



The
Children's
Society

Too old, too young?

Theology on the ambiguity of
adolescence and the impact of neglect

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Foreword

by Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester



It is probably stating the obvious to say that adolescence is an awkward time for young people. The changes which confront them as they grow into all aspects of maturity make the teenage years challenging. But to pretend that adolescence is simply a challenging time for young people is to miss a deeper issue, which is that adolescence is also a challenging time for families, communities (religious and other) and wider society.

Recent high profile stories about the abuse and exploitation of teenagers, combined with debates about the voting age in various political referenda, show that society struggles with the issue of how teenagers should be viewed: are they vulnerable young people who need protecting, or maturing individuals who can cope with adult responsibilities?

For those young people in supportive families, with networks and structures in place, adolescence can be a time of uncertainty and the testing of boundaries.

Yet for those for whom there are no boundaries, for whom neglect is the context of their everyday lives, the unchecked changes and developments of adolescence can have deep and far reaching consequences.

In order to deal with the practical issues around how to protect and nurture children and young people as they grow, we need a better understanding and a fuller vision of what it means to be a teenager. Furthermore, it is vital for the church to wrestle theologically with the issues of what it means to be a young person in relation to family life, community membership and participation in wider society. Thus, this collection of essays is both timely and important.

The first section takes a fresh look at what the issues are including new analysis of how young people are neglected within the home. The second looks at these issues through a theological lens with a reflection on what Scripture might tell us, and the final section takes on the urgent task of how we might constructively act within families, communities and at the legislative level. These essays aim to provoke both hearts and minds and is a prophetic call to respond.

A short collection of essays on such a vast topic will inevitably leave much more to be said and explored. However, I hope this collection will be an important catalyst for dialogue that will contribute to church thinking and, more importantly, church action for and with children and young people.

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Prayer

'Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets... They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.'

Zephaniah 8.4-5,8

Loving God, who promises to be faithful and righteous,
Help us to make real your vision for all young people,
so that they are valued for who they are,
not who they will be,
so that they are encouraged and supported,
not abused or neglected,
listened to and challenged,
not ignored or stifled,
free to play safely
not forced to grow up before their time.

Loving God, wise parent to us all,
Inspire us to be people who
let the young play,
encourage them to grow,
and enable them to flourish,
in communities of faithful people,
sharing wisdom and joy.
Amen.



Introduction

by Angus Ritchie

The best advice I ever received about ministry with teenagers was this: young people remember *how churches treat them* even more than they remember *what churches try to teach them*. Lives are changed not simply when Christians say the right things, but when people experience something of the love of God through them.

How, then, can Christians help teenagers to experience the life and love of God? At one level, the answer is 'in the same way as we help anyone else': that is, through our worship and teaching, and through the practical embodiment of love within and beyond the Christian community. However, the teenage years do have some unique challenges and opportunities.

As Jennifer Lau explains in our opening essay, teenagers are on a journey from dependence to some kind of autonomy. That transition can be difficult for them, and for those around them. In the home, the church and the wider community, adults may feel ill-equipped to respond. Perhaps that is why adolescent neglect is such a serious issue – one which is itself neglected. This collection

is written to accompany a wider campaign by The Children's Society to draw attention to and effectively address the reality of adolescent neglect. The essays by Mike Stein, Phil Raws and Mo Baldwin leave us in no doubt about the seriousness and scale of such neglect.

The next four essays in this collection explain the nature of the challenge. The following four explore the Christian response.

The section of theological reflection offers a response to the research within the context of Scripture and faith community.

In my essay, I root the theological imperative to care for adolescents in the very heart of the Church's mission – which is to draw people into the life and love of the Triune God. Rowan Williams helps us to explore the particular ambiguities and complexities of adolescence, and the kind of adult responses that are needed if our treatment of young people is to embody the patient and attentive love of God. In his study of Galatians 4, Krish Kandiah looks at St Paul's use of childhood vulnerability and of adoption as key metaphors in his account of salvation, and draws

out some important implications for the care of vulnerable and neglected adolescents. Then Anne Richards considers the one story we have of the adolescent Jesus, and the echoes it has for parents and carers today.

The complexity of adolescence resists trite and easy solutions. Perhaps this is one reason our society finds it so hard to engage with the issue of adolescent neglect. This makes the last two essays of the collection vital, as Nigel Varndell and Gail Adcock identify ways in which families, carers, churches and policy-makers can respond to testimony and reflection with constructive action.

It is my hope that this collection will inspire as well as challenge readers. These essays not only describe the challenge of adolescent neglect, they also express the conviction that God looks on each one of us with the patient, loving attention that we need – and that it is the same patience and love that enables all of us, including adolescents, to flourish. 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another'.^a

^a 1 John 4.11

Adolescence: opportunity and vulnerability

by Jennifer Lau

Introduction

Adolescence is defined as the period of transition from the end of childhood to the beginning of adulthood. The beginning of adolescence is recognised across cultures by a biological milestone: the release of pubertal hormones that set in motion a cascade of physical growth and development. By contrast, the end of adolescence varies across cultures and historical contexts, depending on when it is considered that a stable adult role has been attained. Not only is adolescence a period of considerable physical growth and sexual maturation, in many societies it is characterised by major changes in the individual's social environment. For example, the beginning of adolescence frequently coincides with the transition to secondary or high school, where academic demands grow and expectations of responsibility change – tracking the changes in cognition that also occur. Teenagers also spend longer periods of time with their peers than with their parents. The social world becomes far more complex – social relationships change from mostly one-to-one interactions to those with a greater emphasis on groups and cliques within more complex social hierarchies. Important psychological changes also occur in adolescence. In part, these

arise from the need to cope with stressful new situations – in particular, the changing demands of the teenagers' social world. Ultimately, these changes prepare the individual to become increasingly independent from the family environment.

Psychological changes in adolescence

What are the psychological changes that occur in adolescence? As adolescents mature into young adults they become better at regulating their emotions. Many studies show that compared to adults, adolescents take more risks, particularly in emotional situations such as when members of their peer group are present.¹ Adolescents are also more affected by various negative forms of feedback than adults are.² Compared to adults, they are less able to direct attention away from emotional stimuli even when these are distracting them from a primary goal.³ As the years of adolescence go on, the capacity to regulate emotions and attention, and to assess risk in a more sober manner, gradually develops.

