The Wonder Years: A Trip Through my Early Adolescence

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Overall, I would have to say that my young adolescent experiences were typical of most preteens and teenagers. Even though at the time many things seemed quite stressful and difficult to deal with, I see now that my early teenage years were fairly simple and stable compared to those of many others. I cannot recall a single defining moment or traumatic incident in my past that has made me who I am today; but rather, I have been putting together the pieces one day at time for the last twenty years. In this piece I would like to share some of the most memorable and important experiences I encountered during my middle school years.

Step by Step

Friends, school, parents, crushes, athletics, and changes, if I had to sum up my adolescence in a few words these would be my choices. The combination of these main factors, along with several other minor ones, define my early teenage years. The positive and negative experiences I have had with these elements have helped me to develop a strong personal identity. Elkind (1998) states that, “In general, a healthy sense of identity is achieved when growth by differentiation and integration takes precedence over growth by substitution” (p. 18). Because most of my experiences have been positive, I have been able to use differentiation and integration rather than substitution in developing a great majority of my personal identity. I feel that I really developed a strong sense of who I was and what I believed in early in life. Many of my peers seemed to change their entire personality depending on who there were in the company of. Elkind (1998) used the quote, “‘When in Rome do as the Romans do’” (p. 21) to describe this result of growth
by substitution. I often saw this behavior in my classmates, and at times I even partook in it myself. However, even when I did things to “go along with the crowd” I always kept my true feelings and beliefs in the back of my mind, and this kept me from doing anything that I was strongly opposed to. I can remember feeling torn between two choices many times throughout my adolescence. One event I clearly remember occurred at a birthday party for my friend Kelley in seventh grade. The party started as a boy girl day time birthday party with cake, ice cream, and presents. I felt very cool just being invited to this party, and I really wanted to impress the popular girls, Lauren, Kelley, and Jessie. We had the party and proceeded to the high school football game that Friday night. Everything was going well until all the girls returned to Kelley’s house after the game for the sleepover portion of the party. I cannot remember why, but suddenly all of us girls began to fight. The fighting continued for the rest of the evening, and I distinctly remember being torn between the two fighting groups. The popular girls were fighting against everyone else, and I wanted to stick up for my friends, while at the same time I wanted to impress the popular girls. I went back and forth from the basement to the kitchen where each group was sitting. Soon enough everyone downstairs feel asleep, and the popular girls who were upstairs decided to create a concoction of shaving cream, toothpaste, and cologne to spread all over my sleeping friends. They wanted me to assist them in this mean-spirited prank, but I could not bring myself to do it. Even though I wanted to gain popularity, I realized that the girls sleeping on the floor were my true friends who were always there for me whenever I needed them. I felt so much peer pressure and Type A stress, which is foreseeable and avoidable, at that moment (Elkind, 1998). I knew what these girls were planning to do, and at the same time I knew I had
the choice whether to participate or not. This was one of the first times I remember using my well-developed personal identity in order to, “Postpone immediate gratification for the attainment of long term goals” (Elkind, 1998, p. 21). The immediate gratification would have been temporary popularity; however, by doing the right thing I earned lifelong friends and long term popularity throughout school. Through situations like this, I learned step by step, and day by day how to stand up for what I believe in.

Coach

A very significant amount of my adolescent years was impacted by sports. In fourth, fifth, and sixth grade I took Tae-kwan-do at the American Tae-kwan-do Association. This was one the most eye opening and self esteem building activities I have ever taken part in. An article from The Clearing House states that, “There are many claims for numerous benefits of sports participation for children and young adolescents: learning to meet life’s problems; character development; having fun; overall fitness, strength, and coordination; sense of personal competence” (McEwin & Dickinson, 1996, p.5). Karate provided me with all of these elements. Not only did I get exercise by doing the workouts, but I also developed a strong belief in the importance of physical well being that I still carry with me today. I made several close friends, who I felt a powerful bond with, because we all loved karate. We provided each other with fun and entertainment, while at the same time we were always there to talk about all the things that seemed so vitally important in our lives at the time; such as, school, friends, and of course crushes. Coordination may seem like a very minor issue; however, I grew very tall very quickly in these years. In This We Believe, Swain (1995) explains that, “In the area of Physical Development, young adolescents: Experience rapid, irregular physical
growth”, and also, “Undergo bodily changes that may cause awkward, uncoordinated movements” (p.1). Learning forms and control during sparring matches really helped me learn to control my body and not feel so terribly uncoordinated and clumsy all the time.

