

MORE EFFECTIVE AND HUMANE YOUTH POLICY STARTS BY TREATING YOUTH WITH RESPECT

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Abstract

Adults often perceive teenage behavior as oppositional. In this they are right. The question is: oppositional to what and why?

Introduction

The “what” part is obvious? Opposition takes the form of doing things that adults forbid or discourage. This covers the gamut from joining gangs, using drugs or getting drunk, having sex, truancy and damaging school property, physical risk-taking – all the way down to bizarre dress, tattoos and piercing, adult-toxic taste in entertainment, disrespectful behavior to adult authority, and so on. These choices and behaviors are expressions of something larger than individual resentment. They are the product of a teenage sub-culture that was visible by the mid 20th century and has developed spectacularly since that time.

Admittedly, there is great variation among teens – for many, a continuum of negative behaviors spans from blatant to merely annoying – while others do well in school and stay out of serious trouble (sometimes because they are careful not to be caught). Not insignificant numbers of young people belong to tightly-knit religious communities and conform to the expectations of those communities. There are also cultural differences in a highly diverse population. For example, poverty and social disorganization lead some inner-city minority youth into criminal gangs and criminality.

Why Are Young People Oppositional?

An answer to the “why” question is complex and contradicts conventional wisdom. In a nutshell, independent, often oppositional, behavior among young people is primarily a response to the ways in which we have reduced their status during the last 100 years or so. This process became explicit when influential thinkers began to view adolescence as a stage of development qualitatively different from adulthood. This was a serious error, and contemporary youth as well as the larger society are paying a price for it. Adolescence is neither physically nor psychologically a distinct state of development except insofar as we arbitrarily define it as such and proceed to treat young people accordingly. One clue to this mistake is in the way we establish adulthood through mere social and legal criteria – old enough to drive, serve in the military, vote, etc. In other words, if adolescence is real developmentally, it ought to be possible to say when it ends in the same way that childhood ends with the onset of puberty.

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Freud, Erickson and Bettelheim warned of the dangers of “infantalizing” young people many years ago. Bettelheim even put his finger on why young people were showing signs of opposition by the mid 20th century. He wrote, “What makes for adolescent revolt is the fact that society makes the next generation too long dependent – too long in terms of sexual maturity and a striving for independence” (Bettleheim, 1969).

Research and theory supporting Bettelheim’s assertion have been compiled in significant quantity and quality. It is massively summarized in Epstein’s recent book, *The Case against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (Epstein, 2007). In *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, Hine (1999) provides a fascinating history of the status of youth from classical Greece to modern America. In this book, Hine reminded us that, from colonial times and into the later 19th Century, teenagers worked with adults, married, had children, and thus merged seamlessly into mature life roles. The latter notes that the word “teenager” did not appear in print until 1941! Moshman (1999), in *Adolescent Psychological Development*, argued that young people differed from adults in lack of life experience rather than in any significant developmental capacities.

Space does not permit listing all of the intellectual and social forces leading to adolescent oppositional behavior. G. Stanley Hall, the founder of developmental psychology in America, is usually credited (or blamed) for introducing the idea that young people (defined here as post-pubescent, but without specifying any arbitrary upper age limit) were developmentally different from adults, especially emotionally. However, even Hall advised “That it’s a mistake to treat teens like children” (cited in Epstein 2007, p. 23). Hall’s theory was based on a now long discredited biological theory – that ontogeny replicates phylogeny, e.g., that developing humans recapitulate stages of evolution. Odd as it may seem today, Hall proposed that adolescents were moody or over-reactive because they were growing through a pre-homo-sapiens stage of development. He ignored the more likely explanation – that the uptick in emotional and behavioral problems among youth was a response to an unnatural extension of childhood. By his day, access to adult social roles was already beginning to shut down for many young people. That process began in the late 19th century, accelerated in the 20th, and continues today.

