



## **Emancipating the Adolescent**

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There is great danger that parents will go to extremes in their efforts to cope with the problem of emancipating their children: they might attempt to stifle the adolescent's natural desire to be independent, or they may try to force self-reliance upon a child who is not yet ready for it. In either case the effect upon the youth's proper development can be disastrous.

## **The Overprotected Child**

The first extreme is made up of domineering or overprotective parents who by means of stern discipline or subtle manipulation seek to retain firm control over their maturing children. The goal of this type of upbringing is not to prepare the child for eventual independence but rather to make certain that he will always do his parents' bidding.

These parents do not always depend upon peremptory commands and severe punishments to impose their will. Oftentimes the children "have been kept so dependent on parental love that even the implied threat of its withdrawal is enough to insure compliance with parental wishes."<sup>1</sup> Parents of this kind are likely to be overly solicitous about their child's welfare, constantly treating him like a helpless infant, and invariably resolving problems for him which he should be learning to work out for himself. It is the adolescent children of parents like these who often dramatically over-compensate for their dependent status at home by wild acts of independence outside the home, such as profanity, drunkenness and sexual excesses.

The adolescent whose desire for freedom is being continually frustrated by the arbitrary dicta or excessive solicitude of his parents will react in one of two ways. "The young person either resents this adult domination and exhibits behavior that is unwarranted and socially undesirable, or he gives up the struggle and falls back upon his childhood dependence, thus denying himself the possibility of advancing toward mature control of his behavior. Either type of adolescent reaction to adult control results in later maladjusted adult attitudes."<sup>2</sup>

In the first case the youth becomes angered by his parents' oppressive rule, and the healthy conflict which should exist between him and his parents begins to smolder in the form of a slinking evasion or flare up into defiant revolt. The product of such a bitter conflict is often an arrogant, uncooperative adult, or one scarred for life with unnecessary feelings of guilt.

Sadder still is the lot of those adolescents who surrender to their despotic parents and abandon their struggle for freedom, for not every child is able to stand up against the coercion or manipulation of his parents. The child's long years of subordination can become so much a habit, and his protected status so comfortable, that it can be exceedingly difficult for him to attain emotional and social maturity without the encouragement of his parents. When, on the contrary, his parents are actively striving to keep him dependent upon them, the adolescent

may repress his desires for independence in order to retain their acceptance and avoid a clash. All too often the adolescent's "rebellion is treated by parents with such intolerance that the child who is trying to become an adult is overwhelmed by so much guilt and remorse over his behavior that his attempts to be independently aggressive are thwarted, and he is forced to mollify his parents by curbing his natural instinct to be free of them."<sup>3</sup>

When parents thus insist upon usurping to themselves rights and responsibilities which belong to their child, what they are doing in effect in destroying his personality, for they are preventing the development of one of his noblest faculties—his free will. The child whose normal growth has thus been stunted develops into a dependent, immature adult. Because the habit of repression is already well established, such an adult is an apt subject for neuroses later in life.

But even if he avoids this pitfall the adult who has never learned to strike out on his own is doomed to unhappiness. The security and safety his parents can give him will not be enough to carry him through life, for what is best for an individual often depends upon that individual's own thoughts and feelings. More important still, security of this kind must sooner or later come to an end.

Eventually the young adult will have to make a decision of his own. He will either refuse to decide or panic into a hasty and foolish decision. It is far more painful to start with the trial-and-error method in one's late twenties than in one's late teens. In fact, it may well be too late. The injured and pouting adult—who is emotionally still a child—will seek some substitute parent in a spouse, an organization, or an authoritarian government or political party, and, with a sigh of relief, will abdicate all decision-making faculties to this new parent. He has also effectively abdicated from the human race.<sup>4</sup>

A person cannot perform the complex functions proper to an adult unless he has first mastered the individual sub-processes which make them up. Many of these basic behavioral developments are meant to take place during one's youth. If they do not, they will either never take place or they will do so only with great difficulty. Thus, for example, as was said in the quotation above, once the youth has passed the age during which decision-making experiences can be gained upon relatively insignificant matters, it will be very difficult for him to take chances on the more serious choices of later life and he will find few adults willing to initiate him gradually in the art of decision making.

His inability to make decisions will make it impossible for him to succeed either in marriage or in business.

