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THE HARDEST YEARS

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scornful arguments as these:

"Oh, Mother! That's not so! Don't you know anything?" or "Oh, Pop! Grow up! Things have changed since you were a kid!"

A most natural reaction is to flare back: "Go to your room. I will not allow you to contradict me." But growing pains are more quickly relieved by keeping lines of communication open with some such answer as: "Let's talk this over. You are big enough to explain what you think and feel, and I want to know." This gives the youngster, trying so hard for status as almost grown-up, a chance to show his feelings in a less childish way.

MUCH of the brash behavior of the sub-teens and early teens is overcompensation for the real and often intense worries that beset most of them at some time during these years. If we understand that worries, rather than dangerous flaws in character, are the source of most of these growing pains, we can deal with them with much less worry ourselves.

Girls, shooting up rapidly, fear that they will always be too thin or too fat. Few escape an attack of nagging suspicion: "Who will ever want to marry me?" Boys, all arms and legs, have qualms about future success in the competitive world of men at work.

Steve, at 14, is typical of how the betweeners are pulled in two directions. Because he is unsure of himself, he feels a need for respect and approval from pals and parents alike.

To impress his gang, he starts sampling cigarettes and an occasional beer, if he can get it. He knows very well that these dashing deeds will shock and alarm his parents. He knows that a lie will grieve them equally, but when threatened with discovery his first reaction is to deny the truth in order to protect them as well as to preserve his standing with them.

His parents rescued him from this confused position neatly. They avoided the pitfall of a spectacular punishment which might have made him seem an even more dramatic figure to his friends. Instead, they first acknowledged

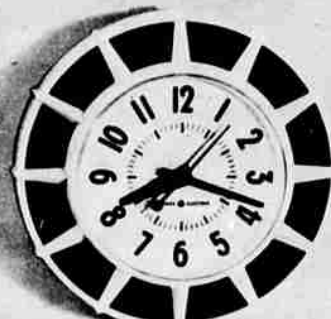
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that it was entirely natural for him to be curious about many of the adult experiences and privileges so near ahead. Then they gave him an undisturbed explanation of why it was better for him to wait. They ended with the compelling compliment that wins more points than scoldings do: "We know you are sensible enough to make the right decision."

Our own high hopes for our children sometimes weigh too heavily on them. Peter's father was a star athlete in college. Quite naturally, he hopes that his son will follow in his footsteps. "Get out there and win, kid! Don't let your old man down!" is his standard send-off before a game.

At 12, Peter is a fine athlete, but he is under a cloud at school as a poor sport. He finds an alibi for every mistake he makes. It's always someone else's fault when his team loses. He feels that he can keep his father's respect and approval only by winning, so he sacrifices sportsmanship.

Sandra, 13, is under a similar pressure, one we often encounter in junior-high-school boys and girls. She is above average in intelligence. Her parents are proud of her excellent marks. She leads her class in all but one subject, math, which is very hard for her. This year she triumphed in that subject, too—by cheating. Integrity had become less important than high grades because of her extreme desire "not to disappoint my family."

It is natural for us to want our children to do well in studies and in sports, but the pressure to excel is often a cruel burden. No child can be outstanding in every enterprise. Part of the job is to encourage each child to do his best. Equally important is giving a child credit for meeting new challenges to the fullest of his ability.

"I don't know what to make of today's teen-agers—I wasn't like that," is a comment we hear frequently.

This is true. We had the same emotions, but the demands on us were somewhat different. Most of us grew up in one neighborhood in a stabilizing circle of bigger families and many relatives nearby. Today, many more families are on the move. Children do not get their roots down as firmly in the community as we did. After school, far more children are on their own as an increasing number of mothers take jobs. Let us not forget that today's teen-agers were born in the Atomic Age. They remember the consternation that followed announcement of the first sputnik. In many ways, more is expected of today's youngsters than of earlier generations.

UNDERSTANDING these and other pressures that send so many betweeners to undesirable extremes does not mean that we can let all their difficult behavior go unnoticed. We are most successful, though, if we steer them past their troubles with care not to wound their touchy pride and sensitivity.

"I'm sorry—but did you have to humiliate me in front of everybody and make me feel like a baby?" was the angry complaint I heard recently from a betweener who had been drawn up short in public. Parents sometimes feel the need to correct a youngster without delay, but there is more than one way to do this. We are apt to win a point with much less pain if we make it in some way that allows the child to "save face" with us and others.

And very often we have to stand by and let them learn from harsh experience instead of depending on punishment or on oversolemn "reasoning." Boys and girls who are left out of parties because of rough words, wisecracks, or unseemly manners usually come around fast by themselves.

Above all, we must keep in mind that the betweeners are in transition. We know that they are not going to stay in junior high school forever. Just as surely, they will graduate from the baffling growing pains that often make these important, wonderful years the hardest for them—and for us, their parents.