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BLIC AFFAIRS PAMPHLET No. 127

EEPING UP WITH TEEN-AGERS

EVELYN MILLIS DUVALL



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REMOTE STORAGE

KEEPING UP WITH TEEN-AGERS

By EVELYN MILLIS DUVALL

Times Have Changed

Grandma may have been quite a girl in the gay nineties. Mother weathered the first World War and was part of the "flapper age" that followed. Yet both Grandma and Mother, and the men they married, often find it hard to keep up with the pace that is being set by their young people today.

Times are changing so fast that each generation lives in a world that is only partially known to the one that precedes it or the one that follows. Understanding these shifts, what they are, what they mean, and how they affect the thinking and behavior of the people who live through them, is one span in bridging the generations today.

This pamphlet has been prepared cooperatively with the National Council on Family Relations and is one of a series of Public Affairs Pamphlets on personal problems and family life.

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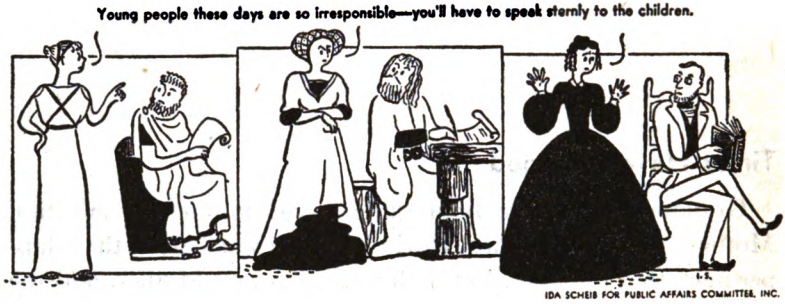
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

YOUNG people are always "going to the dogs" in a sense. Some differences between the parent generation and young people are only natural. These differences are recognized by members of each generation in the familiar way each justifies its position by discrediting the other. Hence, young people for many generations have referred to their elders as "old fogies" who "don't under-



stand," are "old-fashioned," and "out-of-date." Similarly, the elder generation has continued through the years to express its concern over the follies of youth in such terms as "flaming youth," "the lost generation," "irresponsible," and "headed for trouble."

Although there are similarities that are striking, it is the contrasts between the members of the two generations that attract our attention and create friction. In a number of ways youth and their elders tend to be different.

Youth Tends to Be Daring

Young people, particularly the teen-age youth with which this pamphlet is concerned, are naturally inexperienced in many areas of life. They have not yet faced the difficulties to be met in carrying out life plans. They have not yet been hurt by the failures that teach a certain amount of caution. Youth has not

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Young People Try to Be Like Each Other

Young people naturally try to be like other young people. Youth is constantly trying to be like, look like, sound like, and act like each other. Parents often find this hard to accept. Yet it represents an identification with one's own generation that is part of growing up. It may be hard for parents to realize that a snip of a girl friend wields more influence with Junior than all the elders of the family. Today's "jive talk" that translates only for the youthful the meanings of "slick chick," "in the groove," "deg to biffer," and all the rest of the code "slanguage" is meant to set youth off by itself and keep the parents out. Yet these same parents in their youth coined such nonsense as "twenty-three skidoo," the now generally understood "flapper," "speakeasy," and "drag a weed" that mystified their elders and unified youth in their time.

Youth Takes Modern Inventions and Standards for Granted

Today's young people have grown up in a world of wonders. Yet, because they have known nothing else, they take them for granted. Modern youth has ridden about town in automobiles since baby days. Young people have been lulled to sleep by radios all their lives. They are used to fresh fruits all year round. They accept talking movies as a matter of course. They spend more money in a week than their grandparents had in a month. They

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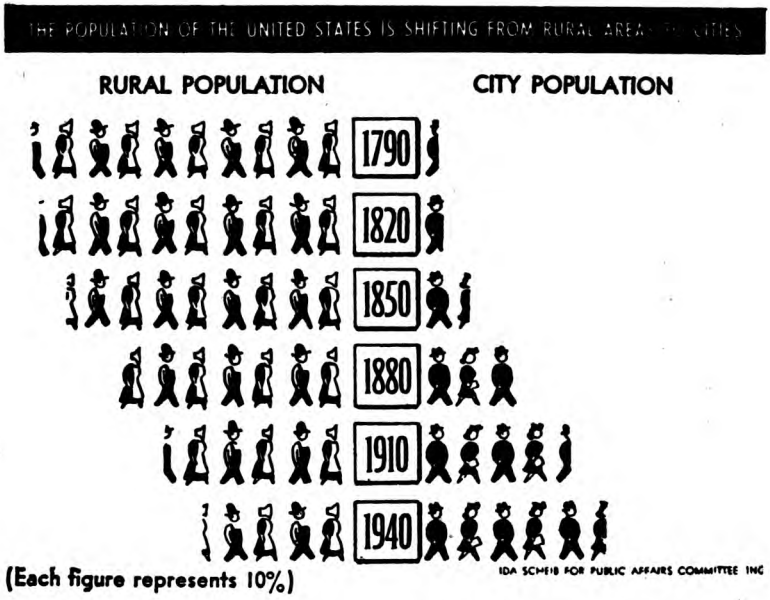
For instance, the Newberrys moving into the big city from rural New England come with a rich heritage of Sabbath observance, Bible reading, and temperance born of years of staunch adherence to puritanical tradition. Their children attend school and go about with young people whose parents migrated from