Such an individual, though an adult in years, is still a child emotionally. He continues to act like a child with his teachers or employers, and, finding himself unable to adjust to the competitive adult world, he seeks out a parent surrogate upon whom he can depend. Yet, even if he does find one, his security remains precarious, for his master is always free to discard him once he has finished using him.

### **Reasons for Parental Domination**

In spite of the grave dangers involved "it is to be feared that many American parents . . . are making all their children's major decisions for them."<sup>5</sup> As a result "parental domination is probably the leading block to the normal course by which the adolescent emancipates himself from parental control and eventually, or reasonably early, acquires the ability to take his place as a mature individual in the economic and social world."<sup>6</sup>

The reasons why parents fail to relax control over their adolescent children are quite varied. In many cases the parents simply do not see the adolescent's need for independence, and, keenly aware that he is still far from an adult, they feel he is not ready to look after himself. Somewhat similar to parents of this kind are those poorly educated parents who are utterly bewildered by their better educated and more experienced adolescent child and who, fearing what they do not understand, have recourse to strict disciplinarianism. Then too there are parents who would like to give their child independence, but who, perhaps fearing that they have not raised him well enough, want him to follow their greater experience and better judgment, lest, left to himself, he get hurt. They love their child so much that they cannot bear the thought of him suffering because of foolish mistakes.

One general psychological problem which the parents of teen-agers seem to encounter is that

. . . they now have to reason with the same person for whom reasons were unnecessary a few short years before. Many parents seem to think that they sacrifice some of their parental authority and dignity when they condescend to have a rational discussion with the young stranger they have suddenly discovered in the midst of the family. In fact, they feel not a little insecure with this stranger and hence fall back on authoritarian techniques because of fear: "After all, children have no right to an explanation. God expects them to obey their parents."

Indeed He does, but He also expects parents to give the type of commands that are best suited to a child's age and problems.<sup>7</sup>

It can be said in favor of all the parents we have hitherto mentioned that, in spite of their failings, to some extent at least they have the good of their child at heart. But there are many other parents whose refusal to let go of their children is really a manifestation of their selfishness. Some of these parents would like to grant their child independence simply to be relieved of many obligations, but, finding that their social status is closely identified with that of their child, they try to ensure his proper conduct by continuing to make his decisions for him.

Many dominating parents work to impede their child's maturation because of their own emotional immaturity. This would include, for example, parents who use their children in order to enjoy vicariously the pleasures of youth. Much more common among emotionally immature parents, however, are those who are simply reluctant to relinquish their role as the child's protectors and supervisors. Just as the weaning of a baby affects the mother as well as the child, so too the psychological weaning of the adolescent from dependence upon his parents affects both the adolescent and his parents. In fact parents usually find it harder to replace the adolescent in their lives than vice-versa. It is understandable, therefore, that the adolescent's growing independence is resented and feared by his parents, for it heralds the dreaded day when he will no longer look up to them for support and guidance.

This fear and resentment is found particularly among mothers. After marriage they often give up all outside activities and devote their whole lives to their home and children. With so much free time on their hands, today more than ever before mothers are tempted to smother their children with attention. Their home and children become the center of their universe and their only source of real satisfaction. When the approaching departure of their children threatens to leave them with nothing to do and to deprive them of their only real interest in life, it can be very difficult for them not to tighten the apron strings, seek sympathy, excite guilt feelings, and do whatever else they can to forestall the emancipation process. This will be all the more true if the mother's marital relations have been unsatisfactory and her devotion to her husband has been replaced by devotion to her children. In short, the more a mother receives satisfaction for her own needs by loving and controlling her children, and the

more she uses them to compensate for other frustrations, so much the more will it be difficult for her to release them.

But whatever their motives, and whatever the difficulties involved, if the child's growth is not to be distorted, his parents must learn to let him go. They must deliberately wean themselves from him by developing other interests. It is the parents' duty to so raise their child that he in his turn will be able to take his place in the world. This means that the parents' role is one of self-sacrifice. They must accept the fact that their child is going to be influenced by outside values and customs, and that he is going to form deep, new friendships.