The extent to which modern cultures infantilize youth is evident in comparative studies of preindustrial societies. Schlegel and Barry (cited in Moshman, 1999) in an examination of 186 such societies reported (1) there was no word for adolescence in most and, in the rest, terms referred only to the period between puberty and marriage without implying misbehavior or *sturm und drang*²; (2) most youth spend the majority of time with same-sex adults rather than age peers; (3) antisocial behavior was usually absent and by our standards moderate when it did occur; (4) there was little aggression or violence by teens.

In contrast, our society segregates youth in schools, bans them from “real” adult work and restricts their civil rights. Most adults may be unaware that not so long ago teens worked in many jobs now reserved for adults. This is true even for jobs that were mainly done by teenagers. For example, they can no longer run paper routes (as did this author) and be responsible for collecting subscription money from readers. There are no newsboys in big cities, either. Yes, teens can work part-time in fast-food restaurants for wages that a single adult could not survive on. Teenagers once worked in factories. On farms they did every job that adults did, including operating machinery (and some still do). Now they must attend secondary school, even when they refuse to learn. If they drop out of school, as so many do, they find that “real” jobs are reserved for adults. Whether we are better off having significant numbers of teenagers in school that hate being there should be the subject of reasoned discussion about possible alternatives. Un-cooperative, oppositional students are not good for schools, their teachers, or their peers who want to learn. Forced schooling for these youth is one of

²“*Sturm and drang*” is German for, literally, storm and longing, or storm and impulse, meaning free expression of emotional extremes, usually in literature and music.

several root causes of teen misbehavior. However, it is equally deplorable to have young people on the street with nothing to do. New ideas are badly needed.

Promoting and Nourishing Teen Culture

The teen culture that confronts us today is the product of youth segregation (in schools and elsewhere) and being barred from adult work and other social roles. Teen culture symbolizes opposition. It is enhanced and served by a huge industry that creates products strictly for youth – clothing, games, music, etc., contribute to the youths' sense of being different from adults. The media reinforce these impressions with images of teenage foolishness and emotional immaturity. Epstein (2007, p. 71) provides a long list of popular films and TV programs that do this. The goofy antics of youth and pompous inanity of the adult authorities they pillory displayed in films like *Animal House* confirm adult assumptions that teens are merely large children. To teens these same images provide models for how they should behave and what adults in authority are really like.

Many Contemporary Youth Teens Do Have Problems

Epstein (2007) notes three problem areas common among contemporary youth: conflict with parents, mood disturbances, and high-risk behaviors. Teenagers also cause problems for themselves and others. The list includes violence and crime, alcohol and drug use (AoD) (including diverted prescription medications), sexual experiences and associated law violations,³ eating disorders, anger, risk-taking, etc. American teens, according to Epstein (2007, p. 141), are the world's most troubled, and this is supported by data that suggest that degree of infantilization experienced by U.S. teenagers is associated with psychopathology. Epstein acknowledges these findings are correlational rather than definitely causal but suggestive nevertheless.

Given the research on pre-industrial societies just cited, many if not most problems experienced or caused by adolescents could result from delaying the process of becoming an adult. However, the assumption that teens are inherently vulnerable remains the basis for the continuing process of infantilization. This assumption is also bread and butter for professionals in the business of “helping” young people. Rather than recognizing the source of our problems, some now propose that adolescence really extends into the late 20's (Arnette, 1999).

A Paradoxical Result

The belief that young people are flawed because of age-related deficits has other serious consequences. It justifies Draconian policies that ostensibly protect young people from themselves. In the principle of zero tolerance, infantilization has embraced Godzilla.⁴ The society seems convinced that zero tolerance for those who break the rules will deter others from the same behaviors. In schools, this justifies policies of deterrent punishment – severe consequences for an offender in order to deter his or her peers. In-school suspension, transfers to another school, barring students from positive extra-curricular activities, virtually automatic suspension and expulsion are the result.

The fact that zero tolerance has not worked in eliminating negative behaviors among school-age youth is ignored. Nor is the possibility considered that deterrent punishment of some probably increases resentment of many and thus furthers active opposition.

³ Epstein (2007, p. 137) offers a thought-provoking observation on teenage sex, “. . . there's no question about the meaning of the sex they have: they're behaving like the adults they really are, exactly as evolution intended.”

