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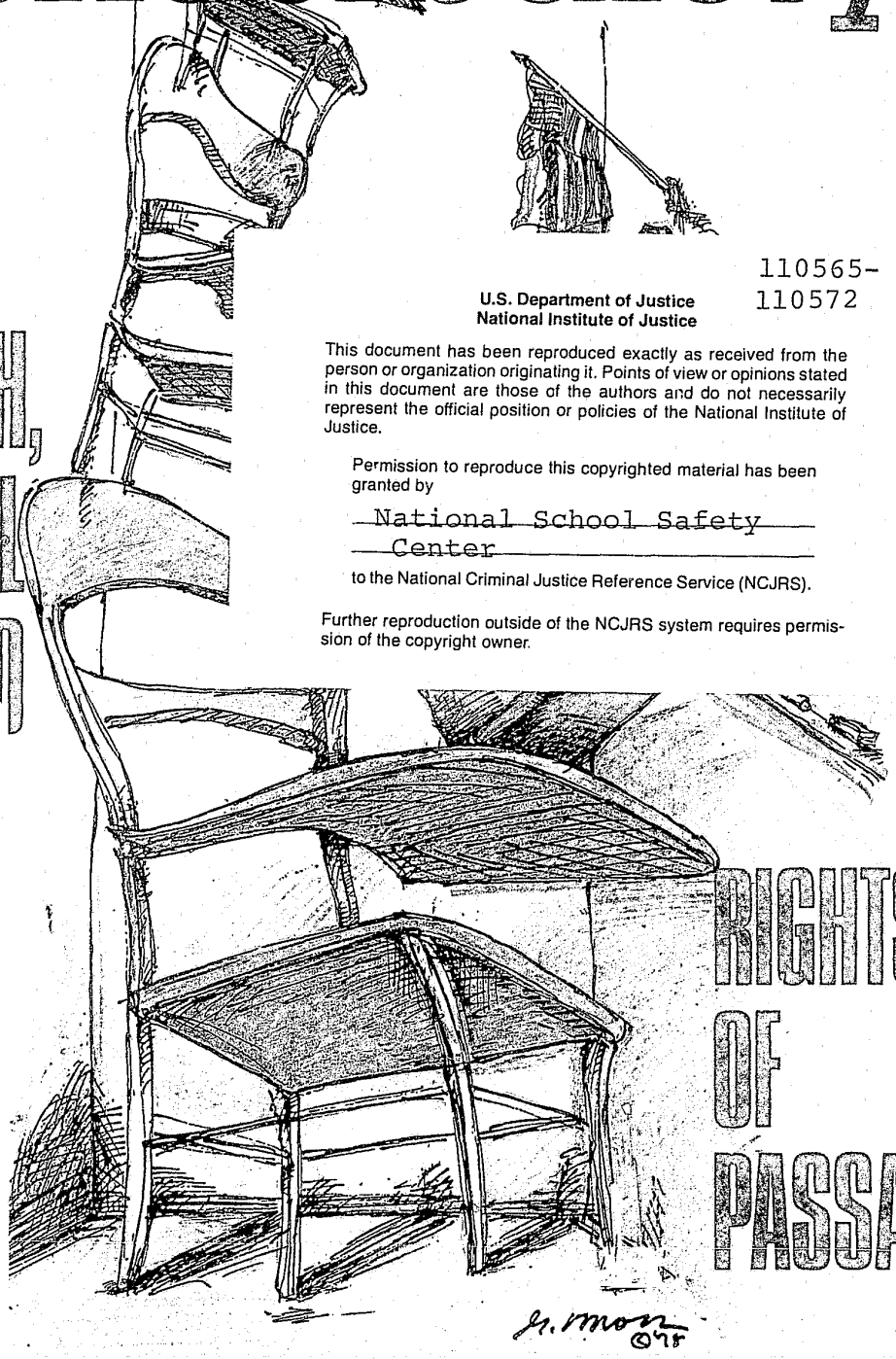
YOUTH, SCHOOL AND RIGHTS OF PASSAGE



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NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

Pepperdine University's National School Safety Center is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. NSSC's goal is to promote school safety, improve discipline, increase attendance, and suppress drug traffic and abuse in all our nation's schools.