Across these years, adolescents undergo another parallel set of psychological changes. They acquire an increasingly sophisticated capacity to understand and manipulate the

thoughts and feelings of other people. Compared to children, adolescents become more adept at knowing what other people think and feel – and become more able to use this information in their own decision making. A recent study (using a game during which adolescents shared earned points with their classmates) showed that older adolescents are beginning to become aware of the concept of reciprocity in their social interactions.⁴

These psychological changes may well be driven by changes in the underlying brain circuits of adolescents.⁵ There is now plenty of evidence showing that there are widespread changes in the structure of the brain across adolescence. These changes are thought to contribute to an increasing efficiency of how different brain regions communicate – and how the organisation of the brain increasingly reflects an individual's experience. Strikingly, the brain regions involved in emotion regulation and social understanding take a long time to mature across adolescence. It could be that this prolonged period of change is necessary as young people learn and practise their new skills of regulating emotions and interacting with others.

'Storm and stress' in adolescence

While adolescence is a period of psychological growth, a time of increased independence and opportunity, it has also long been labelled as a period of 'storm and stress'.

It is often equated with heightened moodiness, recklessness and self-consciousness. Indeed, from Aristotle (384 – 322BC) through Shakespeare (1564 – 1616AD) and on to contemporary thinkers and artists, adolescence has been described as youth's raging, tempestuous passage into adulthood. The social, biological and psychological factors I have outlined above can help us to make sense of this. By the start of adolescence, the brain's capacity to generate emotional responses is pretty fully developed. But these are crucial years, in which young people learn to regulate those emotions and to understand how others think and feel. As Rowan Williams emphasises in his contribution to this collection, that maturation involves the passage of time – the regulation of emotions and the development of empathy are the result of experience. Social support is vital, at the very time when such support demands a much greater degree of patience

and understanding from the adults in each adolescent's life. Adolescence, then, is a time of significant psychological growth and widening opportunity, but also one of significant emotional vulnerability.

My own work as a developmental psychologist is focussed on the sub-set of adolescents who find that transition very difficult – for whom the 'storm and stress' of the period is particularly intense. This intensity may manifest itself in anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, substance abuse and anti-social behaviour. These young people often show poorer emotional regulation and understanding of social situations, and during a time of social flux this may not serve them well, placing them at risk for many psychological disorders. Treating these conditions is a vitally important task. Precisely because adolescence is a period of increased learning and flexibility, treatments at this stage of life are thought to have stronger and potentially long-lasting effects.⁶ It is vital that adolescents who are struggling emotionally are not neglected or ostracised. Reaching out to support them can have a truly life-changing impact.

'By the start of adolescence, the brain's capacity to generate emotional responses is pretty fully developed.'

Conclusion

Much of what is true of adolescents with mood and anxiety disorders is also true of the wider teenage population. Every teenager is experiencing a time of major changes, social and physical, which have profound psychological implications for the teenager's well-being. This may present challenges to the adults who are responsible for teenagers' well-being and it is vital to invest time and attention in teenagers as they mature and develop, for their experience of these years will have a profound impact on their long-term development and well-being.⁷



Part one: testimony

Jennifer Lau's essay helps us to understand why adolescence is such a crucial time in each person's development. In the following essays, Mike Stein and Phil Raws draw on the latest research to demonstrate the extent and nature of adolescent neglect today – and the challenge this presents to every Christian – as we seek to embody the love and care of God to those in greatest need.

Mo Baldwin then offers a synthesis of the main findings of the newly published report from The Children's Society, *Seriously Awkward*, which you can read in more detail at childrenssociety.org.uk/seriouslyawkward. This report uses an analysis of a range of data sources alongside consultation with young people in The Children's Society's services to explore the legal and service provision challenges faced by the most vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds.

1.1 Why is adolescent neglect an important issue?

by Mike Stein

Introduction

Public responses to troubled teenagers are often polarised. In the popular media they may be demonised as hooligans or hoodies, or they may be pitied as victims. The plight of homeless teenagers and the child sexual grooming scandals have highlighted the vulnerability of adolescents. But the failure of agencies to respond is in part a consequence of these young people being seen as 'blameworthy', in some way themselves responsible for their neglect and abuse, a perception that has never been far from the surface. This short essay will summarise the findings of the 'adolescent neglect' research project, a collaboration between the University of York, The Children's Society and the NSPCC, which aimed to address the lack of understanding of the topic and provide evidence to re-think policy and practice.

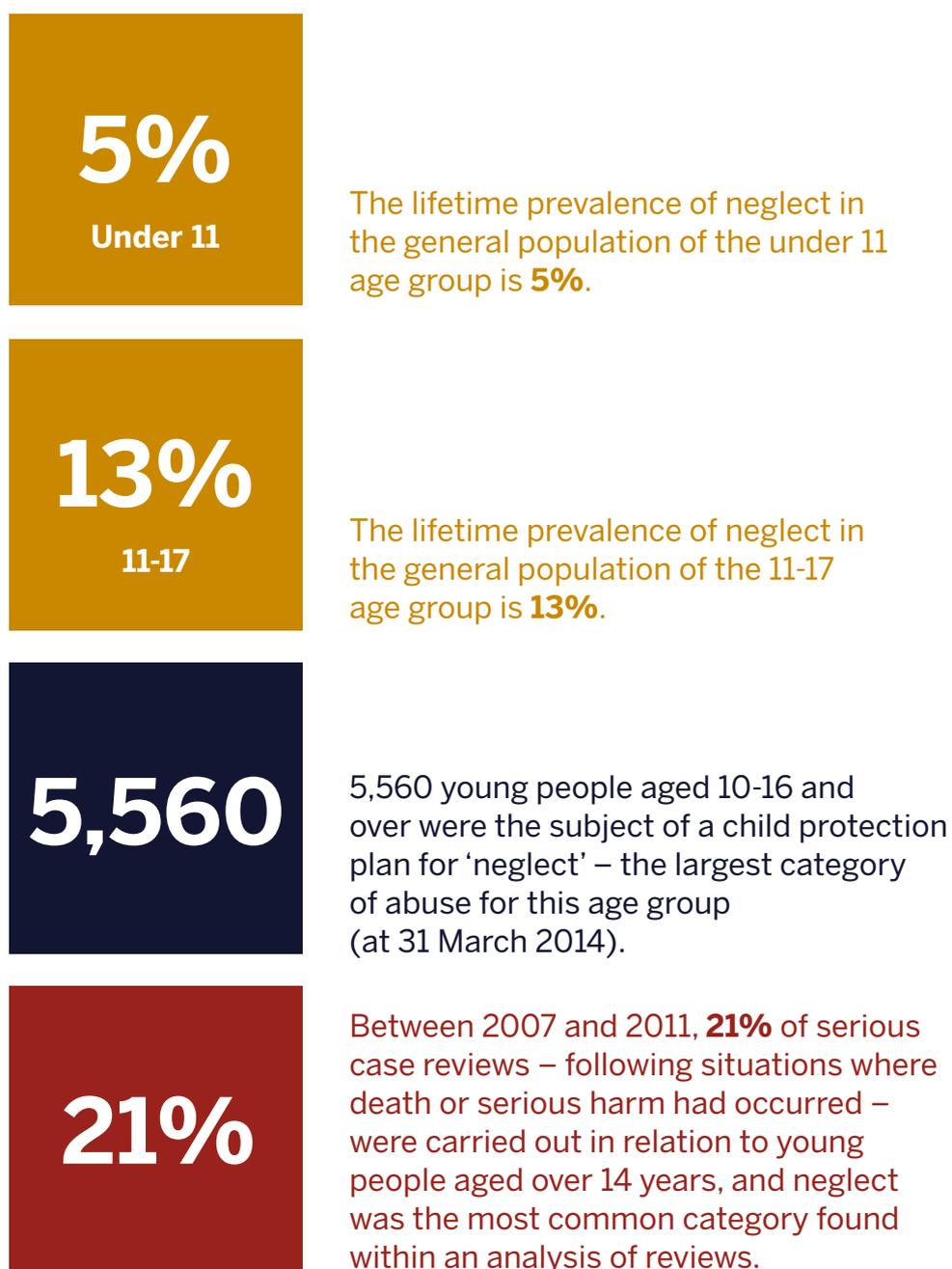
What is neglect?

