All Grown Up and No Place To Go

*Teenagers in Crisis*

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Book Review
In today’s world, the challenges that face teenagers are ever-present throughout all different locations and societies. Adolescence is a difficult time in the life of a child, and the changes that have evolved in the world have made it even more difficult for teens to find their way. In *All Grown Up and No Place To Go*, David Elkind discusses the causes of this time of crisis for teenagers, as well as some ways we can help to reach a solution for the future. Elkind’s main argument seen through his own personal research and education is that, “there is no place for adolescents in American society today—not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large” (3). This is due to the fact that in our society today we tend to ignore the specific requirements for an age group that is somewhere between children and adults. Teenagers are therefore faced with challenges they may not be ready for, at their most vulnerable point in life. However, as teachers, parents and role models, there are many ways in which we can help to resolve these issues and help teenagers develop a place for themselves in the world today.

The author goes through a historical timeline to emphasize his point that in the past, adolescence was seen as a perfect time in one’s life. It seems that the way society views adolescence coincides with the current societal views and values of the time. The ideal view of adolescence correlated with perfect nuclear families that rested on values and ideals. There were also public and appropriate places for teenagers to spend their time, as well as literature and other hobbies that were portrayed in a suitable manner for young adults. Therefore, society seemed to set the stage for teenagers to live in this medium between childhood and adulthood.
Instead of adolescence being seen in a negative light, as a time where kids do whatever they want, this age group was the ideal time to learn, grow, and develop skills for the future.

As the world began to change in the 1960's, this view of adolescence began to change as well. During the modern and into the postmodern era, in which we now live, society began to see a sexual revolution, where premarital sex, drugs and other activities of the sort began to become more common. As this rapid change began to take place, it also became acceptable for teenagers to be involved in these things as well. It became even more accepted as schools offered sex-ed classes, drug education courses, and even providing protection for sexual activity. The nuclear family that existed in the past also disintegrated as different types of family situations became acceptable, and divorce became more common. This time period therefore marked a major shift in the way that the world viewed the time of adolescence. Instead of a golden time of opportunity, teenagers lost their sense of innocence and immaturity. Therefore, today teens are seen as adults before they are ready to handle this stage of life. They are expected to handle the challenges that accompany adulthood, but are not mature enough to deal with these situations properly. It is clear that this can be difficult and stressful for teens since research has pointed to a concept known as new morbidity, which means that during this time period there has been a rise in stress related behavior exhibited by teens.

There are many physical and mental changes at this point in life that make adolescence a very difficult and vulnerable time. Puberty is both a frightening and stressful time in the life of a teenager. Both boys and girls can have anxiety over
developing properly. Each gender wants to look perfect as they move into adulthood, and therefore fear the unknown outcomes of puberty during their teen years. Homosexuality and rape are also seen as factors that can cause stress and anxiety during adolescence. Teenagers therefore can feel insecure, nervous and self-conscious with their body image.

The new way of thinking that progresses in the teenage years can be emotionally troubling and challenging. Teenagers begin to think of themselves differently, and often self-consciousness can arise. They feel that everyone is looking at them, and then feel that they are unique, with the world somewhat revolving around their behaviors and actions. The Formal Operational stage discussed by Piaget, promotes some common behavior in teenagers. Teens may choose to dress differently than adults, or speak using slang to distinguish themselves from the previous generation. This allows teens to create their own group, separated from adults.

This stage of development also promotes the distinction in gender differences, which can change their relationships with peers as well. Changes in social relationships also develop due to the creation of clubs, fads and trends. Teenagers can often feel excluded when they are not a part of a larger group.

Additionally, some mental changes that occur at this point can cause problems in parent-children relationships. Teenagers begin to acquire a sense of critical analysis towards their parents. They start to look back on mistakes they may not have noticed in the past committed by their parents, as well as thinking about different behaviors or statements parents may make. When teenagers begin to
develop crushes, on members of the opposite sex they often feel that they have to take away love that they have towards their parents. In order to make this easier, they then attempt to think of reasons why their parents are not worthy of this love in the first place, which could obviously cause problems in familial relationships.

Teenagers also feel the need to argue about decisions in their lives once they recognize they have the power to do so. This could cause a strained relationship with parents as well. They also sometimes have difficulty making decisions. They have many options before them, and instead of trying to think of a rational choice, they sometimes choose a rather strange decision instead. This can also be challenging to them because of their constant mood swings and shifts in what they are feeling. Because this happens so frequently, it is even difficult for them to recognize what exactly they are feeling. These choices therefore do not necessarily correlate with their emotions and this can become frustrating for parents.