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About the cover:
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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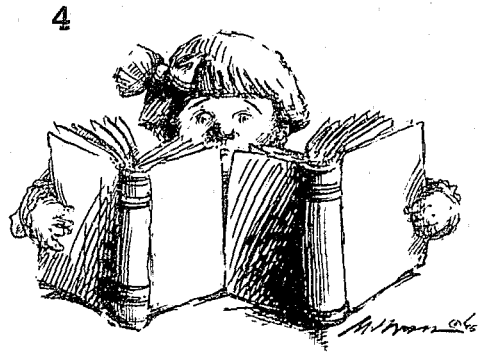

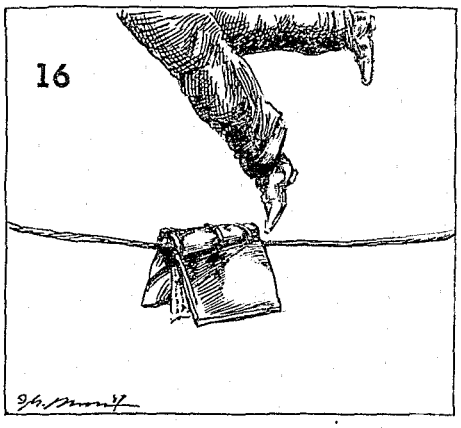

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BY DAVID ELKIND

The disappearance of activities once important to the mature development of youth has coincided with increases in deviant behavior in adolescence.

Disappearing markers and deviant behavior

It has long been recognized that the transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood is made easier by culturally prescribed "rites of passage." Such rites can be formal rituals such as confirmation or bar/bat mitzvah or informal ones such as parental permission to date, use the car at night and so on. Rites of passage are but one example of what I have called "markers," activities that symbolize a young person's progress toward maturity. Markers occur at all age levels and help young people to know their psychological *place* — where they are, where they were and where they are going.

The disappearance of markers

Like so many other things in life, we often fail to appreciate the value of markers until they are gone. We often take good health for granted until we no longer have it. Good teaching is another example. When I visit a well-run classroom where the children are enthusiastic and busy at their work, moving easily from one activity to another, it all seems very natural and easy. Children, after all, go to school to learn, and in the classroom they are just doing what comes naturally. I get another picture when I visit a poorly run classroom in which the children are either loud and disorganized or cowed into quiet submission. At that point I appreciate how much hard work, experience and talent go into managing a well-run classroom. But the importance of good teaching only becomes visible in its absence.

The same is true for markers. When there were plenty of markers to guide children along their struggle to maturity, the trip was not easy but at least it was manageable. Today, many of those markers have disappeared, and we are beginning to appreciate their significance for healthy development. Without sufficient markers many children and adolescents are losing their way and showing the sypmtoms of short-term stress and long-term personality disturbance, which are the product of being psychologically "unplaced" in our society.

The disappearance of developmental markers for children and adolescents began in the 1960s and has progressed to the point that many activities once reserved for older children and adolescents are now pursued by younger children. Even young children are now dressed in adult fashions, and there are make-up kits for young girls and colognes for young boys. Preschool children are now being introduced to competitive sports activities such as ice skating and tennis, once reserved for older children and adolescents.

Schools are pushing a formal curriculum for young children as well. In many of today's kindergartens, children do workbook exercises, are given homework assignments and are graded in the same manner as children at older age levels. Rotation from room to room for instruction in different subject matters, once common only in high school and junior high, is now prevalent at the elementary school level.

The disappearance of traditional markers of development has coincided with an increase in stress reactions for children at all age levels and with increases in deviant behavior in adolescence. Teen-age pregnancy, substance abuse, eating disorders and crime have all been on the increase over the last decade and a half. Although they are no longer increasing, most of these behaviors have remained at distressingly high levels for the teen-age population as a whole.

In this paper I want to briefly review some of the causes for the disappearance of markers as well as some of the dynamics by which this disappearance is translated into deviant behavior. I

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will conclude with some suggestions as to how health and human service agencies, law enforcement groups, parents and schools can work together to re-establish meaningful markers for children and youth.

Images of childhood and adolescence

The disappearance of markers of development in childhood and adolescence is indicative of a new image of childhood and adolescence that emerged in the 1960s and has become the norm in the 1980s. The image of childhood and adolescence is, at any time in history, more a product of social, economic and political forces than of the established psychological theory and research regarding child growth and development. Indeed, the existing research and theory are often distorted to conform to the culturally determined prevailing image of the child.

