

Surviving the Ride: Understanding Adolescence

by Kate Iadipaolo

(In order to better advocate, one must better understand.)



This piece includes a summary and excerpts of major points from a book by Rudolf Allers, M.D., Ph.D. entitled [*Forming Character in Adolescents*](#). Originally published in 1940, this book is addressed to parents and educators of young people. Allers received his MD in Austria, served with distinction at major European hospitals as psychiatrist and physician, was a member of the last class taught by Sigmund Freud (whose work Allers later debunked in [*What's Wrong With Freud?*](#)), received his doctorate in Philosophy, taught at Georgetown and The Catholic University of America, and also served the Church as a matrimonial advisor. This work is the fruit of his learning and experience—and though it was written years ago, contains timeless wisdom and fresh insights into the lives of adolescents.¹

Adolescence is a Time of Transition

The time of adolescence is a time of transition. A person, being in-between childhood and adulthood, must navigate through many changes. In order to understand adolescence, it makes sense to begin with the child's worldview: "The child takes himself for granted, as he takes the rest of reality."² A child unabashedly relies very much on others, and in cases where stability is the context of homelife, comes to feel a certain security. This security compensates for his as yet undeveloped objective and subjective senses.

The security of childhood seems to all but vanish as a young person enters adolescence. "[T]his situation changes, gradually or suddenly as the case may be, with the onset of adolescence... Accordingly, it is essentially a period of unrest and of uncertainty."³

Uncertainty is the Basic Feature of the Age of Adolescence

The adolescent cannot 'take himself for granted' the way that he did as a child. "**The reliability of things and persons vanishes**, not because these things and persons have become different, but because the adolescent's relation to them changes. This change of relation is due to the change in the individual himself, or rather in the consciousness he has of himself."⁴

With so much uncertainty, it is difficult to predict what a day in the life of an adolescent will look like: "Things may become utterly different overnight. What was lovable to-day may be detestable to-morrow. Things which seemed devoid of all interest may be enthralling the next day. Projects which were conceived enthusiastically may become stale and stupid within twenty-four hours."⁵

There is a striving for independence throughout one's life that becomes especially pronounced during adolescence. The very onset of adolescence urges a young person to rely on himself more than appealing to others in the way of a child. But relying on himself is difficult as this self seems to be "*ever-changing, ever-elusive, ever-mysterious.*"⁶

On the brink: “The adolescent mind, however, has to face **a world as yet unknown**, one in which he is precisely not at home, which is in a way strange and uncanny; and he has to face it while he is still ignorant of his own forces and capacities.”⁷

“The formation and solidification of the self is the very essence of the developmental processes during adolescence.”⁸

The changes which are undergone in adolescence are POSITIVE developments. As Allers reminds us: “It is indeed **necessary** that the infantile attitudes be replaced by such as are adequate to the **new stage of development**.”⁹

“With the slowly growing consciousness of being a self—absolutely distinct from every other self, **having to live its own life and to bear the whole responsibility for its being and doing**—the adolescent mind develops a natural reluctance to disclose itself.”¹⁰ This is the formation of that adult attribute of discretion, or right discernment of things to be told and things to be withheld. The teenager is learning to walk the middle path, but in the process sometimes tends toward one extreme or the other.

“Understanding means, in the most literal sense of the word, standing under another – that is, bearing his burden and taking his place, sharing therefore his point of view.”¹¹

An adolescent may be outspoken one day, reticent the next. “For this reason it is well to make use of every opportunity he offers us for becoming acquainted with him and his problems; it will not do, with adolescents, to postpone a discussion, because we never can be sure that to-morrow he will be as willing to confide and listen as he is to-day.”¹² This also underscores for educators of youth the importance of just spending time with young people, in order to be available for those moments of disclosure for which a mature and trusted adult is sought after.

It is also important to remember that some adolescent behaviors, especially those exaggerated behaviors, are due to an attempt to overcompensate for their basic uncertainty.¹³ Every issue a young person is dealing with is utterly real, even though to some adults they may seem transitory and trivial. “Changing though their ideas may be, young people are nevertheless **deadly in earnest** about them.”¹⁴ In order to know an adolescent, one must take his ideas and problems seriously.

