

A LINE ON LIFE

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The Myth of Teenage Turmoil? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

The traditional view of adolescence is typically as a time of "*storm and stress*." This period has been characterized by extreme mood swings and unpredictable, difficult behavior. Where did this view originate? Is this typical for most teenagers?

Viewing adolescence as a period of turmoil can be traced back to writers in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Psychoanalytic psychologists working within Freudian tradition have supported this view. In addition to seeing turmoil as normal in adolescence, some of them view the lack of turmoil as a sign of arrested development. In fact, Anne Freud — Sigmund Freud's daughter — wrote "*to be normal during the adolescent period is by itself abnormal*."

Early in the 20th century, cultural anthropologists argued that the storm and stress theory of adolescence does not apply to non-Western cultures. They describe cultures in which children gradually take on more and more adult responsibilities without stressful transitions or a period of indecision and turmoil.

It was not until the 1970s that this turmoil theory was widely questioned in psychology. In the United States, large studies of representative adolescents were done. The results of these studies have been consistent — *few adolescents experience the inner turmoil and unpredictable behavior ascribed to them*.

In one study, psychologists Offer, Ostrov and Howard (1981) asked over 2,000 adolescents about their personal experiences. They concluded that normal adolescents "*function well, enjoy good relationships with their family and friends, and accept the values of the larger society*." Below are some of the statements followed by the percentage of adolescents who agreed with the statements.

I feel relaxed under normal circumstances. (91%)

I enjoy life. (90%)

Usually I control myself. (90%)

I feel strong and healthy. (86%)

Most of the time I am happy. (86%)

Even when I am sad, I can enjoy a good joke. (83%)

There seems to be much more consistency in personality from early adolescence to adulthood than the turmoil theory would predict. Several other psychological studies have found that good adjustment in adolescence tends to predict good adjustment in adulthood. Although adolescence may be experienced as a stressful period for many young people, those few who experience *serious* trauma are likely to continue having serious problems as they move into adulthood. The indications of these studies are very important. Essentially they are saying — adolescents who experiencing emotional turmoil or crisis should be taken seriously. Their problems cannot merely be explained away as part of a normal "*passing phase*."

Unfortunately, many mental health professionals are still prone to accept this "*storm and stress*" viewpoint. As a consequence, they tend to underestimate the seriousness of the problems of adolescents. In another study by Offer, Ostrov and Howard (also 1981), a group of psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers were asked to fill out a series of questionnaires as if they were "*normal, healthy adolescents*." The same

questionnaires were filled out by groups of actual delinquents and adolescents in treatment for psychiatric disturbances. The adolescents rated themselves. On the average, the professionals rated adolescents as being more disturbed and having more problems than did these adolescents themselves. The picture painted by the profiles that professionals had of "*normal adolescents*" was more extreme than the actual profiles of disturbed adolescents.

**Rather than indicating a normal stage of development,
teenage turmoil indicates problems that need attention.**

In defense of the professionals, it is possible that the disturbed adolescents might minimize their own disturbances and blame their problems on others. However, this does not minimize the conclusion of the previous study that the problems of adolescents need to be taken seriously. Although they may have developed adult bodies, their acceptance by adults is piecemeal and inconsistent. Many parents fail to listen to their teenagers, because they may still see teenagers as "*just kids*" and consider their feelings unimportant. This has a circular effect. (If others didn't listen to you when you needed a friendly ear, wouldn't it be hard for you to listen to them when they wanted you to listen?) If teenagers don't get adequate communication with their families, they will probably seek it with their peer group. Then they will be more likely to follow the standards of their peer group — whatever these standards may be.

Parents need to really listen to the feelings and problems of their children — not judge them, but just listen to them. If you *really* listen — then you will be more able to talk *with* them rather than *at* them.

* Adapted from Philip Zimbardo's *Psychology and Life*, Scott, Foresman & Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1988, page 93.