They can set aside a time for work to be done, and establish a quiet place where work can be completed without interruption.

If their child is having difficulty with work, parents should not hesitate to contact the school immediately. Parents should not wait for the child to become frustrated with failure but rather find out what can be done and if more help is needed (Sawtelle, 1985).

Lee Canter and Lee Hausner (1987) wrote a guide for parents called Homework Without Tears. It provides excellent information on how parents can best help their child through the trauma of homework and actually turn that time into an enjoyable, positive one. They pointed out that homework affects school achievement, it teaches responsibility and is an important link between home and school.

Homework Without Tears allows the parent to begin to feel in control. They learn how to set up a study area, strategies for getting work done on time, how to get children to do homework on their own, how to motivate and praise, how to communicate assertively, how to back up their words with actions, and how to work with their child's teacher. All of these areas were covered in a very readable format with step-by-step procedures to follow.

Canter (1987) says, "Homework is all about your children learning to make choices: when to do homework, how to do homework, where to do homework, and even if they will do homework" (p. 137). He gave practical suggestions which increased productivity, raised self-esteem, and helped the child make better choices.

Parent Concerns

One of the greatest fears of parents today is that their children will become involved with drugs or alcohol. According to Huhn and Zimpfer (1984), concerns about drug use is one of the main reasons parent groups are formed. Many young adolescents are experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs. According to the Carnegie Report, 92% of the graduating class of 1987 had begun drinking before graduation. Of those, 56% said they had begun drinking in 6-9th grade, and 51% said they had used tobacco products during that same time period. About 29% had used illicit drugs during grades 6-9 (Hornbeck, 1989).

This early involvement with drugs and alcohol is particularly alarming because the danger of long-term addiction increases when drug use is started at an early age (Hornbeck, 1989).

"Preparing Parents for Teenagers: A step in the Prevention of Adolescent Substance Abuse" was a program aimed at sixth grade students and their parents. It was a preventative program with an overall goal of intervention and reduction of substance abuse. It attempted to teach parents more effective parenting techniques which focused primarily on behavior modification and communication skills. Parents also learned ways of setting limits and handling discipline programs. All of these factors work together to help the adolescent learn to make wise decisions about drug use (Grady et al., 1985).

The authors of the program concluded that parents of adolescents need to begin letting go of their children. "They need to learn how to give ownership of problems to their children while offering suggestions and help" (Grady et al., 1985, p. 548). As children became more independent, the parent's role became that of facilitator instead of decision maker.

Another parent concern was early involvement with sex. As stated earlier, adolescents with physically mature bodies may be immature intellectually and emotionally; yet they must make sexual decisions that may affect their entire life.

A national survey of teenage women in America indicated that 20% had had sexual intercourse by age 16. By age 17, one in ten had had at least one pregnancy (Zelnick and Kanter, 1976). Parents wanted educational programs for themselves and their children that would help them deal with these problems.

Summary

A review of the literature on adolescent development illustrates the need parents have for information about this stage in the childrearing process. Adolescence can be a difficult time for both parents and children. Parent education programs that teach parents how to better communicate with the young adolescent can make the transition period much easier. Parent support groups are often formed to reassure parents that the behaviors they are seeing are common and to help them find positive ways of dealing with the changing adolescent.

CHAPTER III

Procedure

The purpose of this project was to gather information for a parent handbook for Sterling Middle School. In order to do that, these procedures were followed:

1. Letters were sent to 152 middle schools in the state of Washington requesting copies of their parent handbooks. Forty-one percent of those polled responded. Of those, only 17 percent were actually parent handbooks. The others were student handbooks that gave information about school programs and policies.
2. Research was done on adolescent development, communication, parent education, study skills, and parent concerns.
3. The Sterling Middle School parent group approved the outline for the handbook and made suggestions.
4. The handbook was designed using all of the above information, and, after approval from building administrators, was made ready for final printing.

CHAPTER IV

Chapter IV consists of the handbook itself. The handbook is attached under separate cover.

CHAPTER V

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary

The purpose of this project was to gather information for a parent handbook for Sterling Middle School. There seems to be a large body of information available to parents regarding the stage of development we call adolescence. Getting that information to parents in a usable form, however, seems to be a problem. Working with small groups and then expanding to a larger group to disseminate information may be the key to reaching the largest number of people. Schools have the unique opportunity to see parents in small groups as well as one on one. Schools also have a degree of credibility with parents in that they understand child development and can address many of the issues concerning parents.

A parent handbook distributed through the schools may get wider readership than an article written for parents in a national journal. A locally distributed document can also address local concerns and provide local resources for parents.

Conclusions

Based on the literature review and information gathered from other middle schools, the following conclusions can be made:

1. Few middle schools have parent handbooks.
2. There is a growing interest in parenting skills for parents of adolescents.
3. A great deal of information has been written about adolescent development.
4. Getting information out to parents is sometimes difficult.

Recommendations

1. More middle schools should develop parent handbooks.
2. Parent support groups should be formed to discuss issues raised in the handbook.
3. The handbooks should be presented to small groups of parents, and they should be encouraged to take one to friends and neighbors.
4. Additional study should be included on new ideas, reflecting new data, and applications specific to unique situations.

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APPENDIX A

Letter to Middle Schools

Kay Fuson

November 10, 1989

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Dear Colleagues:

As part of my Master's degree in Educational Administration, I am putting together a parent handbook for Sterling Middle School. As part of that process, I am collecting handbooks from all of the middle schools in the state. I am sure there are excellent models in existence, thus alleviating the need to re-invent the wheel. If you have a handbook especially designed for parents of middle level children, would you please send me a copy.

Thank you for your time. The parents of Sterling Middle School appreciate your help.

Sincerely,

Kay Fuson