The love parents bear their child must not be mere sentimentality but rather a truly parental love, that is, one which provides for the child's needs, is self-sacrificing and is prepared even to see the child suffer when it is necessary for his greater good. As in all love, parental love implies respect for the one loved. This respect should lead the parent, first of all, to see his child as a person existing in his own right, and secondly, to be concerned that this person grow and unfold as he is, for his own sake and in his own way. The loving parent feels one with his child as he is, not as the parent needs him to be so that he can serve the parent's selfish interests. Obviously such respect is possible only if the parent has achieved independence, only if he himself can stand and walk without a crutch, without having to dominate or exploit anyone.

### ***The Permissive Upbringing of Children***

At the opposite extreme from domineering parents are those who react to the problem of emancipating their children by being over-permissive. For "despite the more recent trend toward stricter discipline and a more authoritarian approach to child rearing, there still remains a strong current of feeling among parents in favor of the permissive upbringing of children."<sup>8</sup>

Permissive upbringing was, of course, greatly fostered by John Dewey and his progressive school through their adoption of it as a principle of education, but its widespread acceptance among parents must also be attributed to the excessive self-centeredness of many modern adults and the disorder of modern society. All too often parents reject or ignore their children simply because they lack a sense of real responsibility for them. These parents are concerned only with their

own selfish desires and pleasures and view any attempt by their children to win attention or affection as an intrusion upon their comfort. This attitude is reflected by the diminished importance of and respect for family life in our society and by the greater interest of adults in activities outside the home. Then too such is the chaos of our modern world that even those educated parents who are sincerely concerned with their children are often too uncertain of their own standards and beliefs to offer proper leadership and guidance to their children:

While it is true that the failure of authority in education can always be attributed to egoism, carelessness, or inadequate training, there is the additional factor today that parents have been shaken in their own security as educators. The questioning of so many values and pedagogical methods has left them disconcerted and has frequently led to their abdication of authority. Parents suddenly recognize themselves in radio programs and feature articles that lay bare to a wide public the secrets of complexes and frustrations. They fail to realize that the portrayal is often extreme and does not necessarily fit their own situation. They develop guilt feelings and abandon the ship in despair—unless, of course, they react in the opposite way and become set in despotism and constant nagging that are no less harmful.<sup>9</sup>

These failings in parents and society come especially to the fore when the child reaches adolescence, for it is then easier than ever for parents anxious to be free of parental responsibility to assume that their almost physically mature children are ready to be on their own. The truth is, however, that children even adolescent children need their parents. They must be able to count on them for help and guidance; they need their affection and the self-respect which comes with the knowledge that their parents love them and enjoy doing things for them. As the adolescent experiments with his growing powers and his new freedom he needs the security of knowing that his parents are always there ready to help and comfort him should things get too tough, that their loving, more mature eye is quietly watching over him to ensure that he does not seriously injure himself.

In recent years the whole world has been witnessing the disastrous effects of granting total self-government to countries whose only qualification has been an exaggerated spirit of nationalism. The effect of permitting an adolescent, whose only asset is a budding sense of his own individuality, to fend completely for himself may not be as far-reaching as giving independence to a primitive country, but it is every bit as tragic.

It is clear, then, that it would be wrong for parents to use their authority either to retard or to rush their child's emancipation. It is the children from homes such as these that fill our juvenile courts and result in maladjusted adults. Here, as in so many areas, extremes can be exceedingly dangerous.

### ***The Appropriate Manner of Emancipating Adolescents***

Adolescence is the supreme test of parental wisdom, for it is during this period that the parent must exercise the greatest tact in encouraging the child's emancipation without thrusting independence upon him too suddenly. The parent's goal is clear, namely, the development of the child's ability to make his own decisions and care for himself, but it is no easy matter to determine precisely when various rights and responsibilities should be transferred to a particular child. In every case, however, two norms ought to be kept in mind: first, this transfer must be a *gradual* process, and secondly, the child must be encouraged to function as an independent person in as many areas as possible as early as possible. "The trick," as one author has put it, "is in finding out how much rope you can let out without getting involved in a hanging."<sup>10</sup>

The adolescent is torn between old habits and new desires and must, therefore, be handled wisely and with understanding. In order to develop new appropriate behavior patterns the adolescent requires help in getting the experience he needs to discover who he is, what he is good at, how to be self-reliant, etc.