Along with the positive physical aspects of karate, there were also many positive psychological and emotional components. The instructors were positive role models ranging in age from about seventeen to forty. They did their best to instill positive morals in us through dialogue and the weekly theme. Each week the instructors would present a theme, such as, integrity, courtesy, respect, or self esteem. During each class we would all sit and discuss or feelings about the topic for a few minutes before we began our workout. In Beyond Customs, James (1974) explains that there are the Twelve Contradictory Needs of Young Adolescents. Karate did an excellent job of fulfilling all of these needs. For instance, doing forms fulfilled my need for routine, while putting on pads and helmets for sparring allowed me to express intensity (James, 1974). Along with this I felt separateness and belonging (James, 1974). I always felt like part of the ATA family, but at the same time I developed a strong sense of self through pondering the weekly topics and disciplining myself to learn. After earning a first degree black belt I still loved karate; however, I turned in my uniform to pursue middle school interscholastic sports and bond with my peers at my own school.

Elkind (1998) expresses that the increase in middle school athletics indicates a vanishing marker for today’s high school students (p. 115). Even though this may hold some truth, this is the norm since, “More than 80% of all middle schools have interscholastic sports programs” (McEwin & Dickinson, 1996, p. 4). For me junior high athletics were an extremely positive experience. The concepts of sports burnout and
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parental pressure never became an issue for me (Elkind, 1998, p.116). I ran cross country and track and also played basketball. Although at times I did feel overwhelmed by the length and intensity of practices, I believe that I am now a better person for fighting through them. I developed strong friendships, learned about winning and losing and the importance of teamwork, and also saw the impact that caring coaches can have on young adolescents. McEwin and Dickinson (1996) explain that the behavior and knowledge of coaches is vital to the quality of the teenagers experience in sports. I feel that I was lucky to have had each of the coaches I encountered along the way. They were caring, involved, and knowledgeable, and each one taught me not only about a sport, but also about myself. My cross country coach for instance, taught me that hard work really does pay off, and that I could do anything I set my mind to. My first day of practice I could not even run half a mile; however, by the end of the season I could finish an entire two mile race. Half of this was physical, but the other half was mental. I was getting into better shape, but what really gave me the ability to run was the support of Coach Rupe as he encouraged me to run through the pain. This was when I first learned that the phrase “mind over matter” really does mean something. I took this new found knowledge and have incorporated it into every element of my life.

Middle school athletics fulfilled my need for identity, connectedness, and power (Weinstein G. & Fantini, M.D., 1987). Cross country definitely had the biggest impact on these elements, so I will explain its effect on myself as a young adolescent. I always felt very close and connected with my teammates. We had something in common; we were all runners. I took so much pride in being part of this team, that I can hardly put it into words. My school was very small, so the junior high and high school teams
practiced together. I loved being able to hang out with the older kids. I thought the upperclassman boys were so cute, and I felt privileged anytime one of them talked to me. By far, the strongest form of connectedness that I felt was with the older girls. I looked at them as though they were goddesses. They could do no wrong in my eyes, and I wanted to follow in their footsteps so badly. I wanted to listen to their music, have boyfriends like they did, go to homecoming and be on the court just like them. In This We Believe it is stated that, “In the area of Social Development, young adolescents: In their search for self, model behavior after older esteemed student.…” (Swain, 1995). This is exactly what I did with these girls, and I did develop my sense of identity by modeling them. Fortunately, they were positive role models and set a good example for me. Soon enough, I was the senior on homecoming court with the boyfriend, and I had junior high runners looking up to me. As far as power goes, I always felt so in control whenever I was running. No one could stop me from running. My physical ability was the only thing that could hold me back or push me forward. The harder I worked the faster I ran, and that made me feel like I had complete power over at least one aspect of my life.