Around the turn of the century, for example, the religious emphasis of society supported the notion of the "sinful" child whose will had to be broken if he or she was to be saved from perdition. As our society became more secular and more suburban, a new psychology of the child took hold. Purportedly based on Freudian psychology, the new image of the child reinforced both the suburbanization of society and the importance of women's role as housewife and mother. This new image was that of the "sensual" child whose infantile sexual drives had to be expressed if the child was not to become neurotic. And such expression took place best in the process of play, ideally in the child's own backyard.

How this image served social and economic forces is easy to demonstrate. In both England and America during World War II, large numbers of women worked in defense factories. A system of day-care centers was set up at public expense to care for the children of working mothers. After the war, a problem arose. Returning servicemen needed jobs, and day-care centers were costing communities a considerable amount of money. At this point social science came to the rescue by introducing the concept of "maternal deprivation." Mothers were warned that if they did not care for their children for at least the first three years of the child's life, dire consequences would ensue.

The concept of "maternal deprivation" was not based on any new data about child growth and development. After all, little scientific research had been done during the war. Rather, old data was reinterpreted to fit the times. Women left the work force and day-care centers were closed. Clearly the concept of the sensual child supported the move to the suburbs, which in turn supported the home building industry, the automobile industry and the road construction industry. Fortunately for children, if not for women, the concept of the sensual child supported many markers of childhood and a nurturant environment. Some images of children, even though rooted in social forces, can still be beneficial to children and youth.

The competent child

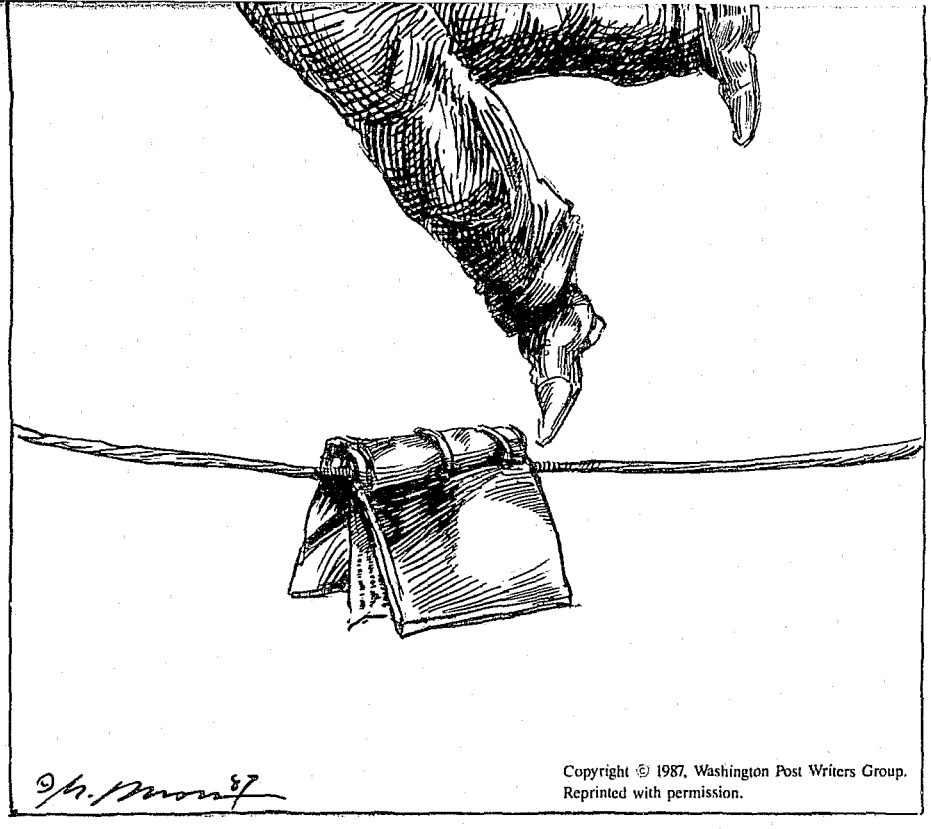
All of this changed in the 1960s. The women's movement (in part a reaction to their relegation to the suburbs), the civil rights movement and the "war on poverty" created a new social and economic climate of reform. Not surprisingly, a new image of the child emerged out of this new social climate. A major thrust of the social reform movement was a demand to recognize the potential of women and minorities. Their potential, it was strongly argued, had been much underdeveloped and undervalued. It was time that this unused potential was given a chance to be realized.