Responding to the issues of adolescents: “It is, of course, quite right to tell the adolescent that his troubles are not unique in the sense he believes them to be; but this has to be said tactfully and with caution. Only after having got the youngster to feel that one understands him and is willing to listen and to advise, may one point out to him that all these troubles belong to human nature, that they have indeed a peculiar note, first with adolescents in general, secondly with him as an individual; that even adult life is not altogether free of them. But it would be a mistake to cut short his tale by stating that one has heard these very things already many times.”¹⁵

Adolescents have such a strong sense of the novelty of their experience and ideas that any remark made by an adult claiming to have had similar experience is taken “as a sure sign of a

lack of understanding.”¹⁶ As the adolescent comes into his own, no longer can he subscribe to the old ideas, but he has not as yet replaced these ideas with others.

Relationship to Authority

“**The child** is not yet capable of understanding and of justifying... ideas rationally; he **relies on authority**. Authority, however, is one of the things that **adolescents** most resent. It is, strange enough, **at the same time one** of the things for which they long most.”¹⁷

The onset of this attitude toward authority is triggered by the fact that the adolescent “can no longer subscribe to the old ideas, nor can he definitely replace them by others. His mind is in a state of doubt and tossed from one extreme attitude into another. The inevitable result is that the adolescent assumes mainly **an attitude of denial**. Young people are often quick in rejecting views held by the older generation, but they are not capable of replacing these ideas with others.”¹⁸

“Authority **as such** does not impress youthful minds...”¹⁹ It is important to remind adolescents that they are to obey legitimate authority when appropriate, not simply because such an authority says so, but rather because they are most often bound to know better.

Against premature generalizations: It is important to seek the root of adolescent revolt in both general explanations and in each individual. The reasons why an individual adolescent revolts at all, and why he chooses one particular way of expressing his revolutionary attitude, must be ascertained by careful observation and reflection.²⁰

Inefficient authority is worse than none at all. **The face of authority:** Only authority which is accepted by the adolescent is helpful. Many adolescents (and adults) are more impressed by personality than position, therefore, “the authority of personalities is... generally greater than the authority of institutions.”²¹ The adolescent “has a desire for some visible, concrete, impressive power on which to rely; an institution, even if it is in a way admired and acknowledged, has not this capacity of immediately impressing the youthful mind. **The respect for and the acknowledgement of institutions depend, therefore, very much on the persons representing them and presenting them to adolescents.**”²²

A **brutal** assertion of authority is **never accepted** by the adolescent, and will probably stir up **revolt** in an adolescent. Below are two other possible ways to make authority acceptable to adolescents:

- 1) The reasonableness of laws based on natural truths is best **conveyed** by trusted persons to adolescents. This is a kind of authority established on the basis of **personal relations**. One must be aware of the many influences which can affect relationships, from emotional factors to accidental circumstance. The disturbance of these relationships may affect the adolescent’s stance toward authority.

2) Authority may become acceptable to an adolescent because its necessity and its true meaning are **approved by reason**. Reasons, once understood, become part of the personality and withstand the passing of time.

Additional Thoughts on the Proper Exercise of Authority:

- Avoid at all costs the **pretense of infallibility**. If you refuse to admit your error, then young people are discouraged to know that you are “not only liable to error, but also capable of insincerity.”²³ Even when a young person recognizes that trusted adults make mistakes, something more valuable is gained. “The intellectual authority, if one may express it in this way, becomes less, but the moral authority grows.”²⁴
- Authority should not expect of others that which said authority is unwilling to do. Teenagers can spot a **hypocrite** a mile away! “There are, of course, many things permitted to adults which cannot be conceded to the child or the adolescent; but [adolescents] must know that these things will be accessible to them too after a certain time, and, in so far as possible, must be told why the adults may do or have this or that, while the younger generation is still denied the permission.”²⁵ Authority must **not be exaggerated** “so as to make it utterly disgusting to the adolescent, **nor may we dispense with it** and thereby fail to develop a true sense for authority and order.”²⁶ In dispensing with authority, the adult is placed on exactly the same level with the adolescent. By doing so, this adult “renounces every possibility of creating a real understanding of authority.”²⁷ Without such a real understanding of authority, the further development of the adolescent (in social life and work especially) is endangered.

Advocating for Adolescents

Support adolescents by asking them their views, and follow through by asking them to explain and prove their views. Adolescence is an important time to form good habits of the mind.