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013), the Government's statutory guidance, used by all professionals in England responsible for the welfare of children, states: 'Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development'. Protecting neglected children from 'significant harm' is seen as the guiding principle of safeguarding. However, little attention has been given to the policy and practical implications of differences in age and development in relation to 'parental supervision'; nor to the boundaries between neglect and other forms of maltreatment of teenagers: for example, when a young person is forced to leave home and finds themselves hungry and homeless. There are also differences in the way that young people and professionals define neglect, indicating the importance of including young people's views in the assessment process.

How many young people are neglected?

Although neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment within the family in the UK, and the largest-cited category of abuse of children of any age who are the subject of a child protection plan in England, it has received far less attention in the research literature than other forms of maltreatment. But not only that. A review of research revealed the lack of attention paid to the maltreatment, including neglect, of 'older young people', rooted in the tendency to focus on under-16s. The available data shows adolescent neglect to be a significant issue (see **Figure 1A**).^{8,9}

Figure 1A



Consequences of neglect for young people

Perceptions of teenagers as 'resilient' and 'more adult' in comparison to younger children tends to mask an understanding of the consequences of neglect and what can be done to help.

So what do we know about the consequences of neglect for teenagers?

Physical and mental health: just under a quarter of serious case reviews resulting from death (around two-thirds) or serious injury (a third) related to young people aged 11-17. There is strong evidence of a link between neglectful parenting and depression in teenagers, and neglect has a stronger impact on young people's mental health than other forms of maltreatment.

Risky behaviours: neglectful parenting, including poor parental monitoring and emotionally neglectful parenting, is associated with drug and alcohol abuse; early sexual activity and the increased likelihood of young people running away from home.

Educational experiences and outcomes: neglectful parenting contributes to

behavioural problems at school; poor academic focus characterised by 'high levels of task-irrelevant behaviour', and low levels of academic achievement – although the latter is also influenced by cultural and economic factors.

Behavioural problems and offending: neglectful parenting has a stronger association with late adolescent offending, violent behaviour and arrest than physical and sexual abuse does. There is also evidence that low parental warmth, involvement and control are linked with a higher incidence of anti-social behaviour and offending.

Longer-term outcomes: although there is a need for longitudinal research, the evidence summarised above would suggest that the experience of neglect during adolescence is a high risk factor for poor adult outcomes, affecting career prospects, mental health and well-being.

What are the causes of adolescent neglect?

As detailed above 'neglectful parenting' is associated with negative consequences for adolescents: this is evidenced by a low level of parental

control, including knowledge and monitoring of activities, whereabouts and establishment of boundaries, and; a low level of warmth and acceptance by parents toward young people. However, there has been very little research that explores parenting behaviours and other contextual factors that relate to teenagers as distinct from younger children. We do know that as young people become older they may be neglected by being drawn into caring roles in response to parental problems, and feel excluded when living in families where changes in parenting relationships are taking place.

What are the key issues for young people and professionals?

Research into young people's views shows that they see neglect as a lack of 'love and affection' and a failure to provide some aspect of care – such as food, suitable clothes and access to appropriate hygiene. But they also conceptualise neglect as part of a wider spectrum of harm that extends beyond professional boundaries of maltreatment including, for example, the importance of teaching self-care skills, the prevention of obesity, treating siblings equally and not

favouring new partners over their children.

The main challenges identified by professionals relate to the involvement of young people as they grow older; achieving a balance between protection and participation; working with parents, preventing persistent neglect becoming 'normalised' in professional culture; and the importance of multi-agency practice.

How can we intervene to assist neglected adolescents?

Interventions are often classified into three groups.

Primary prevention aims to prevent neglect before it occurs, through universal or targeted approaches: the former will include promoting the health and well-being of young people in schools, colleges and communities; the latter will require directed schemes such as offering parenting skills courses for the parents of teenagers.

Secondary intervention, or early intervention, aims to respond to problems when they first arise. This will help young people to recognise neglect, through guides and social media; giving them ready access to services, offering informal help within the

community and providing more formal help through assessment and professional support.

Tertiary intervention aims to respond to young people with persistent experiences of neglect. The limited research evidence suggests that a specialist multi-agency team approach is likely to be most effective in working with neglected teenagers.

Final thoughts

In this short essay I have argued that adolescent neglect is an important issue which causes significant suffering to many young people. It is an issue which demands to be taken seriously, not only by agencies formally responsible for young people's welfare, but also by all those who engage with young people – voluntary organisations, neighbourhood and youth groups and faith communities. We should ask ourselves: 'How can we promote the health and well-being of young people?'; 'How young person-centred are we?'; 'Can young people talk to us and trust in us when they are neglected?'

1.2 Neglect of adolescents at home: some new research

by Phil Raws

Introduction

The Children's Society has recently begun a research programme on adolescent neglect in the home. Mike Stein's essay provides an excellent explanation of what we understand by neglect, and of its impact on the lives and futures of adolescents. Over the last 20 years, The Children's Society has conducted a series of studies around issues affecting disadvantaged teenagers¹⁰ which have suggested that, although they may not suffer the extremes of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, a substantial number of young people live in a hinterland

of chronic neglect which either goes unnoticed, or (perhaps more often) is not acted on by professionals.

Our desire to understand the scale of neglect in England led to an initial project which asked a nationally-representative sample of young people about their experiences of parenting at home. As well as helping The Children's Society to establish the extent of adolescent neglect, it provided some wider insights on parenting of teenagers, some of which are discussed below.

The key findings are shown in **Figure 1B**.

