

## You're the Last Person I'd Talk To

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This chapter concerns communication between young people and the adults they come into contact with in the course of their daily lives. Here we concentrate on the issues that arise when adolescents negotiate with teachers, social workers, doctors and others. Of course adults in their professional capacity have considerable power and influence over young people. It is for this reason that we need first to look at the general context of relationships between the two groups. Communication never occurs in a vacuum, so in order to make sense of this subject we need to consider the position of adolescents in society today, and to look in particular at the difficulties confronting the young in making the transition to adulthood.

### Understanding adolescence

Adolescence is best understood as a complex transition between the states of childhood dependence and adult independence. Transitions are never easy, but there are some unique characteristics of this transition which make it an unusually problematic one. In the first place the beginning and the end of the transition are not clearly defined. None of us is really clear when adolescence begins, and there is even less clarity about the moment when adulthood is achieved. Perhaps it is at 16 – the legal 'age of consent' – or at 18 – the age when we can vote. Yet different elements of adulthood are permitted at different ages, thus creating confusion for all concerned (Coleman and Warren-Adamson, 1992).

A further point is that there are in fact a number of different transitions which occur during adolescence, all of which contribute to the overall process of reaching maturity. Thus there is the transition from one sort of school to another, the transition from education to work or training, the transition to independent living, and so on. Of course all these are experienced differently depending on social background, on ethnic origin, on gender, and on living circumstances. It is important to recognise that the overall transition from child to adult is accomplished through multiple smaller transitions all of which may potentially be stressful or difficult in themselves (Coleman, 1992; Heaven, 1994).

A third issue is that adolescence is both beginning earlier and ending later in industrialised countries today. As for the beginning, it is clear that puberty is gradually occurring at a younger age. Girls as young as 10 may have started their periods, while many boys at 11 will already have commenced the growth spurt.

At the other end evidence shows clearly that the age of leaving home has, over the last two decades, become later and later. Similarly the entry into the labour market has been delayed, so that more and more young men and women find themselves on training schemes or in further education, rather than in paid employment. The implications of all this are important, for if the beginning and ending of a transition are ill-defined, and at the same time the transition is experienced as taking longer and longer, then a high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity is created (Chisholm et al., 1990; Coleman, 1995). It should be no surprise to us that it is exactly these feelings which are experienced by so many of the young people in Britain today.

### Status ambiguity

Status ambiguity is an appropriate term to outline the position of adolescents in our society, as it is used to describe a situation where the individual's rights or roles or responsibilities are not clearly defined. This can lead to a high degree of uncertainty and confusion, not just on the part of the young person, but for many adults as well. Within the legal framework young people are allowed to do different things at different ages. The well-known Gillick case failed to clarify matters, and, as recent research has shown (Moore and Rosenthal, 1995), the majority of teenagers are still convinced that a doctor will breach confidentiality and tell their parents if they seek medical advice under the age of 16. The Children Act 1989 is well intentioned in respect of the rights of young people, for it made a serious attempt to clarify and extend the protection of the law to minors in a number of important areas. While this has been successful in some respects, especially in the realm of family law, there are many areas where the situation has hardly improved at all, for example the position of young people being accommodated or looked after by local authority social services departments.

### Power and equality

The question of status ambiguity is a key one because of what it tells us about the balance of power in the relationships between adults and young people. If the individual's status is ambiguous, and if his or her rights are not clearly defined, then inevitably he or she will lack the power to influence events and to take control of his or her life. The experience of powerlessness is a common one for adolescents, and its significance cannot be overestimated. For some it may lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair. Others may be unable to make use of their skills and capabilities, settling for an easy but unfulfilling option; yet others may become angry and resentful (Rutter and Smith, 1995).

These issues may not at first sight appear especially relevant to the topic of communication but, as we shall see, they are indeed an essential context. Effective

communication can only take place if both parties believe in their ability to be heard. Where power is unequally shared, and where one participant is aware of his or her relative powerlessness or where they fail to acknowledge the power of their position, then communication inevitably suffers. It is to this that we now turn.

### The nature of communication

There is a large literature on the nature of communication, and what makes for good communication between people. There are certain requirements of good communication that need to be observed if adults and young people are to get through to each other (Sypher and Applegate, 1984). Three elements may be mentioned here:

- 1 the necessity for both participants to be genuinely involved in the communication, that is to listen to each other;
- 2 the importance of each showing respect for the other's point of view;
- 3 a willingness on both sides for there to be give and take in the rhythm of the conversation; that is that each must give way to the other at certain times, and there must be relative equality in the time allocated for each person in the overall communication.

As will be immediately apparent, these conditions are not always fulfilled in the interactions that occur between the two generations. All too often exactly the opposite takes place, with one or more of these principles being violated. Such situations have obvious consequences. We need also therefore to outline briefly some of the reasons why communication between adults and young people is likely to fail. Again three reasons may be given:

- 1 where one person pursues their own agenda without taking account of the needs or requirements of the other;
- 2 if one party is unwilling to listen to what the other has to say;
- 3 where one party – usually the adult – is perceived as being patronising or sarcastic by the other.