Encourage: There is hardly an adolescent who wouldn’t report feeling discouraged by the thought that they never will overcome certain difficulties, never be able to realize certain ideals, etc. “Discouragement is the necessary consequence of uncertainty, especially uncertainty about the ‘self’.”²⁸ For precisely this reason, “Encouragement is something of which the adolescents are urgently in need.”²⁹

When encouraging be sure to remember:

- To be effective, encouragement must apply to actual things worthy of such words.
- Adolescents are most encouraged by repeated small successes.
- Take the middle road: encouraging means challenging in addition to affirming.
- To avoid discouragement, “One ought... never to rebuke (the adolescent) for something wrong he has done, without letting him feel that one trusts in his capacity to behave differently.”³⁰

Know the characteristics of adolescence as well as the characteristics of each individual’s personality, their present situation and their past history. The educator’s principal task is not to condemn but to understand the behavior of young people. A young person’s various behaviors can be considered a problem, **or** “an opportunity for discovering the true nature of his pupil’s mental make-up.”³¹

- **embarrassment:** “Embarrassment disappears when the person ‘feels at home’; that is, when he feels that he is sufficiently appreciated.”³² Exaggerated desires for making a good impression lead to a habit of embarrassment. This can be tempered by the realization that: we cannot always expect to make a good impression on everyone.
- **instability of behavior:** This instability springs from uncertainty about self, world, and destiny. The adolescent does not have full control over his instable behavior. “This behavior indeed springs from sources unknown to the individual and beyond his influence.”³³

Education & Influence: In one of his more lucid moments, Allers reminds of quite possibly **the most important** tenet to apply in the process of educating and influencing young people:

“What a man has to learn, and what he is best taught while still a youngster, is that these (objective) laws, which are apparently outside of himself and forcing him to obedience, are in truth **the very laws of his own existence and his own personality**. They are not merely some strange powers one cannot help but obey, because otherwise they would destroy us; they are **the very basis of individual human existence**. The laws of reality are at the same time the laws of each individual, since the individual is part of this reality and not merely opposed to it. **Rebellion against these laws therefore undermines the individual’s very existence**. The idea that self-assertion necessarily involves opposition or rebellion must be combated. It is one of the most disastrous mistakes the human mind ever became guilty of, because it destroys the true conception of man’s place in the **totality of real being**.”³⁴ (!!!)

Instilling good habits of thought—The adolescent will readily concede that human society cannot persist without honesty and reliability prevailing in it. They are necessary for mankind and society to exist at all. During his adolescence, a young person will base his behavior much more on his subjective feelings (new and strange as they are) than on objective considerations. Though a young person may be brought to see the weight of objective considerations, also, it is something that must be taught before it becomes habit.

In practice: “Little is gained by simply telling the adolescent what he ought to do and how he ought to behave, because he knows this pretty well himself. **The important thing is to make him see, and if possible to discover for himself, why he does not do what in his own eyes is right**. The best way is to let him find out; we ought to make him explain why he acted just as he has done and does. He is sure to have quite a number of reasons for his behavior. By analyzing these reasons, he may be brought to understand that they are not as valid as he believed them to be.”³⁵ Consequences applied without explanation and understanding of the undesired behavior will do little to modify the behavior, much less offer opportunity for the young person’s growth. It will often amplify the young person’s revolt.

Along with encouragement should come an education in **persistence and patience**: “The adolescent must be shown that it is quite right to strive for a high and lofty goal, but that to realize such a goal demands the exercise of patience.”³⁶

In conclusion—“The point is, that in dealing with the adolescent, we have first of all to help him to some understanding of himself.”³⁷ The educator of young people should also expect to be educated along the way.

¹ *N.B. While the author of the book, Rudolf Allers, acknowledges the vast differences between individuals, he speaks in a generalized way of the adolescent, offering a basic sketch in the hopes of assisting educators of young people. He refers to the adolescent as “he” for the sake of simplicity with no intention of excluding young ladies from the discussion.*

² Rudolf Allers, *Forming Character in Adolescents* (Fort Collins, CO: Roman Catholic Books, 1940), p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Emphasis added.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33. Emphasis added.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43. Emphasis added.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63-64. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65. Emphasis added.

²⁰ Cf. Allers, p. 67.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 67-68.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.