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**The
Hardest
Years
for
Children—
and
Parents**



Between the ages of 11 and 15, youngsters go through a difficult period as they test their grasp on maturity—and their parents' patience

By SIDONIE MATSNER GRUENBERG with Llewellyn Miller

HARD-PRESSED PARENTS of junior-high youngsters are giving wide circulation to a current joke.

"When do you want us to bring him back?" ask the grandparents of a 12-year-old as they pick him up for the day.

"When he is 16!" his father retorts. These years between 11 and 15 are a fascinating age, delightful and rewarding in so many ways. It is not the easiest time in a youngster's life, however. And it is a time of some bewilderment and anxiety for parents.

This is a period of very rapid physical and emotional growth, and often of perplexing and inconsistent behavior, as boys and girls, ambitiously trying to put childhood behind, reach out forcibly for more privileges than they are ready to handle. So far in their young lives they have taken themselves pretty much for granted. Suddenly, they discover themselves as individuals.

They feel an imperative need for recognition of the stunning fact, "I am me—and growing up!" If they can't get enough recognition any other way, they will try the well-known "shock method" of outrageous behavior. They don't do this with deliberate calculation, but

are impelled by strong forces that they understand dimly, if at all.

One of these is an intense need of assurance that they are "wonderful me," because characteristic of this transition period is a wavering between confidence and doubts of one's adequacy to meet the challenges ahead.

At no time does a youngster need the support of parents more, but at no time is it more difficult to give, since the growing pains of these "between" years so often evidence themselves in extremes of behavior.

We may expect outbursts against the authority of adults during this time. Amenable little girls may stage dramatic scenes of protest if anything "the gang" does is questioned or forbidden. Boys often go through a streak of destructive mischief. Both are apt to be untidy, dilatory, silent, and withdrawn, if not actually defiant.

Patty, 13, startles her father with a flip, "Oh, Dad! Don't be a square!" when he decides that an hour is too long to giggle on the telephone.

Joel, 14, gives an insultingly bored sigh when asked where he is going, answers simply, "Out," and is gone.

Certainly, these disconcerting mo-

ments are no source of happiness, but they should not make parents feel that they have failed. It is entirely normal for youngsters to act in such ways. If they are to grow, they must test their growing powers. Only by going a little too far can they learn where proper boundaries lie.

No matter how wisely you have guided your children through their earlier years, it is unrealistic to expect them to be unwaveringly obedient, polite, and appreciative, during the "between" stage. It is just as unrealistic to jump to the conclusion that they are skidding fast into delinquency and must be stopped by drastic measures.

WHAT THEY are really asking for, and what they need far more than punishment or reproach, is your steady support of them as important and loved individuals. They need this most when they are most out of hand.

This is easier said than achieved. While our children are small, we grow accustomed to their unquestioning admiration of us as possessors of correct answers about everything. It is hard for us to descend from this pedestal. It takes effort to deal mildly with such

(Continued)