Saved by the Bell

My school system did not have a middle school. Kindergarten through sixth grade was in the elementary building, and seventh through twelfth was in the high school. Fifth and sixth grade gave me a sense of power. Being the oldest kids in the school made the changes of adolescence a little less traumatic because it did not feel like people were watching me all the time. First graders do not care if your shirt is from Abercrombie, if your hair is just right, or if your chest is big enough. Elkind (1998) discusses an imaginary audience that young people always feel is watching them. The prevalence of
this audience definitely grew when I entered the seventh grade and moved to the high school. Swain (1995) says that starting junior high can be scary because there are more people around and the school is bigger. For me the issue was not so much that the building was big or that there were too many people, rather it was the fact that I was in seventh grade and there were seniors in the same building. It was hard not to feel self-conscious when such dramatic physical and emotional changes were occurring, and the upperclassmen were already out of their awkward stages.

When I think back to my middle school years, academics is usually not the first thing that comes to mind; however, it was a prevalent part of those years. My school was very small, and “It is well established that the effectiveness of education is directly related to the amount of one-on-one time between student and teacher” (Elkind, 1998, p.169). I feel that I definitely benefited from attending a small school. I knew all my classmates very well, and I felt a close connection with almost every teacher I had over the years. Elkind (1998) wrote, “Teachers are important role models for students. When teachers are no longer excited about what they are teaching and have lost their commitment to young people, their effectiveness as role models is diminished or lost” (p.181). I could tell that every one of my teachers really cared not only about the subject matter but also about his or her students. I always felt that if I had a question or problem whether it was school related or not I could go to my teachers.

For as long as I can remember I have put a lot of academic pressure on myself. It was never pressure from my parents, teachers, or peers. Rather, it was completely self-inflicted. Swain (1995) mentions that during early adolescence students gain more knowledge about their “personal abilities.” For me this meant coming to the realization
that I was not good at math. I distinctly remember getting a math test back in fifth grade with a D on it. I was so upset. School had always come so easily to me, and I did not know how to handle failure. I also recall that I could not build three dimensional shapes with clay and toothpicks for the proficiency test to save my life, and I was devastated. As the years went on I worked hard and got A’s in math, so I was chosen to take algebra in eighth grade. This was traumatic. I could not comprehend the subject, and every day I would sit and fight with my mom as she tried to help me with my homework. Math classes caused me a great deal of Type C stress throughout my early adolescence (Elkind, 1998). I knew I would have to take exams and turn in homework; however, I could not prepare myself. Math never became my favorite subject, but I did manage to deal with my stress and learn the material.

This We Believe states that, “In the area of Moral Development, young adolescents: Are generally idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to become socially useful (Swain, 1995). This statement is very true in my case. I knew my whole life that I wanted to become a teacher, and in middle school I finally got the chance to try my hand at it. In seventh grade I began going to the grade school twice a week to grade papers and tutor younger students. It felt so great to be making a difference. I felt like those little kids really looked up to me, and I was not only being a role model, but also helping them learn. At that point in time, I had the idea in my head that I could be the perfect teacher and make all my students love school. Although that is still a goal, I know now that it is not going to be as easy as the simple plan I had worked out when I was thirteen.