In addition to the developments in teenagers that can affect relationships with parents, there are other factors out of their control that can cause a change as well. The lack of parental guidance that exists in many homes can become a major source of problems for teenagers. Parents need to work long hours in order to support their families, and therefore do not get to spend enough time with their children. Due to this lack of supervision, teenagers are also the most likely group to purchase a variety of merchandise, which encourages inappropriate behavior and ideas.

The author does however, refute his own argument about this point and offers suggestions why teenagers may in fact be mature and capable of handling
adult situations, better than children from earlier time periods. In today's world, children are exposed to all types of activities and ideas that would have been unheard of in other times. This does create a more sophisticated teenager in some sense. However, teenagers are still going through adolescence, which is a difficult and maturing stage of development no matter what time period you live in.

Another factor that has led teenagers into a state of crisis is the failure of schools to help navigate students in the proper direction. According to Elkind, “Schools have failed to address the broader social functions of the postmodern school, the narrow emphasis upon academic reform has had little success” (164). It seems that schools today have not properly changed with the times. This therefore reduces the success rate of both socialization and academic success of students.

There are also additional factors in schools that have taken away the school’s role as a meaningful place for children to go each day. Both middle schools and high schools have become oversized. This is due to both logistical and economic reasons. These large school environments make it much more difficult for both students and teachers to create meaningful relationships. This can also be detrimental for the self-confidence of individual students. It is beneficial for adolescents to be surrounded by people who know and understand them, instead of feeling like they are an unknown entity.

This overall large number of pupils in schools also poses problems in individual classrooms. Classrooms today usually have too many students for just one teacher and therefore teachers cannot meet the individual needs of every child. This not only detracts from the overall dynamic in the classroom, but also seems to
cause an emphasized awareness for only the successful half of the class. When a teacher only has a limited amount of time to be one-on-one with each student, the focus goes to those students who are likely to succeed and move forward with their education. This however, causes the lower half of the class to do even more poorly and be even less motivated than before.

Additionally, Elkind discusses the recent decline in happiness of teachers. In today's world many students are troubled and unhappy themselves. The salaries of teachers are also not high, and therefore this seems to not only have negative effects on the teachers, but on the students as well. This lack of energy and enthusiasm for their job has decreased the success of teachers to properly educate their students. All of these elements combined have devalued schools as a safe and meaningful place for teenagers.

One subject that Elkind discusses, is the challenges that teenagers face with their religious identity. Elkind argues that adolescents are very in tune with their personal religion, but are not involved with institutional religion. They do not want to be forced into these environments, and when they are required to attend they feel that they are being treated like children. He therefore believes that teenagers should be distanced from these institutions until later on in life. He says, “Although it is counterintuitive, a sabbatical from formal institutional religion may be the best guarantee that young people will later integrate their personal religion with that of the church or synagogue” (53). I strongly disagree with this idea developed by Elkind based on my own experience with this specific age group. After working in a Middle School for the past few months, I think that separating teenagers from Shul
and other religious institutions promotes their belief that it is acceptable not to
attend services, rather than help them for the future. In our Modern Orthodox
world, the experiences at Shul are a fundamental and critical part of religion. Even if
teenagers may not be practicing each and every custom throughout their adolescent
years, they are still learning through modeling and observing, and most understand
that this will be their responsibility and lives for the future. Additionally, the age of
adolescence is the time right after a child has a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. If we were to
stop children from attending Shul, and only focus on social issues, I think that this
would detract from the entire purpose of these occasions. Children during the
teenage years are supposed to reach the age of responsibility to take on all of the
Mitzvot. This time in their lives is therefore crucial for them to be working on their
institutional religion, experiencing the services in Shul, and developing their
relationship with God. Hopefully a combination of all of these things will help them
to create a successful religious understanding and life for the future.

The question that remains of course is how can we solve this problem. There
must be a way for teenagers to regain a proper place in society where they will be
faced with appropriate challenges and situations for their age and maturity level. It
is important to accept the changes that have been made in society, and attempt to
work within the postmodern era to navigate a proper direction for adolescents.

Elkind offers similar advice to both parents and teachers. It is tantamount for
both schools and families to work together in order to provide a successful solution
for teenagers. He suggests that parents should first be familiar with child
development. For example, when parents are aware of the difficulty adolescents
have when making decisions, they can try to help them recognize their emotions and moods, which can often be challenging. The next step is to help children develop a healthy self-identity. It is also critical for parents to serve as proper role models and adults in order for their children to succeed. Children need limits and rules to be set and enforced. This allows children to not only regulate their own behavior, but also shows a sense of endearment and care for their well-being. This is also a necessary step in parenting regardless how children may react. Another critical parenting technique is mutual authority. This should of course not be utilized when dealing with limits and rules that are necessary, but rather parents should involve their children in various decisions. Therefore, if parents are able to act both responsibly, while taking the sensitivities of teenagers into consideration, a very healthy and successful relationship could be established.