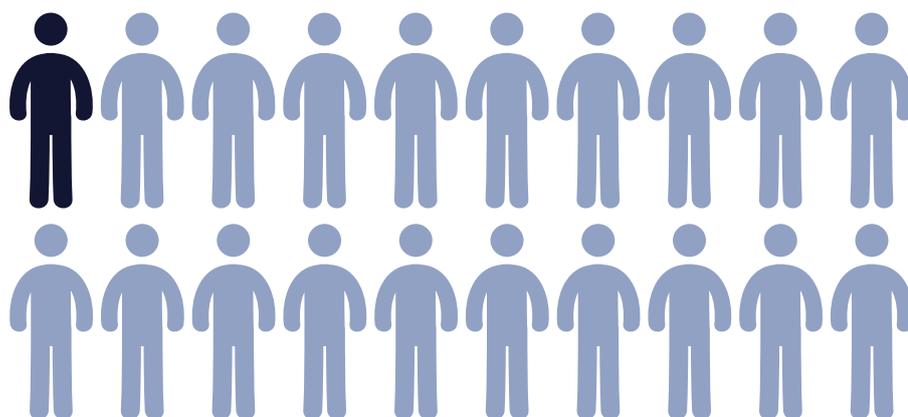
These figures give us some initial sense of the scale and seriousness of the problem. I want to explain in more detail how the research team came to these figures, before going on to draw out some implications for everyone who is concerned about the care and well-being of teenagers.

Figure 1B: Key findings

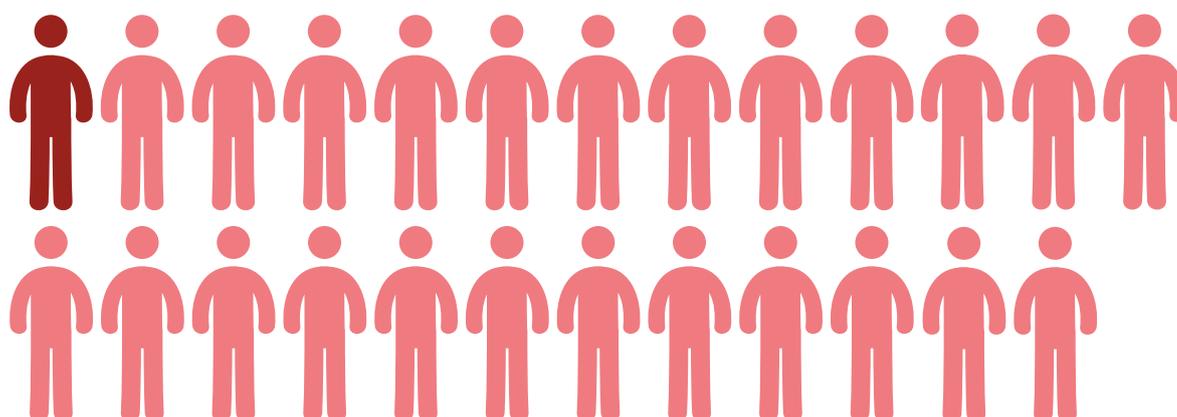


Around one in 12 teenagers are not receiving the most basic forms of emotional care from their parents. They rarely, if ever, get help when they have a problem, support when upset or positive encouragement.

The same proportion of teenagers are inadequately supervised. Their parents hardly ever want to know their whereabouts, or seem concerned if they are late home.



One in 20 teenagers are not given sufficient physical care to preserve their health, or nursed by their parents when they fall ill.



One in 25 teenagers have parents who show little or no interest in their education.

Data for 14-15 year olds

Researching adolescent neglect: a new measure of parenting behaviours

The concept of 'neglect' is complex, as it concerns the interrelationships and interdependence of a range of parenting behaviours over time, and their associated effects in producing deficits or negative outcomes for the development of a child.

When we add into this mix the particular challenges of adolescence – outlined so clearly by Jennifer Lau and Mike Stein – it can be difficult for researchers to establish exactly where parental care is needed or absent.

For this reason, before formulating a measure for adolescent neglect, the team decided to go back to basics and talk to young people and adults about parenting. Their views helped us to develop a new measure of neglect which, after further piloting, testing and refinement was used to ask around 2,000 12-15-year-olds in schools across England about their experiences.¹¹

Parenting of adolescents: findings from the surveys

At a headline level we found that:

- most young people were well cared-for in relation to all aspects of parenting, but a significant minority reported that their parents 'never' or 'hardly ever' provided the types of care we asked about.
- older young people consistently reported less parental input than younger ones – with a marked decline for behaviours we had categorised as 'emotional support' relative to other types of parenting.

And, for 14-15-year-olds who lived in a single household,¹² we found that:

- boys reported less supervision than girls
- young people with a step-parent reported less support around education;
- those in a lone parent family, less physical care
- young people in poorer households reported marginally less support with education.

The data also indicated that, in general, more parental care and support linked to better psychological and physical health, more positive experiences of school and higher well-being, although the relationship to the 'volume' of parenting was not always consistent, eg young people who were less intensively supervised or supported with their education had higher life satisfaction.

When does parenting become 'neglectful'?

Critical to our study was the goal of finding out about the scale of neglect and this required us to use the data to identify the point at which the level of parenting behaviours became so low that its wider impact was consistently negative and significantly detrimental to a young person's health or well-being.

A systematic analysis, comparing parenting scores against different indicators in the dataset (eg for behaviours such as truanting) produced a classification for neglect.

This research is still in its early stages. At the time of writing the analysis of the survey dataset is incomplete and plans are taking shape to conduct qualitative work

with families where neglect has been identified. We also want to have conversations with more professionals about exactly how we define 'neglect,' so we can develop our measures further, and use them for some larger-scale research.

Already, however, a number of fresh and important insights can be drawn from the research we have done. In particular, it should be noted:

- **The high proportions of young people who experience neglect.**
The findings on neglect – that up to one in 12 young people aged 14-15 years old are experiencing parenting that is so poor as to significantly jeopardise their physical and mental health, and their well-being – paint a bleak picture for the lives of many teenagers. And it is likely that these underestimate the scale of neglect because our sample comprised only those young people who were in mainstream schools. Many of the most disadvantaged will not be involved in education, especially by the time they are 15 years old.

- **The decline in emotional support for teenagers.**
A 15% fall in the numbers of young people reporting that their parents 'often' or 'always' help them if they have problems, or support them if they are upset, between the Year 8 (12-13 years old) and Year 10 (15-16 years old) groups is a cause for concern. These parenting behaviours are the most strongly associated with higher scores for the behavioural, health and well-being indicators in the dataset, suggesting that by not prioritising this type of care as young people grow and mature some parents may be hindering positive outcomes for their children.