⁴ An extensively researched draft report sponsored by the American Psychological Association on the negative impact of zero tolerance policies on youth is available at <http://www.apa.org/releases/ZTTFReportBODRevisions5-15.pdf>.

Criminalization: The Other Face of Infantilization

Zero tolerance has also resulted in greatly increased criminalization among many youth (and even children) through constant addition of new laws and punishments and the intrusive surveillance tactics that accompany them. It is ironic that infantilization has been accompanied by a parallel increase in punitive response by law enforcement and schools. Epstein (2007) provides a list of new youth crimes by year. This is a continuing process as more and more activities become explicitly illegal. Epstein (2007, p. 63) further notes that the juvenile justice system (now also in decline with adult punishments allowed for some serious crimes) denies 5th and 6th Amendment rights (due process and trial by a jury of peers) to juveniles. Imagining that this open door would not be abused by police and court authorities is certainly naive. Worse, incarceration creates lifelong criminals of many youth through association with experienced criminals (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999), and an arrest and prison record bars entry to employment at all but the most meager levels.

Epstein (2007, Appendix 5) documents how this process is paralleled in school suspensions and expulsions for offenses such as “. . . throwing spitballs, making gun gestures with one’s hand, or having a dull kitchen knife in one’s car.” Even the mental health system has joined the party. “Oppositional Defiant Disorder” is enshrined in the psychiatric and psychological DSM manual as “a pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior” towards adults lasting at least six months (Epstein 2007, p. 362). Included among the eight criteria – meeting only four is sufficient – are: “often argues with adults”, “deliberately annoys people, and “is often touchy”. This diagnosis is used to justify treatment (and prescription of psychoactive drugs to get the young person under control) for behavior that is hardly uncommon among teens.

Alternatives to Current Thinking and Practice

Suggesting that it is time to abandon infantilization policies and zero tolerance ideology in the treatment of youth may seem like shouting into the wind, but there are indeed alternatives. The basic principle in achieving positive relationships between adults and young people is treating them with respect. Using the terms “teen” or “teenager” is indicative of the problem, since in our society they reflect the assumption of deficit when “adolescence” is primarily a cultural invention rather than a stage of development that is significantly distinct from adulthood.⁵

Young people who have good relationships with adults and their school are much less likely to engage in oppositional behaviors and more likely to avoid risks to their health (Resnick et al., 1997). Tobler and Stratton (1997) reported that interactive approaches to drug education were more effective than top-down lecturing and information dispensing. Not surprisingly, overall student “connectedness” to school is lower in schools which impose severe punishments for minor infractions (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002). Cook-Sather (2002) has suggested that listening to young people (thus signaling respect) is badly needed in education. “There is something fundamentally amiss about. . . (not) consulting . . . those it is ostensibly designed to serve. . . Authorizing student perspectives can directly improve educational practice. . . (when adults) begin to see the world from those students’ perspectives.” Two way conversations in which young people participate as equals illustrate a way out of a continuing crisis of mutual disrespect.

The much larger issues of youth infantilization, teen culture, and adult response gradually emerged during the author’s work on alcohol and drug education (Skager, 2006; Skager, in press). The author eventually realized that what he had discovered in this work applied to other areas of oppositional youth thinking and behavior

⁵Attending a recent International Conferences on Drugs and Young People sponsored by the Australian Drug Foundation, the author discovered that these terms were avoided as a rule of policy. “Youth” or “young people” were the terms of preference.

and likewise gave clues for the reasons why youth are often oppositional as well as ideas about how to respond to what we have wrought.

Respectful Drug Education and Student Assistance

The first step was finding an approach to drug education that promoted mutually respectful interaction between young people and the adults who deliver it. The author was fortunate to find this kind of education in the UpFront program at Oakland High School.⁶ Sitting in on group sessions provided me with a convincing illustration of how positively and productively young people respond when led by adults who know group process, who are knowledgeable about AoD, and sensitive to how and when to share their knowledge.