It was not a big step to extend this concept to children. Children also had potential and abilities that were underutilized and undervalued. Indeed, many social ills could be remedied if only we recognized the potential of young children. And, sure enough, voices from the scientific community soon supported a new notion of the child, the *competent* child. In the early 1960s, Jerome Bruner proclaimed, "You can teach any child any subject matter at any age in an intellectually responsible way." Benjamin Bloom argued that children attained half of their intellectual ability by age 4, which is when educational intervention would be most effective. And James McV. Hunt contended that intelligence is malleable, not fixed, and can be modified by appropriate early experience.

None of these arguments was based on any new data or theories about child development, but rather they were based upon reinterpretations of well-established existing data. Even social scientists can be caught up in the emotions of new social movements and read data in such a way as to support social change they regard as morally and ethically right. Nor did those social scientists believe they were tampering with the middle-class image of the child. Their writings were directed toward disadvantaged children, not toward advantaged youngsters.

Nonetheless, the image of the "competent" child was quickly adopted by middle-class parents. Again, the acceptance of this new concept was made less on the basis of new data and theories and more on the basis of, however unconscious, self-interest. Middle-class family styles have changed dramatically since the 1960s. Today, more than 50 percent of mothers with children under the age of 5 are in the work force. The liberation of women has meant out-of-home care for a large proportion of young children. The concept of the sensual child in need of "maternal" care was clearly out of step with this new lifestyle, while the notion of child competence fits very well.

If young children's abilities were underappreciated and needed to be realized, this might best be done in an out-of-home educational setting that could provide the trained teachers and materials children need to attain their full capacity. The thousandfold growth of Montessori schools in this country,



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schools that provide a rich, child-centered academic program (plus full-day care at an early age), is witness to the new image of child competence. The extension of curricula and teaching practices once reserved for older children into the kindergartens is still another example of how the new image of child competence is determining educational as well as child-rearing practices.

The new image of the competent child, introduced to benefit disadvantaged children, was taken over by middle-class parents because it was in keeping with contemporary family styles. Nor was this image limited to young children, and it soon spread to all age levels. Again, this new image serves as a rationale for contemporary family styles. It is very difficult, for example, for parents to monitor the television fare watched by children and adolescents. Many parents simply give in and allow their children to watch what they please. The rationale of the competent child would maintain that children are competent to interpret and understand what they see, resist commercial pitches, and not be affected by the sex and violence so freely portrayed on the small screen.

As for adolescents, I have talked to parents who believe that girls as young as 13 should make decisions about whether or not to be sexually active. Other parents, acting under the same wrong conception, make beer and wine available at parties for adolescents, influenced by the young people's argument that "without booze there's no party." And the new image of child competence helps explain the surprise of some parents at finding their homes trashed after leaving teen-agers alone in the house for the weekend. In short, the new image of child competence has been instrumental in eliminating markers and in parents and educators assuming that children and adolescents are miniature adults.

Markers and deviant behavior

A full discussion of the dynamics of markers and stress reactions in children and adolescents is involved and complex and would require more space than is available here. I want, therefore, to focus on adolescents and how the absence of markers can contribute to deviant behavior. Even more specifically, I want to focus on only one aspect of deviant behavior, decision making and risk taking.

One thing markers did was to delay important decision making until most young people were sufficiently emotionally, socially and intellectually mature to make self-preserving rather than self-destructive decisions. In the past, most young people did not make decisions about becoming sexually active, experimenting with drugs or engaging in anti-social behavior until middle to late adolescence — roughly ages 16 to 18.

That made good developmental sense. Elaborating on the work of Jean Piaget, the famed Swiss psychologist, I have suggested that in early adolescence young people construct two realities that govern their conduct to a significant degree. One of these constructed realities is the *imaginary audience*. Once the young adolescent can begin to think about thinking — a process children are not able to engage in — they make the error of assuming everyone else is thinking about what they are thinking about, namely themselves. And because they are preoccupied with the dramatic changes occurring in their bodies, their feelings and their minds, they automatically assume everyone else is as concerned with them as they are. Young adolescents believe they are under the constant surveillance of an audience. Only in later adolescence, after a number of experiences have shown them that others are really not preoccupied with their appearance and behavior, do young people modify the audience to make it better conform with reality.