- **The variable effects of different parenting inputs.**
Although this requires more work, the nuances in the data around how much parenting is best (eg medium levels of supervision and educational support = higher life satisfaction for 14-15 year olds) offer clues which can be explored further through the ongoing research programme to find out how the needs of adolescents change over time.

A landmark study in the US has shown that the repercussions of neglect in the teenage years are at least as serious as neglect earlier in childhood.¹³ Already our research shows how serious the issue of adolescent neglect is, and challenges us to understand and address it. More research is needed, and is being undertaken, but we can already say with confidence that action is needed – and there is much that communities, churches, charities and policy-makers can do.

1.3 At serious risk

by Mo Baldwin

Introduction

Every year around 800,000 children in the UK turn 16, an important milestone in the life of any child. Their rights to make independent decisions expand and future career choices are made as they progress from school to colleges, apprenticeships and first jobs. It is a period of major change and they are faced with decisions that will determine their life paths and future successes or failures. There is no consistent language to describe this age range: 'teenager', 'young person', 'young adult' are common, whilst many 16 and 17 year olds think the public sees them as 'reckless', 'selfish' and 'impulsive'.

Most young people can rely on support and care from their families to help them navigate their way from childhood to adulthood. But for those who do not have a trusted and reliable adult to guide them through this period, or for those whose needs are greater than their families can manage, it is essential that support is available to keep them safe. The legislative framework in relation to 16 and 17 year olds remains highly inconsistent, leaving many vulnerable older teenagers unsupported and unprotected facing risks such as abuse and neglect. Services often

fail to adequately assess or meet their needs, so they fall through the gaps, struggling to access help appropriate for their age. Public and professional attitudes often compound the problem, deeming them as troublesome rather than in need, and able to cope with all the issues in their lives on their own.

Many vulnerable 16 and 17 year olds miss out on the support they need to grow into resilient adults or simply to stay safe. The Children's Society estimate that around half a million 16-17 year olds may be in need of support and protection without which their current safety and future life chances may be in jeopardy. In the report *Seriously Awkward* The Children's Society explores the issues that vulnerable 16-17 year olds face and analyses the barriers in legal protection and service provision that prevent them from accessing the support they need and too often leave them at risk of harm and neglect. We understand that this is a challenging period for both older teenagers themselves and those who try to support them, whether family or professionals. The law is complex and often fails to protect 16 and 17 year olds when they are most at risk, whilst support from statutory services falls away at this age. At the same time, older teenagers often push the boundaries and their behaviour

can be seen as 'difficult' when they are most in need of support.

On the following three pages you will find a summary of the main findings in The Children's Society's report, *Seriously Awkward*.

Summary of key findings

Many vulnerable 16–17 year olds are being systematically failed by the law and by services. Not only have they endured a difficult adolescence to date, they are often spectacularly let down by the systems designed to support vulnerable childrenⁱ, and not given the same rights or entitlements as adults.

16–17 year olds experience multiple risk factors

Based on analysis of the Understanding Society survey we found that around one in three 16–17 year olds – the equivalent of around half a million across the UK – face five or more risk factors across a range of different areas affecting their lives. These include risky behaviours, poor health and emotional well-being, poverty, and low levels of future aspirations. Around 60,000 of these children face 10 or more risk factors. Last year 70,680 children aged 16–17 were assessed by local authorities as ‘children in need’,¹⁴ meaning they were unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of support by a local authority. Our analysis shows that 16–17 year olds are more likely to be ‘children in need’ because of abuse and neglect at home than any other age group.

Young people aged 16–17 are particularly vulnerable to child sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking. The Office of the Children’s Commissioner report into sexual exploitation by groups and gangs estimates that 16,500 children and young people were experiencing or at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Of these, 44% were aged 16 or 17 – 7,260 young people – which is likely to be an underestimate as the report explained.¹⁵

16 to 19 year olds are more likely to experience abuse from their partners than any other age group.¹⁶ This frequency coincides with a lack of information about healthy relationships and sex education as well as a lack of domestic violence services that work with young people.

Gaps in legal protection

There are clear gaps and inconsistencies in current UK law which leaves 16–17 year olds unprotected. In many cases they have neither the same very basic protections as younger children, nor the same rights as adults. For example, the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 does not include 16–17 year olds in protection from child cruelty, despite other laws reflecting the determination in Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that a person is a child

up to the age of 18. At the same time, the UK benefits system and employment protections does not normally treat 16–17 year olds as adults, giving this age group fewer entitlements to financial support to live independently.

‘Because I’m 16, it will be quite difficult to get my own place, because of course you can’t get a tenancy agreement unless you’re 18’

Male aged 16–17

The majority of parents we polled viewed this age group as not yet old enough to look after themselves and three quarters agreed that 16–17 year olds are still children who should be protected from harm. In fact, most parents thought that young people are already protected from cruelty and neglect in law up to the age of 18 and that parents can be prosecuted in such cases, which is not the case.

Absence of age-appropriate support

The needs of vulnerable 16–17 year olds are particularly acute and they are more at risk of neglect and abuse at home,¹⁷ sexual exploitation¹⁸ and domestic violence¹⁹ than any other age group, but too often these

ⁱ For the purposes of this report we define a vulnerable 16–17 year old as someone who is unable to keep themselves safe and is at risk of harm or who is at risk of not reaching their potential and achieving their outcomes. In many cases these risks go hand in hand.

needs are overlooked by professional agencies and services that see them as someone else's problem or whose statutory responsibilities reduce at 16. In addition, 16–17 year olds can struggle to access the support they need due to their age, and when they do access services, they are often not age appropriate.

Our poll revealed that families play a crucial role in helping young people stay safe and providing support and information on important aspects of life. However, one in every 25 young people we polled did not feel safe at home.

Our interviews with practitioners and case studies show how support services too often fall away at 16, with professional attitudes compounding the problem, as vulnerable older teenagers are deemed to be exercising their choice and independence, and are left to their own devices just when they need support even more to navigate the risks of adulthood.

Lack of understanding

Often teenagers' reluctance to engage with statutory services is mistakenly perceived by professionals as a signal that help is not needed or that a young person is resilient enough to cope on their own. In the worst cases they can be seen

as beyond help and left to go it alone, even when they do not have family support to help them get through difficult circumstances in life. Practitioners we spoke to described having to confront attitudes of 'they can look after themselves' from some staff supposed to be providing support to vulnerable 16–17 year olds. The majority of parents feel that life is harder today for 16–17 year olds than when they were that age. Young people echoed the views of their parents with nearly nine out of 10 (87%) agreeing that they feel judged by society just for being a teenager, with a third stating that they feel judged all the time or often.