UpFront also identifies and assists (rather than ignores or punishes) youth who have progressed to problematic alcohol or drug use. The format is discussion rather than lecture. There are five regular sessions for all students and additional discussion groups or individual counseling for students needing to evaluate their own involvement with AoD or that of friends or family members. Groups are led by adults who have internalized the content rather than delivering it out of a manual. They establish credibility by sticking to honest information. Both appealing and negative aspects of substance use are allowed on the table. There is too much experience among high school students to permit scare tactics or misinformation. When the facilitators do not know the answer, they say so and may ask participants to research it. They never judge the person. Withholding judgment is OK even when the behavior is not. Students also understand that there are “No put-downs!” They are encouraged to share what they know or think on all topics. Adult facilitators are also alert to “teachable” moments – when participants want to know something. Perhaps most important, sharing personal experience with AoD by self or others is encouraged, something inconceivable in zero tolerance education programs. One of the rules established at the start is, “What’s said here stays here!” Experience shows that, when the great majority of youth are treated with respect, they respond in ways worthy of that respect.

Table 1 (next page) summarizes the UpFront process by contrasting it with current zero tolerance approaches to drug education.⁷ However, locating this process at the beginning of the teen years does not mean that age-appropriate educational strategies characterized by respect, interactivity and linked support services would not be effective earlier as well. Programs for children from AoD families are probably the greatest single need at the elementary level.

Finding an Alternative to Deterrent Punishment

The last piece of the youth policy puzzle emerged during discussions of the California Statewide Task Force on Drug Education.⁸ It began with realizing that deterrent punishment for AoD offenses and other misbehaviors is virtually universal in U.S. secondary schools (as might be expected in a zero tolerance society). If youth substance use is symbolic of opposition to adult rules and behavior, perceived inhumane and unfair treatment of peers merely adds to feelings of resentment to school and the adults in it. A different approach is needed, one that seeks to reform and reintegrate rather than stigmatize and banish. That approach

⁶ Developed by Charles Reis, information on this program can be accessed at <http://www.upfrontprograms.org>. Oakland High School is an inner city school enrolling mainly students of color and children of recent immigrants to the U.S.

⁷ This table is taken from the author’s article in *Drug and Alcohol Review* (Skager, in press).

⁸ This group was formed under the aegis of California State Senator John Vasconcellos, then Chair of the Senate Education Committee, and Assemblymember Jackie Goldberg, Chair of the California Assembly Education Committee.

turns out to be the school-based analogue of restorative justice, the result of new thinking in criminology that has led to revolutionary ideas and practice in adult criminal justice. Important contributors to the theory and practice of restorative justice have been the distinguished Australian criminologist Braithwaite (1989) and U.S. practitioner Zehr (2005) among many others.

Restorative justice brings offenders and their victims together in a structured, mediated process which (a) confronts the former with how his or her crime affected others and (b) works toward a mutual agreement on what the offender can do to make amends. Restorative strategies accompany, but do not replace current punishments such as fines or imprisonment. However, this process, when successful, benefits the victim in a way that trial and sentencing procedures cannot. In standard practice, victims may be called to testify, but beyond that are ignored. Many want the offender to demonstrate in a credible way the personal impact of what he or she has done and express sincere regret. Restorative justice addresses the emotional needs of victims and promotes insight and often positive personal development in offenders. Research comparing restorative approaches to conventional criminal justice in the U.S. and other countries, especially Great Britain and Western Europe, has demonstrated that restorative justice (a) reduces recidivism significantly and (b) promotes emotional relief (including relief of post traumatic stress symptoms) and repair that victims do not find in the usual criminal justice process (Sherman & Strang, 2007).

Table 1. Comparing current approaches to drug education and student assistance to the UpFront process

CURRENT	PROPOSED by UpFront
Pre or early secondary	Secondary, age 13-14 and older
Curriculum dominant, information and skill development/practice	Process dominant, students share experience
Didactic, adult centered	Facilitated, interactive, non-judgmental
Sequenced content	Flexible, seeks/creates "teachable moments"
Abstinence only goal	Advocates abstinence, but also addresses reducing harm/risk for users
Focus on AOD only	Includes issues and experiences related to both use and abstinence
Does not identify/assist users	Identifies/assists problematic AOD users
Indoctrinates, only negative information on AOD	Acknowledges positive aspects of AOD use in order to establish credibility

Restorative practices in schools have devolved from restorative justice for adults. Schools deal mainly with disruptive behaviors rather than crimes. In school, young offenders can often repair or otherwise compensate for what they have done. Voluntary service, cleaning up, painting over graffiti, etc. are concrete ways of "making things right" in restorative practices terminology. So is expressing credible regret and public commitment to changed behavior in the future.