southern Europe. These Italian children have had wine from their baby days. They are astounded at the Newberry young people who are not allowed to touch any kind of liquor. The Newberrys are shaken by the casual acceptance of alcoholic beverages by their children's friends, while the Italian parents are equally shocked that the Newberrys would withhold food to punish their children. Both sets of parents shake their heads and wonder what the world is coming to, while their youngsters, rubbing elbows with so many different little worlds, are having to weigh and discard or retain patterns of living that their parents took for granted.

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woman today faces literally thousands of vocational possibilities for which he or she may train and become adept. The son is no longer expected to follow in his father's footsteps. The girl may marry or not, have children or not, work or not, at whatever she pleases, in a way that would have been unheard of in her mother's or her grandmother's day.



Recreational opportunities have similarly increased. The automobile has widened our young people's playground to take in many square miles never known to the older generation. Electric lights, night shifts, and commercial amusements have kept places open far into the night where but a generation ago, "they took in everything but the sidewalks at ten o'clock at night." Today's youth have not only the home, church, and school activities that absorbed their parents' leisure time, but in addition a host of others in sports, the arts, crafts, music, drama, museums, books, and the world of wonders that the radio brings.

Personally the choices are many and confusing. Out of the variety of opportunities open to youth comes the problem of wise choice not only of where to go and what to do, but even of what to be. Roles are no longer rigid and definite. Who is a good girl? A good woman? A good mother? A good boy, man, father? Few of us have a clear understanding of just what is expected of us. This is especially true of youth who have grown up in the welter and bewilderment of the city's opportunities with few established patterns to guide them. Grandma did not have as many possibilities but she did not have to struggle through the confusion

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sible of property rights? What does youth have to say for itself?

First of all, we must recognize that even while such practices as we have been discussing may be common enough to evoke continued and widespread criticism, *many* young people are not irresponsible. A great many young people do take care of their things, do respect the property rights of others both within and outside the home, and do assume a real and conscientious responsibility that exceeds that of many adults.



Let's turn the question around then, and instead of asking "Why don't young people take more responsibility?" let's ask, "Why do some young folk assume as much responsibility as they do?" The answer now is not hard. Evidence points clearly to the fact that people, young and old alike, take as much responsibility as is really theirs.

Occasionally young people refuse to take responsibility simply because they are afraid of it, and of growing up. Those children fortunate enough to have had graduated opportunities for more and more responsibility as they develop are often less fearful of growing up than those who are suddenly plunged into adult responsibilities.

Responsibility Must Be Given Before It's Taken

The "smothering" mother who hovers nearby to remind son or daughter to find his school books, to hang up pajamas, or to scrub out the tub, as often as not ends up by doing the job herself. Philip Wylie has caustically denounced this "Momism" as one

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Music lessons are often a burden. As long as they are taken primarily to satisfy a mother's wishes rather than because the youngster himself wants a musical education, we can expect only a lukewarm interest. In those homes where music flows as a language of parents and children alike, the young people take to it as a part of living. It takes an unusual interest or exceptional aptitude to keep an active teen-ager at work on Bach when the gang goes in for jive and the rest of the family doesn't know one note from another. Culture is caught, not taught.