Key concerns facing older teenagers

Family, relationships, and support

- Almost half of 16–17 year olds in our poll who feel under pressure to take part in activities such as drinking and drug use said that their family helped them to withstand that pressure.
- Our poll of 16–17 year olds showed that a small but nevertheless significant group of them experience worrying issues at home. Around 4% of those who took part in our poll reported that they do not feel safe at home. This number is worrying but not surprising considering that

around 2% of 16–17 year olds are 'children in need' because of neglect and abuse experienced at home.

- Also in our poll around 6% reported that they never or rarely felt cared for and loved and 8% did not feel happy about their relationships with their families. Again, this does not come as a surprise. Our forthcoming research on adolescent neglect shows that around 1 in 12 adolescents aged 15 (8.3%) are not receiving the most basic forms of emotional care from their parents. They rarely, if ever, get help when they have a problem, support when upset or positive encouragement. The same proportion are inadequately supervised. Their parents hardly ever want to know their whereabouts, or seem concerned if they are late home.
- Our poll shows that 16–17 year olds are unlikely to turn to professionals for support and information if they are worried about themselves or someone close to them.

Health and well-being

- The Understanding Society survey analysis shows that around 7% of 16–17 year olds report their health as not being good.

- In our poll with 16–17 year olds a significant number of those polled had felt a range of negative emotions over the last 12 months. One in four said they often or always felt low, with 38% sometimes feeling this and only 9% never experiencing these negative emotions.
- Both 16–17 year olds and parents identified a need for more information and support on mental health issues.
- A fifth (19%) of 16–17 year olds said they don't have the information they need regarding mental health issues and one in ten (11%) said they were unhappy with the choices they have made with mental health issues.

Risks that may lead to exploitation

- The majority of 16–17 year olds polled did not report feeling under pressure to engage in activities such as drinking or taking drugs. However, this was not always the case – the three activities young people most frequently feel under pressure to engage in are: spending time with people they do not feel comfortable with; attending events and parties where they do not feel comfortable; and drinking alcohol.
- Where they did feel under pressure, 16–17 year olds

most frequently reported that this pressure comes from friends their own age and peers in school or college. The only exception was pressure coming from people they got to know online to take and send explicit pictures.

- Parents underestimate some of the pressures facing young people – for example, to take and send explicit photos of themselves. Just 13% of parents thought pressure to do this came from online contacts, but of 16–17 year olds who felt under pressure to do this, 38% said they felt this pressure online.

Poverty and inequality

- From the Understanding Society survey statistics we estimate that 1 in 5 young people aged 16 or 17 are living in poverty.
- 16–17 year olds from poor backgrounds on average have fewer friends than those from better off families – nearly a quarter (22%) of those in the poorest families have less than two close friends they could talk to if they were in trouble, compared to less than one in 10 (8%) of those in better off families.
- 16–17 year olds from poor families report feeling a lot less safe in a range of environments. For example, in the school environment

– 92% of those who said their family is 'very well off' reported feeling completely safe, compared to just 45% of those from families who said their family was "not well off at all".

- 16–17 year olds from the poorest backgrounds were less likely to be happy with their life overall – with more than half (54%) of 16–17 year olds reporting their family was 'very well off' saying that they were very happy with their life, compared to less than one in 10 (9%) of children saying their family was 'not well off at all'.

Future prospects

- The Understanding Society analysis shows that around a quarter of 16–17 year olds do not feel optimistic about their future.
- Two of the areas where 16–17 year olds feel least happy are in relation to how much choice they have in life, and how happy they are with their education.
- 16–17 year olds from families who said that they were 'not well off at all' are significantly less likely to report that they are happy with their future prospects. Only 39% of them are happy with this compared to 81% of young people whose families are 'very well off'.



Part two: theological reflection

How can Christians respond to the scale and depth of challenges described above? The next four essays show us how vital theological reflection is in shaping and inspiring a Christian response.

Angus Ritchie and Krish Kandiah argue that the way we care for adolescents is a crucial test of the way we are (or are not) embodying the love of God. Rowan Williams offers us a powerful and rich meditation on the importance of giving teenagers the time to develop – and resisting the pressures of commercialisation. Finally, Anne Richards reflects on the only Biblical record of the adolescent Jesus, and what it has to tell us about the care of the young people with whom we are entrusted.

2.1 Teenagers: today's church, not (just) tomorrow's

by Angus Ritchie

Introduction

The ministry of the Church to teenagers – whether through the life of a congregation or through the way Christians minister in the home, community and workplace – is in one sense just the same as its ministry to anyone else. Our calling is to draw people more deeply into the life and love of God. We do this through our worship and teaching, and through the practical embodiment of love within and beyond the Christian community.

Holistic ministry

The different aspects of the Church's life (worship, teaching and the practical love) cannot be separated from one another. They are *all* central to receiving and sharing the life of God. That is a central message of prophets such as Amos and Micah. It shines forth in John's Gospel, where Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, and his commandment to them to love one another, are placed where the other Gospels recount the institution of Holy Communion. This is followed by Jesus' 'Farewell Discourse'^b in which worship, doctrine and practical love are woven together as a seamless whole.

Jesus' teaching here emphasises the connection between the love we share on earth and the love at the very heart of God:

'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.'

John 15.9-10

'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.'

John 17.21b,23

As members of the Body of Christ, we enter together into the flow of love and adoration at the very heart of God. This is what it means for us to be 'participants in the divine nature'^c It is a 'spiritual' matter, certainly – but the 'spiritual' is not a separate thing from our material relationships, for our very bodies are 'temples of the Holy Spirit'.^d Our 'spirituality' is expressed by the way we

embody, or fail to embody, the generous love of God: 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us'.^e This is why Scripture contains so much teaching about our physical relationships, the way we use our possessions and the way our common life is ordered. The way we use our bodies, and the way we treat the wider material world can either build us up in communion with our neighbours, in a way that participates in God's life – or can be a source of alienation from both our neighbours and our Creator.

The calling of the Church with respect to any age group is to build a common life which draws them into the life and love of God, and to allow them to draw the rest of us more deeply into that life.

Inter-dependence, not independence

We journey into God *together*, and so we are called to build relationships of mutual learning and of inter-dependence. What we have seen in the first section of this collection is that teenagers have some quite distinct needs and challenges. There is a particular responsibility for

^b John 14-17

^c 2 Peter 1.4

^d 1 Corinthians 6.19

^e 1 John 4.12

adults to hold these relationships, and manage the boundaries of appropriateness which children and teenagers have to learn – in part by probing and transgressing them.

The relationship between children, teenagers and adults in church is not one in which responsibilities are equal, but the church is called to recognise the equal dignity of people of all ages. Teenagers are not just the ‘Church of tomorrow,’ they are a crucial part of the ‘Church of today.’ The Church’s treatment of them should not be driven by anxieties about institutional decline, but by the desire to draw them – and be drawn by them – ever more deeply into the life of God.

