

Challenging Adolescents

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This article examines the process of growth from childhood into adolescence and describes how, by giving students challenge and choice, teachers can help each student to become a distinct and different English language user.

The greatest mistake made by adults is to forget what it is like to be a child.

Adolescents are often seen by adults as being undisciplined, uncooperative and badly behaved. This view, from the adult perspective, indicates adult failure to understand this period from the adolescent perspective. If we examine the progress out of childhood, through adolescence towards adulthood, perhaps we can gain some understanding and learn some tips about how we should behave towards adolescents.

Leaving childhood – finding a new identity

Childhood is a magical period of freedom during which adults do not expect the child to be perfect, indeed mistakes are accepted as a normal part of growing up. Adults expect children to be dependant and children expect to be able to depend upon adults. Although children are naughty, they generally accept the fact that the world is governed by adult rules.

Young children are motivated by a desire for adult approval, from parents, from teachers, from all adults. Young children measure their success by the degree of adult approval which their efforts generate. When children reach the age of 9, 10 or 11, they are 'expert children'. They know what is expected from them and have the ability to perform most of these functions. They are experienced children and are at the top of the tree of childhood. They can be manipulative and they know how to 'play the system' with adults. They are starting to be able to accept responsibility for household tasks such as caring for their pets or looking after younger siblings. They can look after their possessions and handle money with a fair degree of maturity.

At the start of puberty, which generally starts earlier in girls than boys, these 'expert children' start searching for a new identity. They don't know what this new should be. They only know that it should be different from their adult-dependent child identity.

This search for a new identity is initially demonstrated by a rejection of adult links. The children become less motivated by adult approval. Peer approval, from others of their age, becomes a more powerful driver.

We can observe this change in the primary classroom. Young girls will become increasingly responsible and independent. They will become increasingly frustrated by the childish behaviour of the boys. In the home, they adolescents become less willing to accept physical displays of affection from their parents and adult relatives.

Hold me close, put me down, let me go

Desmond Morris began his career by studying animal behaviour, particularly the behaviour of animals in groups. Later, he applied his expertise to studying humans. His books *The Naked Ape*, *The Human Zoo* and *Manwatching*, gave us a new view of human behaviour from a zoologist's perspective. In *Intimate Behaviour*, Desmond Morris suggested that there were three phases in the cycle of development in human relationships. He called these phases:

1. *Hold me close.*
2. *Put me down.*
3. *Let me go.*

Desmond Morris first examined the relationship between baby and mother. This starts with “*Hold me close*”. During the first 12 months of life, baby will welcome close affectionate hugs from mother. Later, as baby becomes more mobile, baby will want greater freedom to explore the world, but will still desire the security of returning to mother. Morris calls this phase “*Put me down.*” Later the child will want even greater freedom to make discoveries in the “*Let me go*” phase.

Desmond Morris observes that the same three phases can be seen in childhood. Adolescence is clearly the “*Let me go*” phase in the relationship between parents and their offspring. When adolescents start to make their first girl/boy relationships, this same cycle of three phases is repeated.

Although the relationships between school students and their teachers could never be described as “intimate behaviour”, we can see a similar pattern in the development of social interaction between teachers and their students from Pre-primary, through Primary and into Secondary education.

Adolescent challenge

“*Let me go*” is a challenging phrase. The adolescent feels constrained by the close relationship with parents. The adolescent wants to break away and discover a new identity. This desire is emotional rather than logical.

Whilst the adolescent wants to escape from the close bond with parents, she/he wants to retain all the benefits of family life; regular free meals, laundry, and financial support. At an emotional level, the adolescent wants to escape but also have the freedom to return, at any time, and receive the same level of affection and support from parents that she/he received as a child. So, we can say, the adolescent wants to escape, but not abandon her/his parents.

The adolescent calls for freedom, but what are these freedoms? As we can see below many of these freedoms are connected with ‘image’. Adolescents want to:

- choose their own clothes and wear them as they wish.
- choose their own hairstyle.
- choose their own friends.
- choose how they will spend their time.
- choose how they will spend their money.

A difficult time for parents and schools

Parents will often resist these changes. For many years, the parents' public image has been (partly) defined by their well-dressed, well-nourished and well-behaved children. Parents may see the adolescents' behaviour as being a threat to their own social standing. Schools behave in similar ways. Schools which have a 'school uniform' policy, see their adolescent pupils adapting the school uniform in creative ways.

For years, adolescents have had their image defined by their parents and by their schools. Now they want to create their own image – their own identity. This will be manifested by bizarre clothing, strange hairstyles, excessive use of make-up.

Resist or give total freedom?

How should parents, schools and teachers react to the adolescent bid for freedom? Should they resist or should they abandon all constraints and give total freedom?

Adolescents need to struggle and break down the walls which are constraining their behaviour. If we give total freedom, the adolescents lose the need to struggle. They often interpret total freedom as lack of interest and withdrawal of affection. Therefore parents, schools and teachers should continue to battle against some aspects of the adolescents' bid for freedom whilst accepting that many of these battles will be lost.

Looking for challenge

Parents, schools and teachers should not give total freedom to adolescents because the adolescents are looking for challenges. They want to be able to 'prove' their new power and ability.

As adolescents move out of childhood into adolescence, they try to find a new identity. Part of this process is proving that they are no longer children and therefore deserve to be treated as young adults.

As teachers, we can help our adolescent students by giving them challenges. These can be simple challenges like giving a prepared presentation to the whole class. An even greater challenge would be to repeat the presentation to a different class. Another challenge would be to take an English speaking visitor on a tour of the school or the town. A friend in Russia has helped his students to record 'cover versions' of their favourite songs in English.

Students need challenges which will allow them to measure their own success. Sometimes these challenges will be to overcome their own shyness in using English in front of other people, but sometimes the challenge could be an intellectual or creative one.

Here are a few ideas:

- Answer a quiz which will require Internet research in English.
- Write a quiz which will require Internet research in English.
- Prepare a crossword puzzle with clues in English to challenge your classmates.
- Write a report in English about a football match or TV series school magazine.
- Write new lyrics in English for a popular song in your mother tongue.
- Write a CD insert leaflet in English for a favourite CD.
- Rehearse and perform a show of funny sketches in English for parents or other students.
- Prepare and demonstrate a favourite recipe in English.
- Prepare a booklet of your favourite poems in English including some of your own poems.
- Choose a short video sequence in your mother tongue. Translate and record an English sound track for the video.
- Prepare and record a radio programme in English about your favourite sports team.
- Design and describe a costume for yourself or a character in a story.
- Write and illustrate a tourist brochure about a place you know well, or would like to visit.

Challenge and Choice

As we can see from the variety of ideas above, the tasks have been chosen to appeal to students with different areas of interest and ability. When we examined the freedoms which adolescents wanted, many involved freedom to choose.

Teachers will need to abandon the habit of setting the same assignment to all students in the class. Adolescent students need to be given the freedom and learn the skills to choose their own assignments. This means that teachers will be evaluating many different types of assignment and there will not be a single 'answer key' against which to check the students' responses.

You may feel this will create extra work for you, but you will soon begin to enjoy the variety in your work and also begin to appreciate your students as individual English language users. They greatly wish to be appreciated as individuals. By giving them choice, each student will have a chance to shine and you will be able to enjoy their success.