*The Facts of Life*
Some of the things I remember learning about the most vividly in middle school were growing up, puberty, and sex. My parents never sat me down and gave me an official sex talk, so whatever information I received at school was the extent of my accurate knowledge. I was definitely not as informed as the middle school kids today are about these issues, and I do not think I even knew as much as most of the kids in my own class. In the spring of fifth grade all of us girls were taken to the movie room to watch a film about two girls getting their periods. We also received books that explained puberty and sex. While we girls were suffering through the big talk, the boys got to go outside and play kickball. To this day I am not sure why they did not have to talk with the male teachers about the changes they were going through. We got the same talk in sixth grade and this time the boys did have to have one also. Elkind (1998) discusses the fact that today very young children know about sex and are exposed to it through the media very regularly, so knowledge of sexual topics is a vanishing marker. When I was younger my parents really protected me from seeing sexual acts on TV and such. I do remember reading articles in Teen magazine and sneaking a peek at MTV every once in a while; however, I really did not know all the facts. I think that the manner in which the information was presented to us in middle school was appropriate. It was the first time I heard the facts from an adult rather than from my friends who had pieced together false information from older siblings, television, and musical lyrics. Elkind (1998) states that, “Sexual behavior occurs on the average of three times per hour during prime time” (p.126). I do not remember catching these sexual behaviors on television. Maybe my parents did not let me watch those shows, or the innuendos just went over my head. My best guess; however, is that when I was a preteen there were not as many or as direct
sexual references being presented during primetime. As I continued to grow up the
dialogue between teachers and students about this type of topic stayed opened, but eighth
grade health class was the first time we received all the information in a classroom with
boys and girls present. I'll never forget watching a video called *The Miracle of Life.* This
was a graphic film, and it left nothing to the imagination. It ended with the taping of a
live birth. I remember everyone in the room trying not to laugh at what we had just
witnessed. Looking back I think that eighth grade may have been a little too early for us
to watch that video. Overall, I believe that my school did a good job of informing us with
the necessary facts without scaring us or promoting any inappropriate behavior.

*Family Ties*

I can honestly say that I have had one of the most stable and traditional home
lives of anyone I know. My parents were happily married while I was growing up. My
dad worked, while my mom took care of my brother and me. While discussing nuclear
families Elkind (1998) says that they are the “ideal family form” and that young people
raised in this situation are likely to become “responsible, productive citizens” (p.10). I
cannot make a judgment about the effects of growing up in a permeable family; however,
I feel that being raised in a nuclear family has been a positive experience for me. I
remember being very shocked when I found out that my cousin’s parents were getting
divorced when I was in middle school, because I did not think that divorces could occur
in my family. I still felt that my parents would never get divorced, and I still do to this
day. Elkind (1996) refers to thoughts like these as a personal fable. Seeing my cousin’s
parents go through a divorce helped me to realize that my own personal fable could be
wrong, and bad things can happen to anyone.
My parents have always tried to protect me, and at times they have even gone a little overboard. From my first day a kindergarten when my mom followed my bus to school, right up to her telling me not to go out alone at night on campus, she has always been overprotective. When I was very young I never really noticed what other kids my age were doing, and I never thought my parents were different than anyone else’s. As I approached my teenage years, however, with my newly developed formal operations I started to realize that many of the kids my age had more freedom than I did (Elkind, 1998). I became more aware of what my peers were doing, and I could not accept the fact that I was not allowed to do these things. At that point in time I thought it was a curse, and I felt that my parents were very irrational. They both grew up in bad neighborhoods in downtown Youngstown, and I always wondered why they couldn’t understand that McDonald was safe. I put up so many fights over my early teenage years. I recall one night at a little league game my friends asked me to come play flashlight tag afterwards. I was so excited; because they played all the time, but I lived on the outskirts of the village so I could not just walk down to join them. I ran up to my mom to ask permission. Little did I know she was going to say, “No.” Her reasoning was that she did not want me running around the streets in the dark, but at the time I just saw it as her being mean to me. I constantly felt like I was missing out on all the fun my friends were having. This fighting continued and many times I just argued to argue, which Elkind (1998) says is a normal action for young adolescents. I wanted so badly to have power that I would disagree with my parents on any issue just to have a say in things. The issue we fought the most frequently about was definitely boys. I remember when I was in seventh grade a boy named Adam asked me to go for a bike ride to Ianozone’s Pizza with
him. I thought this was the greatest thing in the entire world; however, my parents did not think so. They said first of all that I could not ride my bike to the pizza place, and secondly I was not allowed to go anywhere alone with a boy. I was furious, but I got over it in time. In eighth grade I got my first real boyfriend, Kevin. We met at cross country, and I thought he was perfect. He was without a doubt my first love, and I wanted to be with him all the time. Once again though, mom and dad did not like that idea. As Elkind (1998) says, “Young teenagers in particular should not be allowed to go to unchaperoned parties, on single dates, or to stay home alone for extended periods of time” (p.79). My parents could not have been more in agreement with Elkind. Kevin and I were not allowed to go anywhere alone, or be at each other’s houses when our parents were not home. We actually went to see *Titanic* at the theater with our moms. This was quite traumatic and embarrassing at the time. As I got older and more responsible my parents gave me more freedom, and looking back now I suppose that they were right to forbid me to do so many things, because the world is not as safe as my twelve year old perspective allowed me to see it.