It is quite wrong to think of childhood and adolescence as a journey from dependence to independence.

Humans, at every stage of life, are called to be *inter-dependent*.

The goal of adulthood is not an individualistic ‘self-sufficiency.’ From a Christian perspective, a flourishing adult life will involve inter-dependence – the building of a common life which is a sharing in the life and love of God the Holy Trinity.

The New Testament shows the early Church wrestling with the complexities of such relationships: the dangers of conspicuous consumption,^f idleness^g and gossip^h all flowing from the experience of being drawn into a community that is more than simply a collection of self-sufficient individuals who have a ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus. ‘Community’ ‘mutuality’ and ‘inter-dependence’ may sound appealing in sermons and theology essays, but from the earliest days, Christians have known that they are very hard work.

The preceding essays have given us an insight into why social interactions with teenagers might be particularly demanding. Helping young people on the journey from dependence in childhood to the inter-dependence of adulthood involves patience and self-sacrifice.

Unconditional love

Of course, the value of teenagers must never be understood instrumentally. Their worth lies not simply in what they might *become*, but in who they *are*. If the Church’s engagement with teenagers is fuelled by anxiety about numerical decline – or indeed if the adults who lead the congregation are too preoccupied and inflexible to engage with them

at all – it fails to bear witness to the infinite dignity and value of every child of God. The most powerful Christian witness, both to teenagers and about them, is the willingness to give them time and attention. In the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (‘God is love’), Pope Benedict wrote that:

‘The Christian’s programme – the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus—is ‘a heart which sees’. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.

Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends....a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (1 John 4.8) and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.¹²⁰

Deus Caritas Est emphasises that the Church’s witness is not exhausted by the life of the local congregation. Christians seek to embody the love of God in the home, the workplace and the Church’s charitable organisations.

^f 1 Corinthians 11.21

^g 2 Thessalonians 3.10

^h eg 2 Corinthians 12.20

The Children's Society is itself a practical expression of this practical love. Its work is part of the Church's witness to the unconditional love of God in Christ, and of the infinite worth of every human being. The encyclical speaks powerfully about the impact of a Christian ethos on such charitable activity:

'Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. Those who work for the Church's charitable organizations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity workers need a 'formation of the heart.'²¹

The foundation, then, of the Church's work with teenagers – whether expressed through the ministry of parents, carers and teachers, the life of the congregation, or charitable agencies such as The Children's Society – is the unconditional love and acceptance which each of its members has experienced in Jesus Christ. It is by meditating on the love which we have received – the patient, forgiving and yet challenging love of God – that we learn both *how* we might love and accept adolescents more fully, and *why* this is a Gospel imperative. 'Beloved,' writes St John, 'since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another'.¹

Conclusion

In concluding, we might note three further values which should shape a Christian response to the lives and needs of adolescents:

We need to be courageous in engaging with the reality and ambiguity of adolescent lives: In the incarnation, the Word of God became flesh – entering into the ambiguity and brokenness of the human condition. The temptation for the Church is always to live out an un-incarnate faith, where its engagement with young people is at the level of pious generalities.

It requires courage and sensitivity for the Church to be a place where adolescents feel they can be honest about their lives. The credibility of our preaching of an incarnate Lord depends on our willingness to engage with the realities and ambiguities of adolescent lives. This will be a more powerful witness to the incarnation than any sermon we might preach on God's engagement with every aspect of the human condition.

We need to have the humility to listen to, and learn from, teenagers: The work of Citizens UK provides an excellent example of the kind of mutuality I am advocating. In its churches, mosques and synagogues, teenagers are working alongside adults on campaigns for the Living Wage, affordable housing and dignity for those seeking sanctuary. Our society needs to afford teenagers the dignity of expecting something of them – giving them opportunities to contribute to and shape our common life, opportunities which develop them as public leaders. Community organising is one of the ways in which inner-city churches are valuing and developing teenagers as the 'Church of today' as well as the 'Church of tomorrow'.

We need to challenge structural injustice, as well as offering face-to-face support and care:

The Anglican Communion has identified five marks of Christian mission. They are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

It is vital that we hold together the emphasis on ‘transforming unjust structures’ with that of ‘responding to human need by loving service.’ While this essay has emphasised the importance of practical love – and the ‘humanity and heartfelt concern’ which should be at the heart of the Church’s charitable activity, Christians are also called to a courageous and prophetic engagement with a deeply unjust

society. To care for teenagers involves being willing to speak out against the social, economic and legal structures which neglect the most vulnerable adolescents – trapping families in debt, and generating food and fuel poverty.

The most famous Biblical story of adolescence – in which the twelve-year-old Jesus debates with the religious teachers in the Temple – ends with these words: ‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.’ⁱ In these thirteen words, the Gospel captures the different dimensions (physical, psychological, spiritual and social) of adolescent development. The Church needs to equip its congregations, members and charitable organisations to nurture adolescents through each of these dimensions, so that ‘they may have life, and have it abundantly.’^k

ⁱ Luke 2.52
^k John 10.10

2.2 Adolescence and ambiguity: why it takes time to mature

by Rowan Williams

It is now over forty years since David Elkind wrote a book called *The Hurried Child*.²² It was one of the first books to identify the phenomenon of rushing young people through childhood and adolescence so that they could be assimilated as quickly as possible into the commercial and sexual habits of supposed adulthood. That haste to consumerise and sexualise childhood and adolescence has become more and more hectic in the intervening years.

If we want to give young people a chance of experiencing childhood and adolescence as they should, we have to face the demands of being adults ourselves.

We have to accept that growing up is about taking on the task of forming other human lives, and this process of formation requires an environment with some stability. Stability – a difficult issue because in an environment where change and novelty have a kind of glow around them, stability isn't immediately a very attractive word. It sounds like being static, being stuck. But whether we're talking about the family or about the community overall, it remains true that people do not grow freely and courageously unless there are things in their environment they can trust, and primary among those people being their primary

carers, usually their parents. A trustworthy environment is what we are talking about. My argument in this essay is that adults need to take responsibility for creating such an environment of trust and stability for children and young people. When we fail to do so, we are *all* guilty of neglect. The creation of such an environment is a matter of public policy as well as domestic behaviour. And among the questions that have to be raised in the public sphere are some very tough questions about advertising and young people.

Taking time to grow up

It takes time to grow up, and adolescents require time and space to develop. They need a trustworthy environment – somewhere with stability, with freedom and with boundaries – and that requires adults to be patient and generous with their time.

