

“Hear Me, Understand Me, Love Me”: Pleas to Parents from Adolescents Around the World

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Roughly defined, adolescents can be thought of as children who are in the second decade of life; those from whom I will present data today are between fourteen and seventeen years of age. I have spent the past fifteen years as a social scientist studying the ways in which social contexts—particularly family—impact the lives of adolescents in a variety of cultures around the world. This work includes detailed survey studies of thousands of families as well as intensive interviews with hundreds of adolescents. Today I will present data from seven cultures: Colombia, Gaza, South Africa (whites), South Africa (blacks), India, Australia, and the U.S.

Reconstructing the Image of Adolescents

An unfortunate necessity of any presentation such as this is to begin with a corrective discussion of the nature and capacity of adolescents. This is so because the extensive theorizing that has taken place about adolescents as a stage in the life-course has to a large extent inaccurately portrayed the disposition and capabilities of children of this age. In short, the image that has been created is that adolescents are reckless, unreliable, selfish, disrespectful, defiant, immature, and difficult. There are two problems with the theorizing that has led to this image. First, the data that these early thinkers used to base their conclusions were often either anecdotal in nature or they were derived from studying adolescents and families who were experiencing high levels of dysfunction. Thus, inadequate attention has been given to the variety and contexts of adolescent experience. Second, most of the thinking has come from Western, primarily North American professionals, whose conclusions have been generalized to other settings without regard for the different cultural contexts in which adolescents grow up around the world.

The following excerpts help illustrate the very negative image that has been developed about adolescents. From G. Stanley Hall, a physician and the noted “father of adolescence” writing in 1904:

Development in adolescence is less gradual and more salutatory, suggestive of some ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained . . . nature arms youth for conflict with all their sources at her command—speed, power of shoulder, biceps, back, leg, jaw—strengthens and enlarges skull, thorax, hips, makes man aggressive and prepares woman’s frame for maternity . . . sex asserts its mastery in field and works its havoc in the form of

secret vice, debauch, disease, normal and abnormal rhythms, and sends many thousand youth a year to quacks, because neither parents, teachers, preachers, or physicians know how to deal with its problems. . . .¹

In 1971, Peter Blos, a noted adolescent psychiatrist, described adolescence as, “Rapaciousness, smuttiness, oblivion to unkemptness, dirtiness, and body odors; motoric restlessness and experimentation in every direction of action and sensation.”²

And, as recently as 1997, the general, professional view of adolescents was summarized by psychologists Jim Youniss and Miranda Yates (who do not hold to this view themselves), as follows:

Youth are exceedingly self-interested, marked with an almost unbridled hedonism that needs to be reformed . . . contemporary youth are not equipped to take up adult roles in society because they are enclosed in their narrow “youth culture,” which runs counter to adult society and . . . contemporary youth, more than prior generations in this century, lack political knowledge and, even worse, seem disinterested in taking responsibility for society.³

Palestine Youth as a Case Study

So current a summary testifies to the durability of this negative image of adolescents, despite the fact that in recent years the more scientifically reliable work that has been done on adolescents provides a far less negative view. Work that we have been doing at BYU affords an important corrective to the image of adolescents and gives useful insight into the role of the family and other social contexts in facilitation growth. Since 1994, several of us have been engaged in an intensive study of Palestinian families with adolescent children in the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We have surveyed several thousand parents and their adolescents and have intensively interviewed scores of individuals and families. I will focus mainly on the work in the Gaza Strip, where we have the most complete data.

As you know, the Gaza Strip is a tiny—approximately 270 square kilometers—strip of land bordered on the south by Egypt, on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, and on the east and north by Israel. Its population of one million Palestinians (three-quarters of whom are 1948 refugees and their descendants from interior parts of Palestine, now Israel) and four thousand Israelis is one of the densest populations on earth.

The economy is severely underdeveloped and poor, with unemployment rates among the Palestinians often exceeding 50 percent. Since 1967, the Gaza Strip has been under Israeli military occupation with some largely ceremonial forms of political control given to the Palestinians since 1993.

In 1987, the Palestinian resistance to the occupation crystallized into a six-year-long, quasi-violent uprising, called the *Intifada* (Arabic for uprising or shaking off). All segments of the population participated in this movement to become free from the political, economic, and military control, but it is the role the adolescents played that is most relevant to today's purpose. Any one, and certainly the combination of many of the above-noted characteristics of Gaza—poverty, population density, occupation, early youth autonomy, and trauma—could be used to hypothesize that the theorized negative nature of youth would even be exaggerated in such disabling conditions.

