

# SOME KEY CONCEPTS FROM A COURSE FOR PARENTS ABOUT ADOLESCENTS

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## PREAMBLE

Catholic Family Welfare Bureau Melbourne have for many years provided remedial family services, a core service being marriage and family counselling. Our range of service has expanded to also include educative programs.

One frequent request is for education for parents about adolescence and its' meaning in family life. Additionally, our Dandenong branch needed to respond to the many urgent requests they were receiving from parents for counselling, about "adolescence problems" encountered in their families.

As result a group of counsellors and social workers have produced a course in an endeavor to discover the most effective means to provide education for parents.

Here are identified a number of key concepts which we believe are emerging as essential to successfully enriching family life through parents participation in education about adolescence.

## INTRODUCTION

Recently our Footscray Branch received a typical call from the principal of a school in a western suburb of Melbourne requesting input for parents about "adolescence." Being late in the year, we agreed to just an introductory session for a possible course in the new year. A condition of our agreeing to this session was that the parents define beforehand some of the issues which were of concern to them. The following is the content of the letter which we subsequently received.

".....I am grateful to you for agreeing to speak to a group of our parents on the subject of Adolescence.

The areas (they) would like to discuss are:

- \* Peer pressure/friends
- \* Staying out late
- \* Communication
- \* Playing one parent against another  
-(step-families)
- \* Dress

I realize....., that these topics would require one complete session each, however the need is being felt now so hopefully the discussion will be encouraging for our parents....."The worker seemed to be expressing the sense of urgency, sometimes panic, which typifies some parents attitude when their families approach the phase of family life we label "Adolescence."

Moving into this phase, some families take it in their stride; for some it is fraught with a sense of panic; others attempt to deny what is occurring with resultant depression or excessive rebellion as the outcome. What makes the difference in different families?

What follows is a discussion of some key concepts we believe to be emerging as essential to success in educating parents about adolescence, which may also provide some answers to the question "What makes the difference.....?",

## COURSE STRUCTURE

Although much of the content of a course is formally scripted to a large extent we adapt the course to the particular needs of the group attending, and to the setting in which it is held. Because we are flexible in accommodating participants needs, this allows also for spontaneity of discussion and for the free flow of humor, an antidote for panic, and a positive stimulus for learning.

Each of four to five sessions of a course will contain elements of the following:-

- \* Theoretical input by a facilitator
- \* Participant exercises
- \* Open discussion, or small group discussion
- \* based on set topics, or topics chosen by participants.
- \* Use of video, overhead screen or blackboard.
- \* "Homework" and
- \* "Handouts" relevant to a session.

The key concepts which are emerging as essential to success and which permeate the process of a course are:

1. ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS
2. FORMAL THEORETICAL LEARNING
3. DEVELOPMENT OF FREEDOM AND AWARENESS
4. FOCUS ON "THE ADOLESCENT."

### 1. ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants are motivated to attend a course because of their own perceived need. Their active involvement begins when they decide to enroll and attend the first session. They are assisted to internalize or "own" the experience they gain in the course by being encouraged to creatively contribute from their own experience and knowledge. This

"ownership" of the course is facilitated in a number of ways.

At the outset participants are encouraged to suggest the topics most relevant to their own situations (A similar approach has been adopted in Thelma Paul's "Parenting Skills Program" (1986). Although the course is not designed to address at length particular topics, the facilitators endeavor to refer to those listed, throughout the course. The list itself is prominently displayed at each session. The purpose of this is to keep in consciousness that the theoretical learning and the development being engendered are about dealing with the life realities participants bring with them.

Numbers enrolled are kept to a maximum of twenty adults. This is manageable in terms of the facilitator handling the session and allows, when people feel at ease, for questions, comments and discussion. Although questions are sometimes taken up by the facilitator, encouraging participants in discussion we believe enriches the content and enables greater involvement and "ownership." Depending on the situation small group discussion may be initiated after input by the facilitator, and extra group leaders may be used.

Participants have found it valuable to take home question sheets connected with a session. These are used to stimulate the involvement of the family in discussion which provides for extension of "ownership" into the family, the parents being the facilitators.

Because it sometimes occurs that the material being discussed or a particular activity in the course may be a reminder of stressful times assurance of support, outside the course is offered, if required. Courses are for learning not therapy.

### 2. FORMAL THEORETICAL LEARNING

A basic component throughout the course is purposeful teaching of theory about adolescence, what it means and how it might be dealt with.

One area of theory which is given significant emphasis is Havighurst's "developmental tasks of adolescence" (Havighurst 1979)

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Participants are taught what distinguishes this "stage" of life from others and what are the goals of adolescence. They are given an understanding of how the behaviour of adolescents can be motivated by their need to deal with striving towards the achievement of these goals, with the inherent stresses and rewards. An aim of this segment is to encourage an understanding of conflict as growth producing and a legitimate manifestation of adolescent striving for maturity. Discussion here often being sighs of relief that, "that behaviour is actually normal."

