David Elkind and the Crisis of Adolescence: Review, Critique, and Applications
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The study of adolescence has always challenged both practitioners and researchers. For over two decades, David Elkind has argued that today’s children and adolescents are being required to fulfill unrealistic societal expectations to accept roles and responsibilities before the child is developmentally ready to accept such obligations. More current studies and Elkind’s own work prompts a review, analysis, and potential applications of his contributions in engaging and studying today’s teenager.

Review of Elkind’s Views

Elkind is particularly concerned about the current status of adolescents and their families. No longer is adolescence viewed as a transitional stage preparing the child to gradually grow into adulthood, argues Elkind. Teens can ill-afford to demonstrate immature beliefs and behaviors. Instead, adolescence is now its own sophisticated demographic, stating “(w)e now look upon adolescents as worldly-wise in matters of sex, drugs, music, computers, and consumerism. The teen years are no longer seen as a training period for adult life; they are considered, to be, rather a different form of adult life, with its own unique indices of maturity” (Elkind, 1994, p. 145). Elkind asserts that the culture of children has made a qualitative—and potentially harmful—alteration. Whereas precocity was once viewed with suspicion (“early ripe, early rot”), he believes children and teenagers are instead being pushed to become miniature adults, a phenomenon that he calls the hurried child (Elkind, 2001). Adolescents may particularly lose in this scenario. Elkind (1984) has stated that, “there is no place for teenagers in today’s society; consequently, teenagers are made more vulnerable to stress than ever before” (pp. 18-19). He also believes the consequence of the present crisis of adolescence is to make these teenagers vulnerable to stress while exposing them to stressors never experienced by previous generations (Elkind, 1984).

Using the constructivist theory of developmentalist Jean Piaget, Elkind argues that teens are developing, but have not yet mastered, the sufficient cognitive maturity necessary for adult decision-making and processing. For example, a teen’s thoughts may be characterized more by idealism than realism (Elkind, 1984, 2001b; Opper, Ginsburg, & Brandt, 1987). Elkind proposed what is now his well-known theory of adolescent egocentrism (Elkind, 1967, 1985), which partly expands and elaborates features of Piaget’s theoretical developmental stage called formal operations. Elkind describes at least three characteristics of teenage thinking. One is the self-conscious nature of adolescents which he calls “the imaginary audience,” that teens are constantly being observed and judged. Another is the self-centeredness of teens which Elkind calls “the personal fable.” He states this also helps explain the risk-taking behaviors exhibited by many teenagers, a belief that the teen is invulnerable. A third feature is what Elkind refers to as “apparent hypocrisy,” which helps distinguish between supposed bad motives by teenagers and intellectual immaturity. In effect, Elkind (1978) credits Piaget for providing important insights and helping to shift views of adolescent conduct “from the realm of the ‘bad’ to that of behavior typical for this age group” (p. 127).

Being “hurried” has unique consequences for the teenager. The traditional view of adolescence includes opportunities to grow into adulthood, which includes teenage experiences of awkwardness, rebelliousness, mood swings, and social gaffes (Elkind, 1994). Erikson’s psychosocial developmental theory argues the teen years are a time to find and refine one’s identity, the so-called identity crisis, which by definition involves sometimes confusing experiences of growth and instability (Erikson, 1950). Elkind (1994) stated that the demand for today’s adolescents is to be sophisticated, not immature, with the potential for self-destructive results. He states “many young adolescents are really not prepared, without parental support, to withstand the peer group pressures to become sexually active, to use drugs, to drop out” (p. 146). Teenagers are also expected to be both media and computer savvy (a distinction becoming less obvious), as well as possessing other technological skills.

Elkind singles out changes in the family and childrearing practices as one of his greatest concerns for the future of adolescents. He argues that
postmodernism has witnessed the corrosion of the nuclear family, replaced by what Elkind (1994) called the permeable family.