A corollary to the imaginary audience is what I have called the *personal fable*, a story we tell ourselves about ourselves that is not true. If, the young adolescent thinks, others are so concerned with my appearance and behavior, I must be something special and unique. The young adolescent believes other people will grow old, but not me; other people will fail to realize their life's ambitions, but not me. Like the imaginary audience that is modified by experience, so too is the fable. As young people begin to develop intimate friendships, they discover they are not alone in their belief that they are special.

The significance of the audience and the fable for the present discussion is that they play an important role in adolescent decision making. In early

adolescence, the influence of the audience and of the fable is at its peak. The concern young adolescents have with wearing the same clothing as their peers stems from this great concern with audience reaction. In the same way, the belief in their own power or efficacy will cause some young people to start lifting weights or dieting. They believe that by engaging in these activities they can dramatically alter their body's configurations.

What has happened with the disappearance of adolescent markers is that many of the decisions young people once did not have to make until after the audience and fable had been moderated now have to be made when these realities are most influential. The consequences of this are significant. For example, a young adolescent girl who has to make a decision about becoming sexually active will likely be influenced to a greater extent by the audience and the fable than will an older adolescent girl making the same decision. If the young adolescent girl believes the audience will think she is childish if she does not become sexually active, this will influence her decision. So too will the fable-related belief that other girls will get pregnant or contract a venereal disease, not her.

Accordingly, by eliminating markers of development, young adolescents are forced into making decisions when they are most subject to the influence of the imaginary audience and the fable. Such decisions are much more likely to be self-destructive than if they were made at a later age. The same is true for decisions having to do with anti-social actions, whether these be vandalism, theft or assault. Moreover, once the wrong decision is made in early adolescence, the die is often cast. Once a self-punishing decision is made, young people often get into a pattern of self-justification. And this pattern of self-justification often prevents them from benefiting from the kinds of experiences that, in the normal course of events, would help modify the audience and the fable. In effect, many delinquent youths remain under the sway of the audience and fable long after their non-delinquent peers.

An example of how the audience might play a role in delinquent behavior may help to support the significance of these realities in adolescent behavior. One of the troublesome things about vandalism is that it appears so senseless. What possible gratification do young people get from destroying or defacing property? If we recognize that most vandals are very angry young people, and if we take the imaginary audience into account, then vandalism begins to make some sense. The gratification of the vandal comes from envisioning the reaction of the imaginary audience, from their imagined frustration and anger upon discovering the vandalism.

Obviously, much more than the audience and fable are at work when adolescents get involved in delinquent behavior. But the disappearance of markers, particularly the depiction in the media of adolescents as smarter, more sophisticated and skilled than adults, is an important contributor. And because parents often give credence to these images, their impact is reinforced by parental expectations. So while individual personality, family and socio-economic factors play a role in deviant behavior, so too does the disappearance of markers in our society in general.

Community action

How can we restore some of the markers whose disappearance is contributing to the increase in adolescent deviant behavior? The disappearance of markers is a social and cultural phenomenon, not just something that has happened at home or at school. The most constructive approach would, therefore, involve coordinated actions both at home and by the community. One type of joint action might involve establishing youth clubs that were once prominent in high schools and religious organizations. This means adults have to volunteer to lead such groups. Despite the image of sophistication, young people realize that they can benefit from the wisdom and guidance of adults.

Community service is another cooperative venture that schools, families and community agencies can make a reality. In Atlanta, for example, young people must put in at least 75 hours of community service as a requirement for graduation. Agencies within the community need to make provisions for young people to serve, and families have to be positive and supporting if such service is to be successful. Community service can become a meaningful marker of the transition to adult status.

Other things can be done if the community is committed to re-establishing markers. In some communities young people are going to "proms" in junior high. Why not make the senior prom in high school the only prom? This would re-establish its value as a marker. Although they are hard to implement, dress codes and school uniforms would eliminate a lot of the competition that designer clothing has introduced and could be still another marker of childhood status. While such codes might be difficult to introduce in high school or junior high, a simple uniform dress code would make excellent sense in elementary schools.

Obviously, the restoration of some of the markers of childhood and adolescence is not going to solve the problem of youth crime in America, nor any of the other problems of youth. Such problems will, unfortunately, always be with us. But we can cut down the proportions of these problems by helping those young people who have a chance to lead healthy, productive and responsible lives except for social circumstances that have put them at the wrong time and in the wrong place. With more markers, fewer young people would have to make decisions when they are most vulnerable to the influence of the imaginary audience and the personal fable. □