However, in direct contrast to the image of adolescent disinterest and incapacity summarized above, Gazan adolescents demonstrated remarkable willingness and capability in participating in their society's effort to free itself from occupation. Overall, an excess of 80 percent of adolescents participated at some time during the movement in demonstrations, throwing stones (their primary offensive tactic), and in delivering supplies and assisting others. Over 50 percent of adolescents were involved on a regular basis in these and other activities. These levels of participation by adolescents far exceed any historical levels of youth involvement in political resistance.

Furthermore, this level of activity occurred in the context of significant trauma that either triggered their activism or was a consequence of it. For example, 70 percent of adolescents experienced verbal abuse at the hands of soldiers, were shot at with tear gas, and experienced school raids and closures. Over 80 percent had their homes raided in the middle of the night by soldiers and over 50 percent had a neighbor killed and/or witnessed their fathers being humiliated in front of them.⁴

Despite this heavy, autonomous involvement in resistance and the exposure to prolonged and intense trauma, these adolescents, now young adults, are functioning very well. Their values on family, education, and religion remain strong and there is a remarkable absence of social deviance in the population. Rates of current adolescent and young adult deviance, such as fighting, stealing, running away from home, and substance use are noticeably lower than same-aged youth in the U.S., for example.⁵

Intensive interviews with dozens of these individuals in Gaza reveal that their participation in this difficult, risky, and prolonged resistance movement as young adolescents was underscored by a detailed understanding of political history, by a clear and firm commitment to contribute to the national and social good, by devotion to religiously-based principles

of fairness and justice, and by a powerful cohesion and loyalty among all age segments of the population, both within and between families.⁶

None of these competencies and characteristics are found in the traditional image of adolescents. The corrective that these findings make to our understanding of the nature and the capacity of adolescents is twofold. First, adolescents are very capable of willing, effective, and competent service to the good of others, even under circumstances of substantial and prolonged risk and trauma; and, second, this capacity is facilitated and energized by the presence of strongly held and taught values and ideologies that are shared across generations: political values of equity and social justice; religious values of harmony and equality of human worth and dignity; and family and cultural values of unity, loyalty, deference, and respect for legitimate authority. These values, particularly those related to the absolute importance of family and community, have been at the core of the success of Gazan adolescents in maximizing their contribution to the good of their society.

Insights from Adolescents on the Importance of Families

One of the elements of the negative image of adolescents passed down over the decades has been that children at this age have little need or desire for continued, close associations with their parents; that, in fact they need to sever the infantile emotional bonds with family and develop relationships with peers and others outside the home.

The following information from interviews with approximately one hundred and fifty adolescents in four cultures helps to show that this view is exaggerated, if not distorted. It is important to note that these interviews were not focused on family experiences or relationships. There were, of course, questions about the family, but the interview was an overall assessment of adolescent experience, and, thus, the adolescents were not primed by the topic of the interview to respond with answers about the importance of families.

I have conducted all of these interviews myself, so that I could be sensitive to the overall trends of similarity and diversity that might be included in the information in the responses. Frankly, I have been surprised at the consistency of adolescent personal and social experience across very different cultures. This consistency is strongest when it comes to the role of the family in their lives. The best evidence for this came in response to the simple question: "Under what conditions in your life are you most happy, and under what conditions are you most sad?" In all of the four cultures for which interview data is ready for analysis (Colombia, India, South Africa (blacks), and Gaza), many, if not most, of the responses to this question highlighted the critical importance of family to these adolescents. Three themes about family experiences emerged: 1) family togetherness, 2) marital harmony, and 3) an unbroken family structure.

Carolina, a fourteen-year-old Colombian girl, answered: What makes me most happy is my parents' support, being with my family. What makes me sad is to not have a close-knit family, not being able to be with my father, when there are problems between my parents and I can't be with my little brother, that brother which I love a lot. And not being able to share my teenage years with my father.

Mithrab, a seventeen-year-old Indian girl, echoes the theme of togetherness and highlights the importance of both parents to her happiness:

As I said, we have eighteen members living in our family, but different people are doing different business. But my dad, he goes in the morning, he comes late at night, like 10:30. After coming home he just goes back to his work and we meet him once a week. So we all get together and we speak, we have dinner together, so it's the very happiest moment. And he speaks to me, he tells me like, what are you doing? How is life? How is this? He speaks, that's the very happiest moment. More than my dad, I love my mother, she is just like my friend. I can speak everything, all my secrets to my mom, she's my very best friend I can tell you, and she raises me very nicely, and she's a very good friend to me.