The (traditional) nuclear family provided clear-cut, often rigid, boundaries between our public and private lives, between the homeplace and the workplace, between children and adults. In the permeable family, these dividing lines have become blurred and difficult to discern. The postmodern family is more fluid, more flexible, and obviously vulnerable to pressures from outside self. (p. 1)

The nuclear family allowed parents to impose firm limits through clear values and moral leadership. Raising one’s children was the dominant priority, sometimes to the detriment of the parents, particularly the mother. Elkind (1994) calls this the “old” family imbalance, replaced by the postmodern “new” family imbalance. Though the greater egalitarianism within the family has its advantages, it also can negate parental authority in exchange for autonomy. Dual-career families result in less time available for childcare and parental supervision. Children’s needs are now at best a lower priority and at worst completely neglected (Elkind, 1995). Elkind states that the lack of parental supervision and guidance requires teenagers to mature earlier and become competent—at least in appearance—at a much earlier age. This becomes even more complicated with the prevalence of divorce and remarriage, accompanied by blended families, joint custody, and other permutations.

Critique of Elkind’s Views

Elkind’s theories and commentary have led to much theoretical and empirical scrutiny. Lapsley and Murphy (1985) argued that Elkind’s concepts were better understood as problems in interpersonal understanding rather than applied to Piagetian stage theory. Specifically, the authors view the personal fable and imaginary audience better applied as a social developmental concept, not a consequence of cognitive development. Further, since formal operations involve the cognitive ability to acknowledge the thoughts of others, it should preclude, not encourage, the emergence of adolescent egocentrism. Lapsley (1993) argued that there are strong similarities (“virtually identical”) between Elkind’s concepts of personal fable and imaginary audience and earlier theory offered by Blis (1962) about teens and self-perception. Lapsley and Murphy (1985) view Elkind’s concept of imaginary audience as being an unwieldy and imprecise theory and may be simplified to being the product of an overactive imagination and better explained as the social developmental concept of “perspective taking,” first proposed by Selman (1980).

Vartanian (2000) reviewed earlier research which provided inconsistent and often opposing results challenging Elkind’s description of adolescent egocentrism. Instead, Vartanian finds greater support for Lapsley’s reconfiguration viewing these concepts as a process of social understanding, though Vartanian acknowledges possible methodological (particularly construct validity) concerns in the research by Lapsley and Murphy (1985) and others. Vartanian (2001) also failed to find support for the imaginary audience; the social cognition and perception of adolescents was found to be either egocentric or distorted. Similar results supporting the personal fable (but not the imaginary audience) as a function of interpersonal understanding were reported earlier by Jahnke and Blanchard-Fields (1993). Riley, Adams, and Nielsen (1984) who also stated that formal operations diminished adolescent egocentrism, found instead that perceived parental relations better predicted self-consciousness, although O’Connor (1995) found perceived parental behavior had little effect on identity development. Finally, Aalsma, Lapsley, and Flannery (2006) differed with Elkind’s generally negative interpretation of personal fables, stating it may actually facilitate appropriate risk-taking, motivate separation from parents, and encourage teens to take on new ideas, identities, roles, and tasks.

For his part, Elkind (1985) responded to the earlier work of Lapsley and Murphy (1985), stating that social developmental concepts such as perspective taking, albeit a seemingly more clear and concise explanation for adolescent behavior, is nonetheless inadequate to explain adolescent behavior. He argues growth and development, by definition, is inconsistent and irregular; the distinction that Lapsley and Murphy assert, that personal fable and imaginary audience are more clearly understood as social, rather than cognitive processes, may provide a more concise explanation, yet is nonetheless inadequate for explaining adolescent egocentrism. In addition, Elkind (1996) also believes Piaget overestimated the role of perspective taking in socialization.