The Daily Chores

Washing and wiping the dishes, taking care of the baby, carrying out the ashes, and the other day-by-day jobs to be done around the house are no more interesting to young people than they are to the adults of the household. The young people who take their share of these responsibilities are usually those who (1) feel that they have a real stake in the family, (2) know that their efforts will be noticed and appreciated, (3) recognize that the others in the family are pulling their share of the load too, and (4) are free to do the jobs themselves in their own way without too close "snoopervision." This doesn't mean that parents should not guide youth, but there are ways of doing this and ways that should be avoided. Parents who keep a string on all the household responsibilities, laying down minute instructions for what is to be done, and how, and checking up frequently with criticisms for every departure from their formulas, often are disappointed that their young people don't take more responsibility. Too often they



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tions for which they have no answers. All around them are many, many people behaving in a vast variety of ways. The modern high school exposes every youth to many patterns of behavior that are new to him. Ruling groups make some types of behavior seem "smart," and those that struggle to belong follow along. Few young people want to be labeled "sissies" or "babies" and so try to appear as sophisticated as the next one. This makes for a considerable amount of "faking," of "putting on a false front" to cover the uncertainty and confusion just below the surface.

Kiss on the First Date?

Groups of girls discussing familiarities with boys often agree that they don't believe that a girl should let a boy kiss her on the first date because (1) she shouldn't seem too eager or easy, (2) she wants to be sure she likes the boy before she kisses him, and (3) kisses should mean more than just a "goodnight." Yet it is not unusual for these same girls to admit that they don't know what to do if the boy tries!



Boys discussing the same question say that the chief reason why they try to kiss the girl on the first date is that she seems to expect it. Some of them are afraid that she will think he doesn't like her, or that he doesn't dare, if he doesn't "make a pass." It is the exceptional boy or girl who is sure of what is expected and how to act. The standards of mother's day are passing, and the new codes are often too conflicting and confused to be helpful.

The new standards are being forged in actual practice and in the truth sessions that follow with other young people and with

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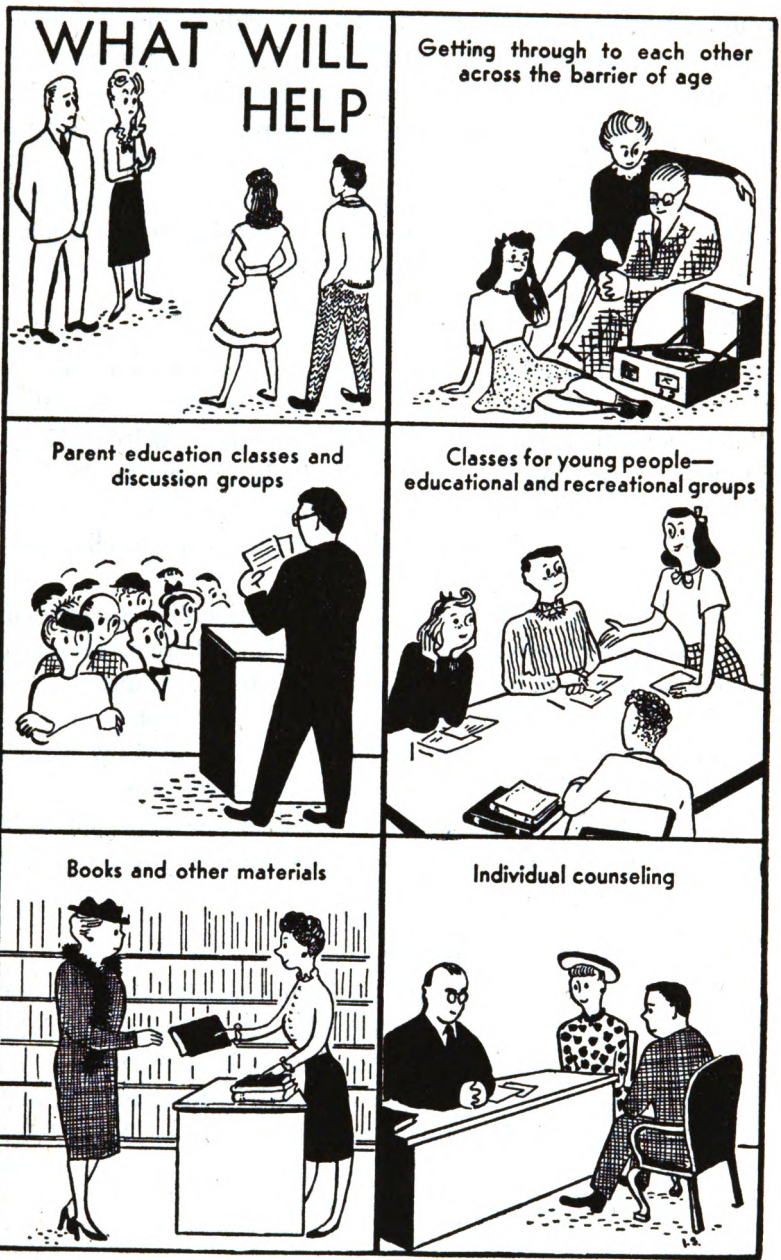

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