Elkind also offers specific advice for schools on how they could create a more positive and successful environment. First, teachers must maintain a positive attitude, even when they feel they are not accomplishing enough. This enthusiasm and energy is critical for the success of teachers, and for students to learn from them. Just like parents, teachers also must work to initiate proper rules and limits in the classroom. A teacher should be able to maintain a balance, by both establishing the rules, and also displaying this enthusiasm at the same time. Teachers must also recognize that their role is not only to properly teach the curriculum, but also to establish meaningful relationships with students. The author even believes that child and adolescent development should become a core part of teacher training (186). This means that teachers need to be able to not only teach their material, but
also work looks towards the social and developmental success of their students. This guidance should work to eliminate some of the dominant stressors that are present in the life of a teenager. There are various types of stressful situations and they should be directed in how to handle both foreseeable and avoidable situations, as well as unforeseeable and unavoidable ones. The last suggestion offered by Elkind is somewhat radical. He believes that since teenagers in this time period are more sophisticated, the last two years of high school should be transformed into transitional years before college. The day should be designed like a college schedule, which would allow more freedom and mutual authority for students, and therefore make them feel more like adults.

I think in summation, Elkind believes that both teachers and parents need to balance their role as both adults but also role models who should provide guidance for teenagers. They need to both establish rules and limits, while also being familiar with child development in order to help their children properly navigate through the different challenges and struggles they may face.

I think that the solutions illustrated by Elkind speak perfectly to his psychology of education. He feels that education extends far beyond the curriculum that is taught in the classroom. Teachers must recognize that their job is far more than a typical occupation where you merely finish the material you are given. In order to be successful, teachers must reach beyond the walls of the classroom to help students on an individual basis in all aspects of their life. Education therefore does not only mean to teach what they need to know for a test, but rather to educate them in how they can be successful throughout their lives and to guide them
through their development into adulthood. This is especially critical in the age of adolescence, where children are faced with many difficult problems and challenges that they need to deal with during their most vulnerable age.

I therefore would recommend this course of action to any of my peers in Azrieli. I think that the advice provided in this book is crucial for all teachers, and especially those who wish to educate the future Jewish leaders of tomorrow. I have seen through many of my own experiences how it is essential for teachers to have the dual role of being both a proper role model who sets limits, as well as guides students in the right direction. At my current job working with middle school students, I often see many of the challenges discussed by Elkind, displayed on a daily basis. Students are constantly dealing with both the physical, mental and emotional changes that occur throughout adolescence. Beyond these typical transformations that accompany the ages of puberty, teenagers are often confused with their own self-identity, especially in the area of religion. Therefore, proper role models and teachers are fundamental for success. Of course, parents need to be involved and help to create the proper home for children to flourish and develop, but teachers need to play an integral role as well. In the younger ages, with whom I currently work they are usually turned off towards religion. This can often be due to the many challenges they are facing, or peer pressure that exists in school. However, having the right people to speak to about these issues can be beneficial for many students. There are still of course some who will not seek out help. I still feel that just by observing the way teachers live their lives, as proper and devoted religious Jews can have a major impact in the lives of their students. It may not be seen immediately,
but there are certain aspects and behaviors that children can internalize and incorporate later in their lives, when they are mature enough to truly recognize who they want to be. Previously, I have worked with students at the high school level, and in these grades they are often seeking guidance and advice on how to properly balance their lives as religious Jews and as growing teenagers. This of course requires proper role models who are able to help them work through these issues. I do therefore agree with Elkind that parents and teachers should be familiar with child development. As a psychology major in college, I feel that many of the theories and ideas I learned have helped me to recognize certain sensitivities and behaviors of my students. I think that this would be beneficial for both parents and teachers in order to understand their children better and to properly assist and guide them with whatever problems that may come their way.

I think that this course of action is critical especially in a religious day school environment. Not only are Jewish teenagers struggling with the same problems as all other children their age, but also it is difficult for them to handle all of the religious stringencies that they are required to perform and uphold. Therefore, it is imperative for teenagers to have proper role models and people they can turn to for guidance. Teachers in religious schools need to feel that their job extends beyond the curriculum that they teach. They of course still need to establish proper rules and limits, which is a part of life, especially as a Jew, but their job entails so much more. They are not only there to teach Torah for homework and tests, but rather as a way of life. Therefore, I think that the point made by David Elkind should be even further emphasized within a limmudei kodesh environment. Even if teenagers in
our schools may not always have the same extreme problems as those in public high schools, the challenges they are faced with are just as significant and need to be treated with proper care and guidance.