There is also disagreement about Elkind’s portrayal of the hurried child. Lynott and Logue
(1993) argue that Elkind (and others) view childhood as an idealized, carefree, innocent context, ignoring that children in earlier eras faced higher mortality, illness, and disease, and also discounting age and developmental level, race and ethnicity, and social class (p. 480). The introduction of television in the 1950s is sometimes viewed as the culprit terminating the so-called golden age, yet Lynott and Logue state that before television, it was feared in the 1940s the wide dissemination of comic books and radio programs would also compromise the innocence of youth. The authors also challenge the assumption that the hurried child is the product of working mothers and the supposed lack of child care. Of particular note is their view of potential hazards of utilizing day care, stating the evidence which reflect positively (or negatively) on the effects of day care on children is decidedly mixed. As for divorce, though it is a period of sometimes major upheaval, Lynott and Logue speculate divorce may be a better alternative to exposing a child to high degrees of ongoing parental conflict. Similarly, Sternheimer (2003) claims current fears about hurried childhood are based on a Victorian era view of youth, stating children of color have often struggled, with their parents and other adults, with inequity and inequality during supposed idyllic periods of childhood innocence.

The criticisms of Elkind's theories and applications may temper some of the observations and recommendations found in his writings. Some of the controversies are to be expected; other than toddlerhood, no other developmental period yields parental (and for that matter, theoretical) uncertainty as adolescence, with its remarkable and rapid transformations (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Nonetheless, a review of Elkind and related literature yields useful insights and applications for parents and practitioners alike.

Applications of Elkind's Views

1. The underlying processes affecting how adolescents perceive and experience their lives is multifaceted, defying simplistic theory. Though seemingly an obvious point, the latent processes affecting the development of thinking and decision making is quite complex. Despite their differences, Elkind and his critics such as Lapsley and Vartanian all concur there are multiple processes, both obvious and covert, that are developing in the adolescent. The lack of a simple, uncomplicated model also implies that attempts at finding appropriate interventions or solutions may not yield easy answers.

Another obvious, yet sometimes overlooked factor is the dynamic nature of adolescence. The ever evolving maturity of the teenager—whether cognitively, socially, or even physically—also requires serious consideration. The teen who initially feels guilt for an offense may abruptly abandon his or her remorse and be unwilling to cooperate or change behavior. The change may be due to cognitive growth encouraging the teen to consider different perspectives such as one's peer group, not just one's parents. This is also a social developmental issue: the prioritizing of peer relationships encroaching on parental authority. A third factor is derived from Elkind's observations about the permeable family: Reduced parental structure and discipline may expose teenagers to numerous, and sometimes contradictory, sources of information. Without parents providing stability and a safe place to sort out differing ideas, this can increase the volatility of a teenager's decision-making abilities. Finally, hormonal changes are not restricted to reproduction, but affect the entire body, which includes changes in the structure of the nervous system, including the brain. The majority of practitioners and families are likely aware of at least some of the developmental processes, covert or overt, occurring within the teenager, yet it is easy to overlook a key variable which would provide better discipline or counsel.

2. Media access has transformed the parent-child relationship. In a study for the Kaiser Family Foundation, Roberts and Foehr (2004) report the average youngster, between 2 and 18, actively gives unique attention to 5.5 hours of media per day. If media being used simultaneously ("multitasking") is measured, this number rises to 6.5 hours a day (p. 192). Much of what's viewed is unrestricted and unguided:

American adolescents use various forms of media primarily because of its entertainment value... (yet) media are part of the process by which adolescents acquire, or resist acquiring, the behaviors and beliefs of the social world and the adult culture in which they live. Most children's media use—including the time on the computer and online—does not involve parental supervision. (National Research Council, 2002, p. 118)

The common complaint about present-day media is the explicit nature, particularly sexual
images, offered by television and the internet. Not everyone agrees about the potential harm associated with such material (see Lynott & Logue, 1993; Sternheimer, 2003), but the greater access to media and inversely, the lessened monitoring by parents of what their adolescents are viewing raises concerns:

The fact that children can sometimes see—and even sometimes seek out—images of naked people is not new. However, compared to other media, the Internet has characteristics that make it harder for adults to exercise responsible supervision over children’s use of it. (National Research Council, 2002, p. 2)

