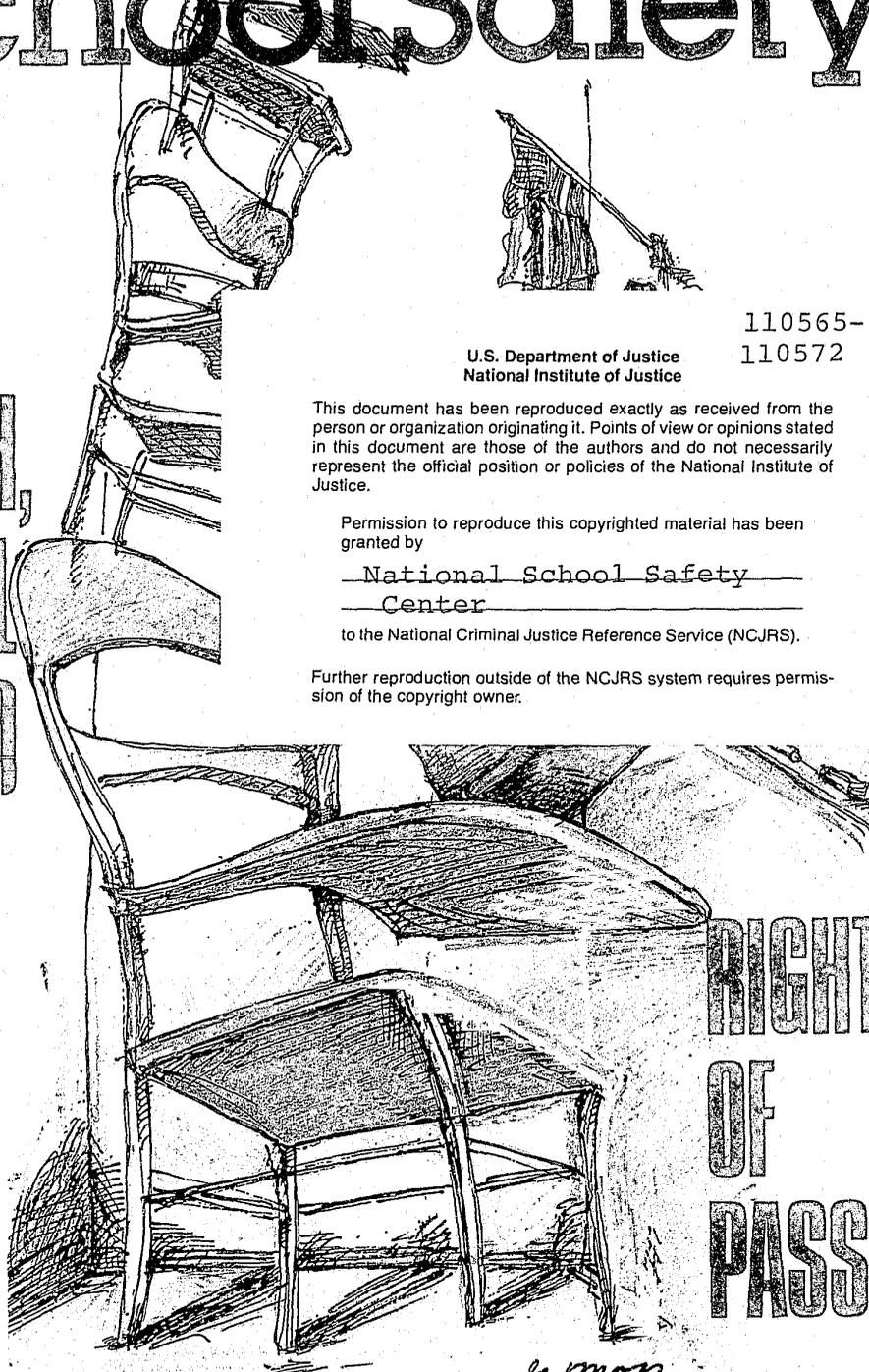


School Safety



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RIGHTS
OF
PASSAGE

J. Moran
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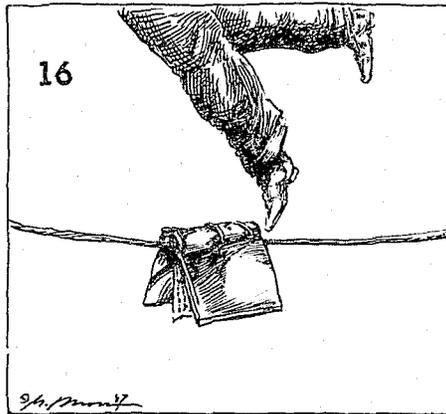
Just as passing from grade to grade, growing up requires learning and balancing a series of rights and responsibilities. Cover by Geoffrey Moss. Copyright © 1978, Washington Post Writers Group. Reprinted with permission.

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BY RONALD W. GARRISON

Ancient rites once facilitated important social development for youth; schools now must reinstitutionalize this process by teaching about rights and responsibilities.

Educated rites of passage

Schools and their communities are preventing gang membership, bullying, substance abuse and juvenile criminal activity through positive adult-sponsored rituals called "rites of passage."

Rites and rituals — which are based on the human need for acceptance, ceremony and recognition — have been vital in the past as a way to pass the culture's values from one generation to the next. One dictionary defines a rite of passage as: "A significant event in an individual's life that indicates a transition from one stage to another, as from adolescence to adulthood, and that may be marked by a ritual or ceremony."