Because teenagers will bring to any interaction with adults their own previous experiences, particularly those with parents and teachers, it is important to say something about this. Research which looks at young people's views on communication with adults makes it clear that, by and large, they have little confidence that they will be listened to or that their opinions will be respected. One of the most common findings is that adolescents do not feel that their views are taken seriously by adults. One of the things they most wish for is for adults to show them some respect, to listen to them, and to treat what they have to say as a legitimate contribution to any discussion or conversation. These

conclusions are especially pertinent, since we know also from research that adolescents need adults (Noller and Callan, 1991). In spite of appearances to the contrary, young people remain dependent on the adults around them for advice and guidance. They continue to need adults for support, for good quality information, for encouragement, and for endorsement of their hopes, goals and aspirations. From our own research (Catan et al., 1996) it is clear that when young people face significant interactions with professional adults in their lives, whether these are social workers, housing officers, counsellors, or police officers, they do have high expectations. In spite of past experiences they continue to believe that adults will treat them well, and will show respect for their views and opinions. Disappointment is therefore all that much more difficult to cope with, and leads to strong feelings of resentment and frustration.

### Some experiences of young people

These examples are taken from our own study (Catan et al., 1996), in which we have been exploring communication among a wide range of young people. In the first example both effective and ineffective communication is illustrated. It concerns a young man of 16 who is taking a GNVQ course. First he recounts an incident where a community nurse, working with his severely disabled mother, presses him to see a social worker about his own needs.

Because my mum thinks it would help me to have someone to talk to, which I don't have. But I don't have much time [he works nine hours a week on top of his school work]. I just listened to her – this nurse – and she went on pressurising me. No. I don't think I will go and see this person.

Next the same young man tells of a good communication experience where appropriate help with a practical basis was offered. A social worker visited the family to talk through the implications of the mother's increasing disability due to multiple sclerosis.

She [the social worker] was very helpful. She listened to our views, and got to know us a bit. She told us about the help my mum would get when she came home – people to clean up and bathe her, do the shopping and the like. She'll come back and see us from time to time. She made a nice atmosphere. My family often fights when we're together, but then with her things were said that no-one took to heart. There was no pressure. It was mellow.

A different example was given by a 15 year old young man, still at secondary school, who was stopped by a police officer on his way home one night.

I was walking home and he pulled me over about a stolen motorbike. He asked me all sorts of questions, but I was not involved. I knew nothing about it. It went well and I felt OK afterwards because like he didn't pressure me and he didn't say it was me and he spoke very politely and so did I speak politely too.

Finally we give an example from a situation where communication would be difficult at the best of times. A young man of 16 has left home, and been living rough for a few months. He has at last been found B&B accommodation by the local housing officer. After three weeks his benefit cheque has finally come through. However no sooner had he cashed it and was on the way to the supermarket to buy some food when the money was stolen from him. He returned to the benefit office to fill in a claim to have the loss made good. He was told to wait, and after two hours the benefits officer appears.

She come back and said 'We can't accept your claim.' I says 'I don't have no money. What am I going to do? I can't help getting my bag stolen. I've got to do something. I don't have any family around here.' But she just went 'There's nothing I can do.' So I got cross and said 'You just take the piss' and I walked out.

What can we learn from this material? As we have indicated, many of the principles of good and bad communication are illustrated here. Where the young person feels that his or her viewpoint is not being acknowledged, or where someone else's agenda is being imposed, then the outcome is likely to be negative. The reader may note the number of times the word 'pressure' is used by adolescents to indicate an unwelcome attempt by adults to force upon them views that are seen as alien or inappropriate. On the other hand the adolescent perceives the communication as being valuable or positive when the adult is prepared to listen and to take seriously what the young person has to say. To be treated politely, to be respected, to be accepted as someone who has a legitimate opinion: these are the essential prerequisites, as far as the teenager is concerned, if he or she is to be able to communicate openly with an adult.

### Communication: some contentious issues

Anyone who claims that communication with teenagers is a simple matter of getting the principles right could reasonably be accused of over-simplifying things (McConnon, 1990). The fact is that there is a range of factors which play their part in determining whether adults and young people get through to each other or not. Let us now look at some of these factors. First, adolescents themselves may be angry, depressed or simply uninterested in making contact with adults (Coleman, 1987). However hard a social worker or teacher may try, and however skilful they may be, there are times when it will not be possible to establish communication with the young person. There may be a wide variety of reasons for this. The young person may be in a phase of needing privacy, of not being free enough or open enough to be able to share something important with that adult. Alternatively the young man or woman may recently have had a bad experience with another adult, and may still be angry or upset about the way they were treated. Of course some individuals are poor communicators: they may be shy, lacking in self-confidence, or simply unable to articulate their thoughts

and feelings. All these are possibilities, and it is important to bear in mind that communication is a two-way street: both sides have to be willing to play their part.