In assessing the potential negative effects of television, internet, and other media, the question not adequately discussed is whether or not there are any positive effects of increased media exposure. Elkind (2001a) points out that decades of Sesame Street and other educational programming have not resulted in better test scores and increased literacy. Meyrowitz (1985) states that television has ushered in revolutionary changes in how people relate to each other, particularly by negating the “veils of secrecy” which defined adult-child relations. At the very least, time spent watching television and videos, using the internet, text messaging, video games, iPods, and other media has a deleterious effect on time families spend interacting with each other. More significant is the amount of unfiltered material currently accessible to teenagers. Concerned parents need to be counseled not to abandon their responsibility and exercise authority even with new technology. Many families place the television set in a common area of the family’s residence so parents can monitor the amount of time and the content of a teenager’s viewing habits. A similar strategy may be necessary with computers. Parents need to ask if teenagers truly need unlimited access to high-speed internet. Also, filters can be installed to limit the availability of inappropriate web material. Anecdotally, some schools request parents to enforce school rules about students not accessing television, video games, and non-academic uses of the web on school nights.

3. Cultural differences are central in understanding adolescents. Generally, culture is considered as part of assimilation and acculturation processes associated with immigrant populations, a concept that in itself may be limited and flawed (Uba, 2002). Szapocznik and Kurtines (1993), in describing their cultural embeddedness model, state that an individual is embedded within their family, and that both are embedded within culture. In other words, every individual exists within a culture, which is mediated by their family. No teenager exists in a cultural vacuum, though such important influences such as American culture, religious culture, geographical culture, neighborhood culture, and other possibilities are sometimes ignored. The social cognitive perspective (Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006; Rogoff, 1991), citing the writings of Vygotsky, stated that the ability to internalize as well as contribute to a culture’s “shared knowledge” is a useful measure of development. In other words, cultural competence is a potential measure of both healthy individual and family progress. Cultural competence may have applications for Elkind’s concept of the permeable family. For example, Gutierrez and Sameroff (1990) found that acculturation affected the willingness of Mexican-American mothers to attribute development to multiple versus single constitutional or environmental factors. Traditional mothers tended to discount multiple factors in explaining their children’s behavior, which potentially affects parental support and discipline. The permeable family would seem to have greater adverse effects on non-Western traditional families, where information obtained outside of the family would be viewed as potentially undermining parental authority. Cultural variation also argues against one-size-fits-all approaches to both parental authority and intervention (Lynott & Logue, 1993).

4. The dynamic nature of adolescence is further intensified by the dynamic nature of the permeable family. Even if Elkind’s concept of the permeable family is rejected, few would argue that adolescents have greater opportunities to gain information while bypassing parental control. There are much more data for teenagers to comprehend and contemplate. As previously indicated, Elkind (1994) is concerned that today’s families are more vulnerable to outside influences, yet the permeable family concept states that busy parents have less time to provide needed structure and counsel. He (1984) is concerned about whether or not parents will provide the stable support and environment necessary to sort through developmental predicaments, stating “there is no place for teenagers in today’s society; consequently, teenagers are made more vulnerable to stress than ever before” (p. 18-19). This
stress has psychological, physiological, and developmental consequences. Elkind believes there is an urgency to which parents and practitioners need to respond. Although some question whether Elkind is being alarmist in his views (see Lynott & Logue, 1993), there is little dispute that substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and gangs are concerns for anyone working with teenagers.

Finally, in regards to Elkind himself, the theories he proposes are still widely quoted and they have sparked debate and study for the past four decades. Alarmist or not, Elkind continues to keep the development and the needs of adolescents as an important and necessary age group requiring ongoing study, evaluation, and age-appropriate care.

In Mark 10: 13-16, Jesus demonstrates the importance of blessing children. Most parents understand the need to share blessing with their children from the very early days of infancy, but may need to be reminded of the value of blessing children through the teenage years. One way parents bless their children was offered by Elkind (1984), when he stated: "Children and teenagers are young and inexperienced. They very much need and want guidance from (parents)" (p. 205). One way to apply Elkind's work on adolescence is to help remind parents and practitioners alike why teens may appear to struggle with the biblical mandate to honor father and mother. Still, the direction and support of parents—though seemingly unwelcome by the teenager—is nevertheless a unique and necessary blessing that parents should continue to make a priority.

References


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