

Comment

Gangs and Teenage Culture

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April 2009



Teenagers have often been viewed as a 'race apart' by adults. Each new generation, according to popular culture, reaches new depths of chaos, disrespect – even depravity! The reality, of course, is that most teenagers are not hugely different from their parents at the same age and that most of them will grow to be law abiding and perfectly pleasant adults.

The terrain that we find ourselves crossing, as adolescents, is a strange and complicated place to be. The inevitable and sometimes painful realignment away from childhood loyalties that have bound us to family, school and friendship systems, towards our new adult lives is challenging. It is particularly hard for an increasing number of young people who do not have those strong family support systems standing by in the wings. These support systems enable youngsters to be child one moment and adult the next, to pick them up when they fall, to smooth ruffled teenage prides and to gently support the sometimes tricky journey into adulthood. Without such reliable, robust and forgiving but boundaried support systems – teenagers can resort to aggressive or threatening behaviour or to disaffection and alienation as a kind of escape.

When faced with situations such as these, parents and teachers often ask 'WHY do you behave like this?' The answer may be an insolent shrug and a grunted 'Dunno'. However the subtext of this answer may be, 'If you only knew... you haven't got a clue.' Adults may in fact have a clue, but they often lack the time, the will, the strategy or simply the energy to put the clues together and do something. The symptoms are treated, the behaviours addressed whilst the causes continue unabated. Latest figures for the UK show that the number of prosecutions for murder and manslaughter has risen by 140% in two years, prompting new fears over Britain's teenage gang culture.

The children's charity NCH (www.nch.org.uk) has completed an important survey, entitled 'Step into our Shoes – Young People's views on Gun and Knife Crime'. The survey reports on the reasons that young people give, themselves, for the startling increase in violent crime amongst their own age group, resulting in one in seven suspected killers currently being minors, as opposed to one in fifteen, five years ago. They cite drugs, self protection, image, peer influence and revenge as roughly equally strong reasons for gun and knife crime amongst young people.

The factors highlighted by young people themselves contrasts starkly with information from a poll of adults, done by The Guardian newspaper in 2007. Here, 80% considered that social and family breakdown and lack of discipline in the home were the largest contributor to increases in violent crime, with the failure of schools to set firm moral boundaries and the failure of the police to impose law and order and justice following behind.

It is interesting to note the culture of 'blame' within the adult poll, whilst the youngsters themselves appear to be looking far more astutely at the culture of 'what it is to be a teenager'. In the NCH survey, the Chief Executive, Clare Tickell reports that there is a need for more access to structured activity for young people and that they should be invited to develop community



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youth services. She says that there is a need to 'challenge and engage, leaving children and young people with emotional well-being and the confidence to meet life's challenges'. These conclusions appear to accept that by examining and acknowledging the systemic changes that have taken place in post war society and therefore, by implication, in the everyday lives of young people, we are more likely to find sensible solutions than if we merely 'blame' or rely on an increasingly punitive regime.

The passage from a highly assisted existence (childhood), to less assisted (adolescence) and eventually to a self regulated (adult) moral awareness is one that involves a gradual weakening of the ties that bind the child to the main systems in their young life (primarily their family and school). It involves a fairly long period of 'counter-dependency' when part of the role of parent is to be pushed against. This is a healthy process, but one that needs subtle and gentle adult acknowledgement and support. If adults, be they parents, teachers or those in the wider community, lose their 'right place' in supporting this process, young people experience enormous insecurity which can result in anger, aggression and the need to 'fight back' (vandalism, violence) or numb down (binge drinking, drugs) or both.

In addition, for many of the most vulnerable youngsters who have been hurt or deprived in their early years, there is an increasing desire to 'pay back'. Their shame (in this context, defined as unsupported and unacknowledged experience) dents the natural energy and excitement of growing up to an extent that is deeply damaging to them developing a personal and social moral compass.

Many of these teenagers are becoming increasingly disengaged with school and family culture. Families are increasingly fragmented, schools do not appear welcoming or understanding. Many teachers have generally experienced relative ease and success in their own lives to truly understand or empathise with how hard life is for some children.

In addition, the challenges of immigration, race, religion, family breakdown and poverty are truly immense for school communities when combined with the pressure of government targets and accountability. In the absence of secure and solid 'base systems' and driven by the basic human need to 'belong' which ironically is overwhelming during adolescence, an increasing number of teenagers will create their own loyalty groups: gangs. The drive that binds them to these groups (conscience) has little to do with morals or ideals. This kind of conscience is the one that acts as an inner compass, guiding all of our fundamental sense of belonging to groups and is a monitoring system that sensitises us to our survival needs and asks the questions, amongst others:

- Am I included?
- Do I belong?
- Am I secure?

It is interesting, at this point, to examine the features of any human organisation. They are groups constructed by humans for humans and with a defined structure or hierarchy; used by many people to serve and protect them; rules are set to ensure the functioning of the group and rule breakers need to be punished; rules can be changed if not useful and new ones created; there is a shared purpose and loyalty is prized. For gang members, these features are strongest in their gang systems. No harm there... until, sadly, the need to 'belong', the need to conform to the rules and expectations, to please, overcomes the conscience that also enables belonging to the wider society.

It would seem that the NCH has started on the right lines – asking young people themselves to analyse and explain how it is for them and then encouraging and supporting them to be a part of their own healing and developmental process. Systemic approaches can be a key element of this, enabling youngsters to see themselves as part of a wider context – family, culture, friendship groups and by giving them insight into the natural forces that have impact on their lives.