Providing the adolescent with the opportunity to gain this necessary experience is much too important and delicate a task to be left entirely to chance or shortsighted impulse. Parents should look ahead and consider the new demands which will be made on their child and then try to prepare him for them by giving him experience in the prerequisite sub-processes. Since no two people mature in exactly the same way, and since some are more mature at sixteen than others are at twenty, it is impossible to set down a detailed program for parents to follow in emancipating their children. Always the individual child will have to be considered.

Perhaps some parents would find it helpful to discuss between themselves questions such as how soon they should encourage their child to choose his own clothes or go on week-end trips, or how they can provide him with suitable opportunities for learning to handle money

or to hold positions entailing responsibility. But whatever method they find most useful for determining when their child is ready to acquire still another adult right and responsibility, parents should follow a more or less *deliberate plan* in leading their child to full independence. Each year, as more and more privileges and duties are transferred to the youth, there should be a gradual change in the parents' relationship with the emerging adult in their family. Nor should parents view this process as an abdication of prerogatives rightfully theirs, for as soon as a child is able prudently to look after himself in a particular area, his parents no longer have the moral right to direct him in this matter.

The successful emancipation of the adolescent from parental control presupposes the satisfactory completion of his earlier developmental tasks. If, for example, the youth was given virtually no responsibilities during his early years, he is likely to mourn and fear the approach of adult obligations. But if, on the other hand, his childhood was marked by a progressive increase in his responsibilities, his ability to care for himself will develop gradually and normally so that the duties and decision-making of adulthood will all be taken in stride. It follows then that the parents' program for preparing their child for eventual independence must begin during the child's earliest years. As the child's capacity grows there should be a rise in his level of play, a transition from play to work and an increase in his degree of responsibility and the difficulty of his duties.

In striving to develop their child's ability to make his own decisions there is going to come a day when, no matter how well and how long they have planned, parents are simply going to have to encourage their child to begin making some of his own decisions—and his own mistakes. Many well-meaning parents find this latter point difficult to carry out. They are keenly aware that through their own superior judgment they could save their child from the painful consequences of many bad decisions, and they are unwilling to see their child suffer "unnecessarily." What such overprotective parents are doing, however, is destroying their child's personality, for they are thwarting the development of one of the faculties which most sets him apart from the brutes, namely, his free will.

Given our human condition free will implies mistakes, suffering and learning by trial and error. It is true that parents should always be ready with prudent advice; it is also true that they should keep a watchful eye on the child to ensure that he does not get into serious

trouble. But unless they give him the freedom to make his own decisions, and insist that he suffer the consequences of his own poor judgment, he will never acquire the knowledge and prudence he is going to need to make the weightier decisions of adulthood. Parents must follow the example of the Creator of all, Who had the "courage" to endow men with free will, even though He knew they would abuse His gift. The adolescent will never reach emotional maturity until he has learned to face the world's unpleasantness, to make decisions involving risk without becoming petrified by fear of failure.

### **"Do What I Say, Not What I Do!"**

If the parents' plan for cultivating gradual emancipation is to bear fruit, the atmosphere of the home must be such as will nurture proper adolescent growth. First of all it should be noted that the best home for raising children is not one which depends primarily upon the setting up and enforcement of rules to guide the children to maturity. Rules of themselves produce only external conformity.

It is when the child finds his parents' own deeds conforming to their words that he is moved to make the ideals behind their commands his own. He conforms himself to their standards, not in order to do them lip service, but because of his high regard for them and their values. Often the youth who is staging a revolt against his parents and their standards is not so much rejecting these values as he is testing how firmly his parents really hold to them. The most powerful influence which parents wield over their children is their own *example*; in the good home, therefore, the chief stimulus to the child's healthy development will be the shining example of parents striving to practice what they preach.

Rules, however, even those given without any explanation, also have a place in the home. It would be very difficult indeed, if not impossible, to care for and educate a child without having resort to rules and commands. Moreover, the adult world expects people to be able to obey orders, and the good home is one which prepares the child for the demands of adult life.