Sachin, a seventeen-year-old Indian boy, also emphasizes his relationships with his parents and defines the give and take that occurs between them:

My happiest moments will be when I make others happy, especially my parents. You get that feeling. Your parents are happy, they do something for you, you have in turn something, you, you do something in turn good for them. And they feel happier when you're happy, simple equation, so fine. That's when people are more happy, that's at least in my case. For example, I am coming to the sad part of it. I feel sad when my parents are very worried with me, try to be too inquisitive, or something, or just not happy with my performance.

PHEMEZA, a fourteen-year-old black South African girl, emphasizes the importance of her parents' relationship:

I always feel happy when I see my parents, both my parents are happy. I don't want to see my parents angry, especially my father because he likes to be angry. So when I see my parents happy, I always feel happy.

Amjad Issa, a fourteen-year-old Gazan boy, focuses on his family's awareness of his feelings:

I am also very happy when my family understands and realizes my feelings. And they provide me what I

want, and if there is a psychological environment at home, like giving me tenderness or kindness or love or something like that, I feel very happy.

This same sensitivity to feelings is reflected in the comments of Mithrab, a seventeen-year-old Indian girl, who also highlights the very critical role of fathers to girls in India:

I become depressed because of my father. My father is very busy, but he loves us it seems. My mom tells us he loves us, but he doesn't show it. Every time he is occupied with business and with his own things, but he doesn't show love for us. But he, whatever we ask, he buys and gives, but he doesn't speak, like how he should speak to a kid. Like he should ask how was school like, that's all. And after he won't ask anything. I think it will be at least two weeks since we'll see him. Like he'll be always busy with his work. So we feel very depressed. I take my uncle's example. He likes to be with his wife and his kids. Always they be going out. And many people you know, in my society they say "why your father not coming home? Where is your father?" So I feel very depressed. My mom says, "Why are you bothered, you don't be bothered." So, because of hard things I'll control myself, and will be quiet. And I get depressed and my mom scolds me with my mistakes. And when her health is spoiled, when she spoils her health, like when she's not eating well or not sleeping, I feel very depressed.

Youth from all of the cultures mentioned the values of grandparents or other extended family, and often the importance of the intactness of the family was mentioned. It was most often an issue among the black South Africans. One example is from Mzonzima, a fifteen-year-old black South African boy, who said, "I feel sad when I think about my father, and every time when my mother discusses it with my grandmother, I even cry because I feel very sad."

Question: Tell me more about why you are sad. What happened with your father?

My mother and my father had some problems. I think it was marital problems because they didn't explain anything to us. What happened when they had problems, my father took us outside and then my grandmother took us. I was nine years old and my brother was five years old by then. So my uncles beat my father and then my father ran away and we didn't see our father since then. The thing that makes me sad is that we were brought up by my grandmother and my mother was having another kid which is not my father's child. So maybe that is the thing that makes me very sad when I think about it.

BUSISIWE, a fifteen-year-old South African girl, expressed similar discomfort with her family structure:

I feel very sad because of the tension between my father and the aunt. I feel that it is very much unfair because what actually happened is that they are not from one father, they've got different fathers, so maybe that's why they always have conflicts. So they don't care for each other, so I don't feel comfortable about that.

These excerpts are just a small sampling of the predominant exposure given to family when youth are asked to describe their own level of personal well being. As I mentioned earlier, there is no clearer trend throughout the interviews than how meaningful, valuable, and necessary good family relationships and stable, complete family structures are to them.

What Parents Do That Matters

In addition to proclaiming the centrality of family in their lives, the youth interviews were also rich with information about the things that parents do and the way that parents behave that are important to their adolescent children. It has been my essential purpose throughout my work to identify elements of the parent-adolescent relationship that contribute to or inhibit the psychological and social development of adolescents. As you might know, extensive scientific research has been conducted on the parent-child relationship over the last sixty years. The literature is voluminous, complex, redundant, fragmented, and, at times, confusing and/or contradictory. My aim has been to integrate the data based on my belief that there are a limited number of essential aspects to the parent-child relationship that matter to child development, and that the more clearly and simply we can communicate these, the better we will be able to assist in improving this important relationship.

This belief is based on the assumption that, despite cultural and biological differences, there must be fundamental similarities in human psychological, social, and emotional needs, and, therefore, similarities in the human response to the social environment. Thus, children in very different cultural settings have similar desires for and responses to, for example, emotionally supportive relationships with adults, like parents. The data I present is supportive of this and other hypotheses.