An article entitled “Changes in the parental bond and the well-being of adolescents and young adults” states that:

Many studies highlight the fact that parents play a key role in the well-being and functioning of adolescents, whether in the development of identity, a positive self-image, life satisfaction, social competence and other skills, or emotional problems such as psychological stress and depression and problem behavior (Wel, Bogt, Raaijmakers, 2002, p.2).
My parents played an in-depth role in each of these aspects of my adolescence. They taught me that it is important to be my own person and have my own identity. I remember hearing all the time that I was perfect the way I was, and that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Without them constantly reinforcing these ideas to me, I probably would not have had a very high self esteem or positive self-image. Swain (1995) states, “In the area of Moral Development, young adolescents: Need the influence of adult role models who will listen and affirm their moral consciousness and actions.” My parents taught me morals and values and were always there to reinforce them with their own actions and behaviors. I would often think about what my mom or dad would do in a certain situation, and then decide whether it was in my best interest or not. My mom and dad were always there for me no matter what. Even when I was having hard times, like the devastating break-up between Kevin and me, they were right there to support me and help me through it. They provided me with guidance, love, support, and even friendship.

Life Goes On

I hope to use my own experiences to help my students in the future. Hopefully, by sharing my stories and the lessons I learned throughout my own adolescent years with my class I can make a positive impact. I never went through anything traumatic, and I know that many of my students will have problems that I will not be able to personally relate to; however, every adolescent has his or her own problems, including myself. I feel that by letting my students know about the experiences I went through, and showing them that I lived through them and grew as a person from each one, they may be able to cope with their own problems more easily. If I share with my students the fact that I
fought with my parents, had a broken heart, and struggled to feel popular at times, then they will be more likely to come to me when they face similar dilemmas. I think that communication is the key to a good student teacher relationship; therefore, I will be sure to make the students feel comfortable confiding in me by showing them they can trust me. My main goal is to help these young people develop a strong sense of self and personal identity early in life as I did. They need to realize that they are all going to make mistakes and bad decisions at times, but in addition to this, they also need to realize that this is normal and simply part of growing up. I will share with them the fact that I made mistakes and bad decisions, but in the end I figured out who I was and what kind of person I wanted to be, as they also will. If they can accept their mistakes and develop strong personal identities they will be much more likely to handle their problems responsibly and be able to tackle difficult situations in a mature manner without being swayed by peer pressure. As they develop I want each one of them to find something that they can love, such as a sport, a club, or an academic subject. I want to be there to help them when they have obstacles, like algebra and break ups that seem insurmountable and impossible to solve. One thing I can say for certain is that I will use my own experiences and everything I have learned to better the life of each child who walks through my classroom door.
References