Nevertheless, it would be both foolish and unjust for parents continually to give commands to their children without offering them any explanation of the reasons behind them. Parents who claim infallibility and demand blind obedience will be found out and their authority rejected. By explaining to the child the necessity of a com-

mand the parent is helping him to internalize the ideal behind it. In many cases such an explanation is, in fact, owed to the child. For while it is the child's duty to obey, it is the obligation of the parents to issue commands in a manner which accords with the purpose of their authority—the training of the child for eventual self-direction—and which respects the child's intelligence and feelings. Even going back nineteen hundred years we find that St. Paul, after admonishing



children to obey their parents, had to add: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, lest they become discouraged." (Col. 3:21)

With the onset of adolescence wise parents will sharply curtail their use of direct commands and try, instead, to capitalize on the adolescent's inclination to submit to a guide of his own choosing. For although adolescents yearn for independence, most recognize their need, and have a strong desire, for guidance, as long as it is offered in an understanding way. In giving this guidance parents ought to take care that they answer the youth's questions honestly. Truthfulness will spare the youth later disillusionments and help him acquire the knowledge needed for self-direction.

### ***Parents Must Retain Their Child's Confidence***

The best home for raising children is also one in which parents are not afraid to hold frank discussions with their children concerning the

causes of friction between them, a practice which has been shown to ease parent-child conflict. Such talks provide both parents and children with an opportunity to drain off tension and help guide the parents in their efforts to free the home from pressures which aggravate adolescent maladjustment. During these discussions the parents should not be opposed to working out compromises with their children in areas where this can be done prudently. The attitude of parents in these talks, as in all their dealings with adolescents, should above all be one of understanding complemented by a happy combination of kindness and firmness.

Two of the main psychological functions of a good home are to provide the adolescent with encouragement and security. Sometimes a youth, secure in his dependent status, lacks the courage and initiative to strike out on his own. These youths need careful prodding by their parents to help them overcome their inertia. More common still are those adolescents who need encouragement at home in order to counteract the demoralizing effects of failures at school, in their social lives or in their attempts to gain control over themselves. As the sensitive and precocious Anne Frank put it: "I only wish I could . . . occasionally receive encouragement from someone who loves me."<sup>11</sup> Parents, however, must also take care not to force shelter on adolescents when they do not need it. It is often sufficient for the adolescent to know that he has the security of his home to fall back on should the going get too rough.

The parent's ability to act as an example and guide for his children, to make his commands palatable for them and to provide them with encouragement and security presupposes that he has succeeded in retaining their confidence and love. It should be his primary concern as parent, therefore, to give of *himself*—that is, of his personal time, energy and affection—to his children, for a child's heart and trust can be won in no other way.

Because it is natural for a child to love and confide in parents who give of themselves in this manner, if a child is gradually alienated from his parents, the blame must fall on their shoulders. But this is not to say that adolescents are not also obliged to try to get along with their parents. Both adolescents and their parents are attempting to replace old habits of thought and action with new ones, and so a great deal of understanding is going to be needed on both sides.

## Conclusion

In a way, Anne Frank summed up the heart of the parent-child conflict in the following words: "I want something from Daddy that he is not able to give me. . . . I long for Daddy's real love: not only as his child, but for me—Anne, myself."<sup>12</sup> Adolescents must have patience with themselves and with their parents' reluctance to accept them as individuals. Parents too must have patience with themselves and their children, but they must also strive to accept the fact that a new adult is emerging in their home, even though at times he gives all too clear evidence that he has not yet fully matured.

An adolescent learning to stand independently on his own two feet is similar to a child learning to stand erect. Like the child, the adolescent has his ups and downs, his good days and his bad, his successes and his setbacks. But if all goes well eventually the day comes when, lo and behold, the young man is able to stand alone, now no longer an adolescent but an adult.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, *Strangers in the House* (New York, Sheed and Ward, 1961), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Lester D. Crow, *Mental Hygiene in School and Home Life* (New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1942), p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> Graham B. Blaine Jr., "Range of Adjustments in Adolescence," *The Adolescent: His Search for Understanding*, ed. William C. Bier, S.J. (New York, Fordham University Press, 1963), p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Greeley, *op. cit.*, p. 118f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> John E. Horrocks, *The Psychology of Adolescence* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Greeley, *op. cit.*, p. 138f.

<sup>8</sup> Blaine, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Babin, *Crisis of Faith* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1963), p. 137.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander A. Schneiders, "The Dynamics of Child-Parent Relationship in Adolescence," *Psychological Counseling of Adolescents*, ed. Raymond J. Steimel (Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, tr. B. M. Moouaart (New York, Doubleday Pocket Books Inc., 1952), entry of November 7, 1942.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*