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Six Things to be Recognized in Dealing with Adolescent Boys

EDGAR M. ROBINSON

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First: A Recognition of the Physical Condition.

As the average boy enters the teens, his physical heart nearly doubles in size; the blood is driven through the veins at double the pressure it ever went before. This means restlessness, activity, enthusiasm. It means that the emphasis in work with adolescent boys should be placed upon expression rather than repression; it should be positive rather than negative. If a boy does not go positively right, he must go positively wrong, if there is any go in him. Unless means of right expression are suggested by adults, in all probability some wrong means of expression will be suggested by the other fellow.

It is a mistake to teach him that it is wrong to fight. There are times to withhold and there are times to strike. The church today needs more boys and men who know how to fight and when to fight and what to fight, as well as those who know when not to fight. No system of religious education can find its greatest success while it ignores the need of positive righteousness physically expressed.

Second: A Recognition of the Gang Instinct.

The little boys are individualistic; boys in their teens go in gangs. Little boys play games in which the individual excels; older boys play team games, baseball, basket ball, football and the like, in which the team wins, and in which frequently the individual has to make a sacrifice play in order that his side may win.

Natural groups or gangs of boys can be enlisted for righteousness under proper leadership and when left to themselves, are likely to expend their energy in the opposite direction. As far as possible, seek the line of natural cleavage and avoid artificial or forced groupings. Perhaps the nine boys who compose the village baseball team do not all attend the same church; do not overlook the fact that certain things can be accomplished

with a team as a team that cannot be accomplished separately by the individuals composing the team. This consciousness of kind, this recognition of the rights of, the relations with, and the obligation to the other fellows, must enter into his religious life. No system of religious education can afford to ignore the desirable tendency for boys to naturally group themselves together, nor fail to see in this an increased opportunity. It is easier to handle groups of boys than it is to handle individual boys, and still easier to get the group to influence an individual who otherwise cannot be touched.

Third: A Recognition of the Complexity of the Individual.

The best Sunday-school classes of boys, as a rule, are those which have the greatest variety of interests, and not those which simply attempt to teach the Sunday-school lesson. One of the most successful Sunday-school classes of older boys, enrolling more than fifty members over fourteen years of age, has its employment bureau, its sick and relief committee, its outings and socials, its benevolences, and a variety of other things beside the teaching of the Bible. Bible classes of boys, which have taken their lunches and blankets on a Friday afternoon, tramped into the woods, had their fun, cooked their supper, sung their songs before the camp fire, slept in the open, and had the refreshing swim or exciting game before the return on the following day, have learned more in their Bible class, which was held in this environment, than they would have learned in a little room where they gave their exclusive attention for an hour to the cramming of the lesson. The other interests do not detract, but rather, help, in the study of the lesson. In any system of religious education we must not only recognize the complexity of the individual, but also the fact that an over attention to one exclusive interest is likely to defeat its own end.

Fourth: The Recognition of the Necessity of Right Doing.

We find no fault with the old quotation, "It is good to know, it is better to do, it is best to be"; but when one says, "It is best to be; therefore since I want the best, I will sit still and *be* righteous," it cannot be done. One might as well

say, It is good to know about strength, it is better to do things that involve strength, it is best to be strong, therefore, I will sit still in my chair and be strong. There is no short cut to righteousness. We must do righteous things if we are ever to become righteous; we must not wait until we become righteous before we begin to do righteous things; we become what we are by doing what we do. We may teach the *theory* of the Golden Rule in the Bible class; we can teach its *practise* on the gymnasium floor, playground and elsewhere. Those who permit religious hysterics on Sunday are most likely to permit dirty sport on Monday, unfaithful committee work on Tuesday, and so on. To get boys to do right things, and to do things rightly, will be more effective than the mere theory of righteousness.

A passing word should be said regarding the tremendous power for good that boys may exert when enlisted. We are only beginning to discover how valuable boys are as workers with other boys and how satisfactory are the results on both the worker and the worked. Boys are eager to work, but too many churches have no reasonable work for them to do. Any system of religious education which deals only with the theory of religion and which ignores the valuable service of adolescent boys, cannot hope for great success.

Fifth: A Recognition of the Relation Between Sex and Religion.

A high scientific authority claims that "A man's love life, which includes love to individual, to fellow men, to country, to God, is so related to his sex life that what affects one affects the other," and in the same degree. If a boy ignorantly or wilfully, either temporarily or permanently, impairs his powers of manhood, to that same extent, he limits his capacity for true love, for anybody or anything. The religion of Jesus Christ is conspicuously a religion of love—love to God expressed in love to fellow men. It is therefore possible that a boy in his ignorance may limit his capacity for the religion of Jesus Christ. The fiercest temptations that come to the adolescent boy have their root in sex, and the cure comes not in emphasis upon the horrors of impurity, but upon the positive side, the power and the possibilities of the pure life.

Much could be said upon this delicate question, but it is agreed that no system of religious education can afford to ignore it.

Sixth: A Recognition of the Need of Leadership.

It has been said that "Christianity is not taught, it is caught; it grows not by precept, but by contagion." Boys consciously and unconsciously imitate the man they respect and admire. Therefore, place in charge of boys the kind of man you would like your boys to be like. Such a man will have faith in boys, for he knows that a boy will strive to be what he thinks you think he is. If you trust him, you help to make him honest. If he thinks that you think he is unreliable, you help to make him so.

The man with a group of boys, who continually does the "hurrah boys" act, may seem to be a leader and yet not be one. The figurehead on the old wooden vessels, with one arm extended, seemed to direct the ship to paths of safety, while the ugly rudder, half submerged at the stern, seemed to be a dead weight on the progress of the vessel. Sometimes a man thinks he is the leader of a group of boys, when in reality he is the figurehead and some boy in the group is steering the enterprise. A real leader is not necessarily conspicuous. He may be the man who with quiet suggestion here and there at the proper time and place, steers the craft. Adolescent boys need tactful, sympathetic, adult leadership, and every successful plan for religious education will recognize it.

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