Rites of passage

In ancient Greece, for example, a youthful resident became a citizen at age 16 and gained the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. In East Germany today, 98 percent of the nation's 14-year-olds take part in the secular equivalent of a religious confirmation. And in Japan, where the crime rate is the lowest of any modern developed country, parents, teachers, public officials and neighbors guide young people through the transitions from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

Graduation, a driver's license and marriage are examples of rites of pas-

sage in our culture. Although these rites of passage are often combined with earlier childhood rituals such as birthdays, prom nights and even football games, a growing number of this country's youths and their families no longer have the time or inclination to participate in socially valuable rituals.

As a result, many positive rituals of transition — once vital to American society — have become blurred or replaced with anti-social mutations. Negative, and often violent, associations have filled the vacuum. Participation in bullying, hazing, cults, gangs and substance abuse has become accepted among the young.

Without adult supervision, youths may upset the delicate balance that exists between rights and responsibilities, causing what they may perceive as rights to degenerate into license where crime, violence and victimization follow. Children do not automatically know how to act responsibly. Adults must teach children the socially accepted rules and codes of their culture. In the past, community adults took charge in the collective rearing of the young. But many adults today have lost interest in giving children the guidance and supervision they need.

From childhood to adulthood

In many cultures, rites of passage and pro-social initiations perform a valuable

service to the community by giving children a sense of belonging and a focus for the future. Apprenticeships, extended families, clubs, positive adult role models, religious involvement, adult-supervised youth activities, future orientation (as opposed to instant gratification) and respect for wisdom all contribute to the individual's commitment to the group.

In our society today, youth-serving agencies need to develop partnerships with the schools, parents and community to publicly recognize the achievements that occur during childhood. Such recognition is particularly important for children who may feel trapped by their economic or social status. In this way, "Rights of Passage" are given to children as they progress toward adulthood, reinforcing investment in the group, community and society.

In the words of Thomas A. Leemon, author of *The Rites of Passage in a Student Culture*, "The continuity of a society depends upon its recurring revitalization...through celebrations that accompany individual or group transitions...called rites of passage."

Fortunately, some schools and communities are already providing appropriate and law-abiding rites of passage:

- In a Philadelphia school district, high school students participate in "Rites of Passage," a preventive program designed to assist students in becom-

Ronald W. Garrison is field services director for NSSC.

ing productive members of society without a dependence on drugs.

- High school seniors and juniors from 18 districts in the Yorktown Heights, New York, area participate every year in a wilderness program, which provides transitions to adulthood by teaching a wide range of adult skills.
- In both the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and in Houston, "Coming of Age" participation programs have been successful as prevention strategies in counseling smoking pregnant teens.

In *Rites of Passage*, Joseph Kett commented that both gangs and other youth subcultures "give young people access to the symbols, if not always the substance of adult status." Kett says this attitude has created "a young person bored by the institutional rituals of adolescence" and culminating in "young people becoming more like adults and adults becoming more like young people."

This lack of distinction between children and adults has accelerated in recent years. Law enforcers have noted that juveniles are committing more serious crimes at younger ages. Without recognition by their peers and adults, growing numbers of youths are able to commit acts of aggression, violence and substance abuse because they lack a formal connection with each other, their school, the community and the nation.

Jeffrey Burton Russell, a history professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and an authority on cults, reports that youths today are becoming more involved in cults and devil worship activity. "It is plausible that current youth interest in cults may be linked to the decline of positive rituals historically offered by religious institutions and schools."

The role of schools

Stanford University professors Shirley Brice Heath and Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin, writing in the *Kappan*, suggest that schools and social policies must move away from isolation "to an integrated view of children as members

of a larger social system" where each child is "rooted in a functional analysis of transitional objectives...rather than a (program) aimed solely at the transmission of skills and knowledge." In other words, the social needs of children are becoming as important as academics.

Rite-of-passage relationships created through school and community instruction during the day, evenings and on weekends will reduce juvenile violence for no other reason than simply knowing where the children are and what they are doing. Schools must accept their responsibility for providing a safe, secure and peaceful haven for community events and celebrations. Becoming



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a full partner in assisting neighborhood groups, clubs or agencies with their ritual efforts for children makes schools safer and renews the school's connection with the parents and community.

Schools concerned with the safety and well-being of their students should actively support and promote a positive student-based rite-of-passage process. An extensive long-term program starting on the primary level and continuing through high school that gives children an investment in the school would significantly reduce the fundamental reasons for involvement in youth gangs. Harvard education professor Perry London said, "Schools' new role must include training for civility and civic virtue, as well as a measure of damage control for personal maladjustment."

Administrators and teachers report using the following techniques for productive rite-of-passage programs:

- Schools need to lead in legitimizing positive rites of passage for children, enriching their social responsibilities, creating empathy for others and instilling self-empowerment.
- School staff and students should practice and use ceremonial and presentation skills. Schools can create opportunities to recognize individual and group achievement, then invite the community to participate.
- Principals should establish a ritual audit of their schools. If hazing rituals are found, they should be replaced with positive rite-of-passage programs.
- Schools that re-establish ties to families, older citizens and the community through rites-of-passage festivals and celebrations will again become the cultural hub of the neighborhood.
- When schools give at-risk and disruptive youth opportunities to renew commitments through passage programs to self, family, school and the community, children discover reasons to stay in school and out of trouble.
- And by providing age appropriate and responsible "Rights-of-Passage" programs, schools will successfully compete for the time and interest of children, which has been dominated by television, "hanging-out," exploitation and crime.

Without the benefit of socially acceptable rites and rituals, individual needs become more important than the collective good of society. School and community wrongs can be turned into "rites" through an ongoing commitment to reaffirm the passages of childhood. □

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