The important scientific work that has been produced over the decades by scholars like Earl Schaefer, Wesly Becker, Diana Baumrind, Eleanor Maccoby, Darwin Thomas, Larry Steinberg, and others, can be integrated and synthesized into three central conditions of the parenting environment that have been shown to be important to healthy child development. We refer to the first condition as *connection*, or the positive, stable, emotional bond between parent and child. We measure this by asking both parents and adolescents to report on the level of parental acceptance in the relationship, e.g., how often the parent spends time with the child, how

available the parent is to console the child, and how much the parent enjoys being with the child. We have theorized that children and adolescents who experience consistently high levels of connection with their parents will learn to trust adults, value themselves, and be willing and able to initiate social interaction with others outside of the home.

The second basic condition of the parenting environment we refer to as *regulation*, or the placement of structure around the child's behavior, i.e., rules, regulations, supervision, and monitoring. The imposition of this regulation informs children about the appropriateness of certain behaviors, assists children in learning to regulate themselves, and protects them to some degree from negative influences outside the home. Therefore, we have theorized that children and adolescents who experience consistent and adequate regulation in their home environments will be less likely to deviate from expected familial and social norms.

The third basic condition of the parenting environment we refer to as *psychological autonomy*, or the ability and opportunity for the child to become aware of and express his or her own thoughts, feelings, and ideas. We measure this by the absence of psychologically intrusive and manipulative parental behaviors: specifically invalidating children's feelings when they express them—interrupting, ignoring, or distracting children when they are speaking; trying to change a child's thoughts or feelings; and making acceptance of the child conditional upon the child's pleasing the parents. Unlike the condition of regulation described above, psychological control refers to control over the psychological world of the child. Children and adolescents who experience consistent psychological control from their parents will respond either by withdrawing within themselves and becoming, for example, depressed, or that they will act out against the intrusive control by way of a variety of deviant behaviors.

To this point, data are ready for analyses on these ideas from the U.S., Colombia, Gaza, South Africa (whites), India, and Australia. In the results for connection, two things are important. First, the connection with parents has essentially the same relationship with social initiative across all of the cultures. The more connection experienced, the higher the social initiative, as hypothesized.

Second, again for all cultures, connection is equally predictive of depression. The higher the connection experienced, the lower depression. For most of the cultures, connection is much less strongly related to youth antisocial behavior. It was unrelated to antisocial behavior in Colombia, South Africa, and Australia, and mildly related to antisocial behavior in the U.S., Gaza, and India. The higher the connection, the lower the antisocial behavior.

The findings for regulation reveals that regulation is either unrelated or weakly related to social initiative and the same for depression. Regulation is much more strongly

related to antisocial behavior in all cultures, with Gaza being somewhat lower than most, and Australia being somewhat higher than most. In all cases, the more regulation experienced in the home, the lower the antisocial behavior, as hypothesized.

The findings for psychological autonomy (measured as psychological control) reveals consistency across cultures in the lack of association between psychological control and social initiative. With some variation in the strength of the relationship, psychological control is significantly related to depression and to antisocial behavior in all cultures as hypothesized.

When considering the great differences in these cultures and the fact that the measurement of these variables was brief and not customized for each culture, these findings provide very encouraging evidence that these three basic conditions of the parenting environment have similar meaning and power in all of these cultures.

Summary

By way of summary, I will outline a series of principles that are illustrated by the findings discussed in these three sections. These principles should be useful in stimulating discussion about policy initiatives that might be formed to support the realization of these principles:

1. Adolescents are quite capable of competent and effective service to their community.
2. This competence is enhanced under social conditions rich in values of loyalty and devotion to family and community.
3. Adolescents depend substantially on the quality of their family life for psychological and social well being.
4. Key elements of this family life are: togetherness, marital harmony, and stable family structures.
5. Consistent, positive, emotional bonding with parents enhances adolescent social competence and protects against depression.
6. Consistent, fair, imposition of rules, regulations, and supervision of adolescent behavior facilitates conformity to family and social norms.
7. Inhibiting the discovery and expression of adolescents' feelings and thoughts encourages adolescents to withdraw or to act out in deviant ways.

NOTES

1. Hall, G.S. *Adolescence*, Volume, 1904, pp. xi-xiii and xv.
2. Blos, P. "The Child Analyst Looks at the Young Adolescent," *Daedalus*, 100, 1971, 964.
3. Youniss, J., & Yates, M. *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 3-4.
4. Barber, B.K. *Deeper Inside a Youth Social Movement: Gaza's 'Children of the Stone,'* Paper presented at the David M.

Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University, December 1998.

5. Barber, B.K. *Political Violence, Family Relations, and Adolescent Functioning*, *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 14, 1999, xx-xx.

6. Barber, B.K. "Youth Experience in the Palestinian Intifada: A Case Study in the Intensity, Complexity, Paradox, and Competence," In M. Yates and J. Youniss (Eds.), *Roots of Civic Identity: International Perspectives on the Community Service and Activism in Youth*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.