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Complicating the Girl Problem Before Adolescence Is Reached

MABEL ELEANOR STONE*

No man or woman who has spent years in walking city streets, standing on the corners of "the square" in any county seat in the United States, bumping in "flivvers" over country roads or wandering over the campus of one college or another and in all these places watching the endless procession of adolescent girls, who pervade the landscape "like onions," as Miss Moxcey vividly puts it, can ignore the obvious maladjustments to society among them. If one could, it is only necessary to read the columns of the woman's page of the daily newspapers, in which hundreds of girls of adolescent age seek help in making adjustments of which they themselves are acutely conscious, to become aware of the problem. The question then forces itself insistently home: "How much could have been avoided by right methods in pre-adolescence? To what extent has our take-it-for-granted attitude toward adolescent difficulties as inevitable, blinded us to the fact that the real cause of the disease lies far back in the years preceding?" It is the desire of the writer to offer a brief analysis of the most obvious social maladjustments of adolescent girlhood and suggest where the mistakes leading to them appear to have been made in order to open the subject for discussion. The analysis is based on (1) fifty letters from adolescent girls clipped from the newspapers in various sections of the country, and (2) a case study of twenty girls, who are, however, representative of a much larger number of girls known to the writer and her associates as being handicapped by the same failure to adjust adequately to society.

Of the fifty letters written by adolescent girls twenty-seven dealt with problems of human relationships outside the girl's family (nineteen with her relations to men and eight with her general relations to society at large), fourteen with difficulties of adjustment within the family circle, economic and social, while the remaining nine ranged over the whole field of inhibitions to purposeful activity, such as "feeling I am never going to succeed." With three exceptions the ages of the girls came within the middle and later adolescent periods, these ages being either determined by a statement in the letter or by some reference to "getting my working papers last year," "trying one year of high school," etc.

Again in the study of individual cases the largest proportion of difficulties in adjustment occur in the realm of human relationships. There is Jane, who "cannot live with (her) family because they are so practical, while I just love everything beautiful"; Helen, who shrinks painfully from every party where there are boys, yet cries herself to sleep because "all the other girls have boys to carry their books home"; Mary, who has gone to work and wishes to leave home for the city because her mother takes all her pay envelope; Elizabeth, who dreads the first going home from college (she is eighteen) because "the family will never forgive me for thinking that Adam

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and Eve weren't my first parents"; Martha, who prays easily in Christian Endeavor meetings, but cheats in examinations the next day, and Edith, who can "run" anything from a class-meeting to the whole office force though she has been in business but a year, yet cannot work with others in the simplest project calling for group action. A cross-cut of these case studies and the letters of adolescent girls suggests the points where the misadjustments occur.

1. The girl is unable to center all herself on the solution of a problem, is incapable of dealing with situations as they arise, partly because she does not know how to organize the elements of that problem or situation in a way that she can see and evaluate. Facts that do not bear on the situation are given first importance while others are ignored. One leader of girls working with the artistic girl in the practical family helped the girl to gather facts about things as practical as bridges and railroads, showing the dreams and energy that had gone into their accomplishment. After a little the girl began to turn to her "practical" family, first for appreciation and later for help in carrying out to expression her own dreams. The difficulty was that she had missed the most significant facts bearing on her problems. In the same way the girl who goes from a narrow religious home to college or from the conservative country town with set social standards to a city fails to adjust to one or the other because she cannot marshal her facts and draw conclusions. The girls of one industrial service center (who were between fifteen and seventeen) changed the whole character of the recreation when they had had a chance to evaluate through discussion and gathering information the different ways of amusing themselves. The conclusion of one girl who had been stimulated to study the Bible for herself came suddenly, "Why, you *can* have your own opinion without being wicked, can't you?" and then after a pause, "Then father and mother have a right to think their way, too." Yet at this point we sin repeatedly with pre-adolescents today in most schools of religious education, certainly in eight-tenths of all our Sunday schools. Teachers whose mild training fits them to use study courses and "lesson helps" are helpless to guide their boys and girls in organizing material for themselves. The project method must spread much further than it has before we shall be overcoming the inability of adolescent girls to adjust to groups who vary in their interpretation of character standards, religious beliefs, etc.

2. For all the adolescent girl's interest in people it is glaringly apparent that she does not adjust, in most cases, to racial and national groups and individuals who are different from her own ordinary contacts. One of the case studies was of a fifteen-year-old girl who led her Sunday-school class in driving from the school a young Italian girl whose family had moved into town. In talking it over she said, "She isn't a girl to go with us; she's just a Dago. * * * My mother says they aren't even people to send missions to." This is not the unusual case, as one wishes it were. Any leader of girls knows the problems involved in mixing racial and national groups. Every leader who has attempted to put together girls of varying social groups has struck snags. To anyone who doubts that this is true the surprised remarks of leaders when they run across the places where it is being done will be convincing. Of course the adolescent girl can be re-educated, but it is a wasteful process. The training of pre-adolescence should aim to make

her a world citizen, having a sense of kinship with many races and social groups beside her own. Teaching her about missions does not do it, perhaps because so much of this teaching, even today, tends toward condescension. Neither is world citizenship achieved by the road of tithing if we may trust the evidence of thirty-eight girls with whom the writer discussed tithing at a summer conference last year. Stewardship was a word beyond their experience (nine girls admitted they did not even know what it meant though "the minister talks a lot about it"). Only one girl had any idea that one was responsible for more than a tenth of one's money if that tenth was given. The rest could be used without thought or plan. One girl confided that Jennie (her chum) thought that "God used His money for the queerest, frumpiest things, not interesting things like fun and French babies." Budget-planning, as executives of a trust fund, proved an absorbing project—and a revelation as to a God who was Father. But the weakness was that certain attitudes of mind, certain mechanisms, already existed which were inhibitions to truly social thinking and these were the result of bad methods of training in group life before adolescence was reached.

3. Perhaps the weakest point of all is voiced by a little industrial girl, "Can't I tie to something? The factory closes down and the girls move on and I haven't a family. Maybe God is real; if you would tell me so He'd seem a part of it all." A sense of assurance is essential to adjustment with our world, but for a sense as vivid as a flame one turns, not to economic stability primarily, but to such experiences as turned a handful of Roman slaves into an unconquerable society welded and fired by a dynamic purpose. Those of us who work in the modern church schools honestly believe that religious education means the education of the whole life; but even now we are not to any degree reaching our goal if the misadjustments of adolescent girls at this point of integration are to be taken as tests. The battle between instinctive desires and conscious purposes lies at the root of more failures to adjust socially than perhaps we yet guess. Health and recreation are two places where methods of religious education with pre-adolescents are weakest, for repression (if not of rules then of guidance) may still be the order of procedure and adolescence is no time to begin to train girls in the positive conception of health, involving habits of mind as well as of body, such as the woman's foundation of health stands for. On the other hand, we do often ignore the part that health plays in religious education and make recreation either a way to let off steam or a chance to teach team play. Neither of these appears to adequately meet the need of the girl for emotional expression which shall be educative. With what methods shall the foundation be laid for the unity of religion and life, as the girl sees it, in a steadily developing personality "with something to tie to"?

There is no place for pessimism today. "Our weaknesses and failures" we may need to discuss, for it takes much journeying away from the beaten paths of the church schools of universities and seminaries and the clubs of strong city organizations to make one realize what problems most of us are struggling all too blindly to solve. Nevertheless it is a long step from the days when we endured the difficulties of the adolescent, hoping that they would soon correct themselves, to our present discussion of ways by which we may prevent as much as possible of the failure to adjust effectively to society through right methods in pre-adolescence.