The role of restorative practices in schools is significantly broadened to include changing school culture to promote better collaboration among staff members and create school-wide climate of caring and respect (Morrison 2005). As one school principal summed it up, "It's changed the way we teach kids; it's changed the

way we think about discipline and behavior management. We get along here (now), and that's because the kids are respected and they know it."⁹

Restorative approaches in schools have received considerable attention internationally, especially in Canada, Britain and Western Europe, Australian and New Zealand. The latter nation has recently incorporated them into all youth criminal justice proceedings. A recent chapter by Morrison (2005, p. 48) summarizes the goals, scope, strategies and evaluation findings on restorative practices in schools. She concludes, in part, that ". . . restorative justice empowers the school community to be more responsive and more restorative. It is about re-affirming and re-building the social and emotional fabric of relationships within the school community."

Restorative practices in schools have three components: (1) conferencing, like restorative justice interventions with adults, addresses offenders and those they have harmed; (2) circles, a regular classroom group discussion conducted by teachers to enhance cooperation and group cohesion, often by dealing with personal or interpersonal problems among students, if possible before they escalate into disruptive incidents; and (3) restorative questions, a counseling strategy that promotes positive connection with an adult while at the same time examining the intentions underlying the behavior and its effects on others. The key to all of the above is a mantra at the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP): the way to change the nature of relationships between adults and students, children or youth, is to do things with them rather than to or for them.¹⁰ Punitive sanctions do something to offenders while alienating them from the school; permissive responses do something for them without holding them accountable; neglect is not responding to their behavior at all.

Pilot studies of implementation by the IIRP of restorative practices in high and middle schools showed significant reductions in disruptive and disciplinary infractions over a two to three year period (Mirsky, 2003). In one high school, incidents of disruptive behaviors dropped from 273 to 153 between 1999 and 2002. In the same period out-of-school suspensions declined from 105 to 65, detentions assigned by teachers from 145 to 50, and administrative detentions from 716 to 282. Similar reductions were seen in the other schools studied. Principals and staff at all three schools reported significant positive change in student behavior and school climate and in the way staff related to one another and their students.

A Last Word

This paper outlines an inevitably controversial perspective on youth development. Adults are accustomed to thinking of adolescence as a biologically distinct stage of development. Adolescents thus lack the capacity to assume adult roles, or so the thinking goes. Instead, adolescence is an artifact of post-industrial social forces. At the macro level, the latter include two 20th century developments: (1) increasing limitations on employment opportunity until all forms of significant work became "adults only" coupled with (2) requiring that virtually all youth complete an academic high school education, whether they like it or not. Concomitantly, society tries to protect young people from themselves with more and more rules and controls. Youth reactions to their experience of mandated immaturity include conflict with parents and outside adult authorities, psychological disturbances, and risky behaviors associated with an increasingly powerful teenage culture. These symptoms are in turn cited as justification for further controls to "protect" teenagers from themselves by means of a veritable storm of new rules in schools and laws in civic society, many of the latter

⁹ Edward Baumgartner, Principal of Palisades Middle School, PA (cited in Morrison 2005, p. 4).

¹⁰ I am deeply grateful to Ted Wachtel, President of the IIRP, and his staff for introducing me to restorative practices in schools and encouraging my participation in their training classes. The institute has an extensive on-line library on restorative practices <http://www.restorativepractices.org> and information on training materials and conferences (including a regular international conference) at <http://www.safersanerschools.org>.

criminalizing offenders. How a society can, without harming itself further, “protect” and at the same time restrict and criminalize more and more young people is a question left for the reader to ponder.

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