A second factor that has to be taken into account is the context in which the communication is taking place. No one is going to be able to talk as openly and freely in a busy social services office, or in a noisy youth club, as they are in a quiet room. The setting of the communication does have an effect on what can be said, especially if one or other individual is feeling uncertain or tentative about the subject matter. A good example of this comes from work on young people's attitudes to their doctors. Recent research shows that adolescents are hesitant to attend their local GP's surgery, particularly if they are seeking contraceptive advice. They believe that they may be recognised by someone in their community, who may then inform their parents. They also feel uncertain about the sort of reception they will receive from the doctor. Thus communication in a setting of this sort is doomed before it starts, since the young person has to deal with a very personal issue, and has no trust in the adults involved. The lesson from this is that services for young people will never be truly effective unless the needs of the clients are fully taken into account.

A third issue to be considered is that there are many different types of communication. In the present context it is worthwhile to remember that, for example, seeking help because of an emotional problem will not be the same as having a discussion about the relative merits of two local schools. In the first instance a much higher degree of trust will be needed before the young person is able to express his or her feelings and to share the problem with an adult. Thus a sensitive adult will seek to create a suitable context if personal or private matters are to be discussed. This is especially important for young people, who may feel awkward and embarrassed when talking to adults about such things.

Finally it needs to be emphasised that communication skills can be learnt. To some extent, therefore, adults have a responsibility to look for ways in which young people can be empowered through the development of such skills. We have in mind here those who might be disadvantaged in their relationships with adults – those being looked after by a local authority, for example – who need more than most to be able to articulate their needs and to express in front of professional adults their views and opinions. Communication is not a mystery. All of us can improve our abilities in this realm, and it would be encouraging to see those in the field of education taking this seriously as a subject for study.

### What can adults do to make communication with young people easier?

Let us now outline a few strategies that professionals might consider to assist the process of communication.

- 1 Try and remember what it is like to be in a position where you have little or no power. Keep in mind the effect this is likely to have on an individual's feelings and on their ability to express themselves clearly. In your dealings with young people, work hard to see things from their point of view.
- 2 Learn something more about communication, and about its many facets. While in this chapter we have concentrated on verbal communication, we should not lose sight of the fact that non-verbal communication is important too. The messages we send through our gestures, our body posture, our eye contact and so on all have an impact. Indeed in situations where adolescents are anxious and uncertain, and where words do not come easily, these non-verbal cues can assume an even greater significance than we realise.
- 3 The context or setting in which you meet a young person also has a significance for communication. If you want to maximise the possibility of effective communication between you, then pay attention not only to what is said but also to where the interaction is located.
- 4 Communication is a skill, and we can all improve our skills! You can do this by thinking carefully about how you plan and manage your interactions with young people. You can pay careful attention to the messages you send – both verbal and non-verbal – in the course of your contacts with teenagers. You can bear in mind that they too will have an agenda, so ask yourself if you are really listening to what the adolescent wants to say. Lastly, never sit someone down and say 'Talk.' It just won't work. Communication is a delicate process, a process which has to be nurtured. The more nurturance we are prepared to give it, the more rewarding it will be.

### Inequality in communication

As a conclusion to this chapter, let us consider some of the issues which arise as a result of the inequality which exists between adults and young people. Such inequality has a number of effects in the context of communication. In the first place, if the adolescent perceives the relationship as unequal then his or her expectations of the communication are bound to be affected. He or she may start out with the assumption that his/her views will not be given a fair hearing, and may as a result give up before the conversation has even got going.

Inequality may be manifested by the context of the communication, or by the way the interaction is initiated. A young person may be 'instructed' to come to the teacher's office, or may be 'asked' to go and see the social worker. Such messages are fundamental in creating a frame for the interaction, and inevitably have a profound effect on what actually happens between adult and teenager.

In addition to the context and the imbalance of power in the relationship there is also the question of how adult power is exercised. Thus adults may use their power to override the young person's viewpoint, or to 'tune out' anything which they do not want to hear. Adults can bully ('now just listen to me'), they can pull

rank or status ('I'm older than you, so I know better'), or they can use emotional blackmail ('Look at all the things I've done for you'). Not all adults behave like this. Young people will have had positive experiences with adults who have not misused their power in interactions, and have genuinely tried to listen on an equal basis. However it is surprising how difficult it is for adults to give up the power they hold over children and young people.

In trying to understand our communication behaviour it is essential that we recognise the effects of the inequality between the generations. Effective communication involves the creation of a relatively equal interaction, with give and take between both participants. Effective and positive communication between adults and adolescents can take place, but one essential prerequisite is an acknowledgement that young people might need some framework of support to be able to start with a sense of equality.

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