Other areas given direct theoretical input which have met with positive response are the adolescent's "development of self identity, "morality and values", and "communication." Sometimes in our work with families we find that difficulties arise when parents are over anxious about creating a "good" family life to the extent that their ability to acknowledge and differentiate a child as an independent person is clouded.

Discussion of development of self-identity not only leads to greater understanding of adolescent striving, it is useful in encouraging the ability to differentiate.

"Morality and values" are for some parents areas of great concern whether this stems from a religious base or from the base of "good" living and proper conduct. Participants are given the opportunity to share their beliefs and opinions and are encouraged to be confident about their own values. Discussion can be an experience for some participants allied to their children's experiences in the world outside the family. This can be a questioning of held beliefs and a confrontation with values different from their own. Some participants through gaining awareness sometimes expressed as an "aha" experience (Perls, 1969) begin to approach their family situations from a different perspective. We believe this enables them to act towards their children less from protective anxiety, and more in support of them as maturing individuals, when their children's developing values seem to be at odds with their own.



"Communication" is an essential theoretical and practical component of the course. Family life as the context for individual development has its substance in relationships, communication being the vehicle for those relationships. Some awareness is given in the course then, of the basic need for communication and of the necessity often, to plan within the family to allow communication to occur. Some basic skills in "how to communicate" are also taught.

### 3. ENABLING FREEDOM & DEVELOPING AWARENESS

The two are interdependent - freedom and awareness.

Many of the difficulties being experienced by families who come for assistance to our agency, and those who attend our parenting course, have to do with being tied into old expectations and rules of good parenting. Some of these may however be less relevant as children mature and as the world changes. What was appropriate for a six year old in 1977 may not be appropriate for a sixteen year old in 1987! Anxiety about being "good parents" and being seen to be "good parents" can in fact be a substantial block to "good parenting." Reviewing old expectations and rules in the light of better understanding of self, knowledge about adolescence, and the influences of today's world, can begin to free parents to act more appropriately to their children's needs. This freedom is given direction through awareness.

In our course the freedom and awareness concept is attended to through a two pronged approach. The aim is to enable parents ultimately to realize the value in gradually giving their adolescent children responsibility for their own lives.

The techniques we employ are what we call "Going Back" and "Influences." "Going Back" is a simple exercise in giving participants permission to do just that - go back to their personal experiences of adolescence, the expectations, the rules and the relationships. This is carefully monitored to contain what for some may potentially be disturbing. Generally however a great deal of humor and enjoyment are experienced in the group with this permission to reminisce.

Moving on to "Influences", participants are encouraged to compare their teenage world of influences with those in their children's world today. Again this allows much cross flow of information and discussion. This segment is enriched by considering general world influences, and those closer to home and more personal. The effect for participants is an expansion of their awareness of adolescence as a time for letting go to enable young people to find themselves, with support, in their own world.

- Theoretical input at this stage might include an examination of different styles of discipline and a discussion of which style is more likely to enable young people to become responsible for themselves.

### 4. FOCUS ON "THE ADOLESCENT"

In the absence of young people themselves in the course we nonetheless endeavor to creatively focus on their point of view. Verbatim reports of dialogues with adolescents are sometimes used giving input about what they see as parents' roles during this phase of life, what adolescents expect of parents.

Of significant impact is a video tape recording used in the context of Havighurst's Developmental Tasks. The video was produced by a group of Secondary school students (St. John's College, 1985) and depicts the students role playing their parents and themselves, illustrating what sometimes happens in families in relation to those tasks. Some participants are glad of the dark as they "see themselves" depicted on the screen!

We are sometimes asked why we do not include adolescents in the course. Whilst there could be great value in doing so, our experience through end of course evaluations by participants, has been that they have gained particular value in simply finding a legitimate venue for "airing and sharing" their experiences as parents with other parents.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion two things need to be mentioned. Because of time limits we may not include all that has been described in every course we run. However aspects of all four concepts elaborated here, are included in each course.

The second point that needs to be made is that our opinion, that these four concepts relate to successful education for parents of adolescents, is based as much upon participants spontaneous reactions, as upon their formal evaluations.

In the current local emerging state of parent education we believe our findings provide relevant and valuable information.

### POSTSCRIPT

A note about what subsequently emerged at the western suburb school session.

The group of twelve participants had attended two other child parenting sessions and were already a cohesive informal group. What they brought from those sessions (e.g. about discipline and communication), was a significant base for this session, and indicated the value of beginning where participants are at. Their topics of interest ranged from sex, "fear of pregnancy", drugs, through life situation



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changes e.g. starting work, beginning dating and separating parents, to usual discipline issues such as homework, chores and going out at night.

Some developmental and relationship issues they raised were, self esteem, confidence, sense of security, values and continuity of standards, responsibility, ignorance, and "parents are human too." The nature of the group allowed the discussion to flow with a minimum of theoretical input. The speaker was as much a facilitator, allowing the participants to learn by sharing life experiences, both present and past, and by supporting each other. The content was educative whilst the informality of structure allowed "owning" the content, to be with the participants.

A final comment again was, "That was great. It was good to hear the others. I really learned something."

#### REFERENCES

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