In a setting where relentless productivity is overvalued, we forget what is needed to produce functioning human beings. We can become abusers of our children by default when we ignore the choices we can make to secure their stability, their sense of being seen and being listened to. The result, when we ignore this, seems to be producing people who themselves cannot properly look

or listen. And that's not a matter of pop psychology, but a serious insight from those who have studied neurological development in human beings. To speak of conversation, social interaction – intelligent, understood social interaction as part of the educational process – is simply to recognise, not only that citizens are not born but made, but in one important sense, persons are not born but made. If our potential – our literal physical potential – is to be activated, other persons are necessary; other persons who will listen, engage, create trust and offer love.

Advertising and adolescence

The perception of children and teenagers as consumers is clearly more dominant than it was a few decades ago. They are the (usually vicarious) purchasers of any number of graded and variegated packages – that is, of goods designed to stimulate further consumer desires. A relatively innocuous example is the 'tie-in,' the association of comics, sweets, toys and so on with a major new film or television serial. Rather less innocuous (more obsessive, more expensive) is the computer game designed to lead on to ever-more challenging and sophisticated levels. Anything but innocuous is the conscription of children and teenagers into the fetishistic hysteria of style wars: it

is still mercifully rare to murder for a pair of trainers, or to commit suicide because of an inability to keep up with peer group fashion; but what can we say about a marketing culture that so openly feeds and colludes with obsession? What picture of the acting or choosing self is being promoted?

All advertising tends to treat the public as children – tends, that is, to suggest that decisions can be made without cost or risk. That is in the nature of the enterprise, as people are seldom attracted by being told about cost or risk. Whereas, from perhaps bitter experience, adults can be expected to know something of how this works, the child or adolescent targeted by advertising is not likely to be aware of this. He or she becomes an economic subject without the opportunity to recognise those painfully-learned truths about how economic activity commits and limits you.

The child as consumer is always a pseudo-adult – which may explain something of the confusion and frustration of the child or teenager ('young adult', if you insist) pressured into the obsessive patterns that arise when consumption is divorced in imagination from its costs and risks. The most merciless example of this is, of course, the

marketing of addictive drugs to young people; merciless not only to the teenager or child affected, but in reflecting back to the marketing world so much of its 'mainstream' strategy.

Sexuality and maturation

The language we use about being an economic subject is not unlike what we say about being a sexual subject. Here, too, what we might want to talk about is commitment and its risks: the whole body becomes, intimately and dangerously, a giver and receiver of meanings and messages, with all that this implies about limit and potential loss. Advertising, once again, loves to suggest that being a sexual subject is fairly unproblematic: the right exercise of economic choice equips you for a better and fuller range of sexual opportunity – which is really rather like economic opportunity. Now it is notoriously hard to say just how far the advertising of children's or even young adults' goods deliberately plays with consciously sexual images; let's assume, generously, that it does not to any great degree. The difficulty comes in, more subtly, with a whole vocabulary of choice and gratification, in the unspoken complexities of rivalry and desire that are not addressed head-on; the business of learning what it is to be desired, to be enviable; in the codes the body is being

habituated to, the messages that it learns to give.

So the pressure on the child to be a sexual subject is not simply about the age at which children become sexually active in the usual sense. The problem is more one of how sexual choices are learned and made: how consciously, and in what context. Sexual latency needs serious attention and protection if sexual maturation is in any way to keep step with the whole process of imaginative maturation. The point could be expressed most simply by saying that children need to be free of the pressure to make adult choices if they are ever to learn how to make adult choices. For them to be free for irresponsibility and fantasy, free from the commitments of purchasing and consuming, is for them to have time to absorb what is involved in adult choice. Failing to understand this is losing the very concept of childhood and adolescence. It is this failure to understand that is evident in the slippage in our public images to treating children and young people as consumers, as economic and erotic subjects, in ways that obscure the whole business of learning to choose – a business at the very heart of being a teenager.

Childhood, adolescence and choice

To look at young people as simply economic and sexual consumers is to flatten the landscape of our own adulthood, to make universal a model of choice that is at best partial and trivial. Protecting the young from some of the pressures of adult choice implies a recognition that such choice is weighty, potentially tragic, bound up with unseen futures for the agent and other agents. To learn about this requires a space for fantasy, a licence for the imagination, where gradually the consequences, the self-defining knots, of adult choice can be figured, experimented with.

It is, of course, possible to say that 'protecting' children and adolescents is again about power or control; but if it is true that the child doesn't come into the world fully equipped for moral self-definition, if the very language of selfhood has to be learned as we grow, we are not in the situation of one adult group claiming the right to set the definitions of another. We are rather trying to equip young people to exercise power, to hold off unequal and deeply damaging contests of power while they are still acquiring it. It may be said that it is almost impossible to establish a clear

line between legitimate nurture and oppressive control; and this is indisputably true. But the difficulty is not to be dissolved by denying its presence and complexity. It is in negotiating the risks here that we discover a great deal about our own adulthood, and the denial of the difficulty is a denial of the very realities of mature choosing.

The reluctance to think about nurture and the learning of choice is fundamentally, I suggest, a reluctance to think about the role of time in the formation of identities. The style obsessions of our day help to reinforce the idea that identities can be purchased and discarded; the fascination of some with virtual reality and cyberspace illustrates vividly the attractiveness of a post-humanist milieu in which the closed options, self-determinations and irreversible sequences of an older sense of human identity are challenged or regarded as transcended. An incapacity to see people as produced, formed in their biology and psychology by the passage of time, implies a fixity in our perceptions of each other that is potentially very troubling. A world of timeless, consuming egos, adopting and discarding styles of self-presentation and self-assertion, is a social as well as a philosophical shambles.

Conclusion

The issue of advertising is but one part of a much wider conversation which is urgently needed. Once we have recognised that mature adults need to be formed, we need some conception of the good life – of what a flourishing, mature adult looks like – and what kind of environment helps children grow through adolescence into adulthood.

Where do we find our opportunities to become adults? This is a very good question for religious institutions to address. My vision is that churches ought to be supremely capable of 'growing' human adults, because they convey and communicate a profound sense of the worth and value of human beings in the eyes of God; a regular awareness of the need for self-questioning in the presence of God; and thus that balance between hope and realism which, I believe, is deeply characteristic of maturity. Rumour has it that not every religious institution in human history has produced adults in quite this way, and perhaps doesn't do so even now. That's why I say it's a good question for Christian churches, schools and charities to ask themselves, knowing what they can be, and knowing sadly what they often fail to be.

2.3 Fully adopted, fully heirs: incarnation, liberation and adoption in Galatians 4

by Krish Kandiah

In this short essay we will follow the thematic map that the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatian church provides for understanding what salvation means for believers. In doing so we will encounter some surprising insights into why Christians ought to be particularly interested in the safety of vulnerable young people and why we should be drawn into action on their behalf.

Remember we were vulnerable children

In Galatians 4, Paul employs the illustration of a child who is due to inherit a lot of wealth. While the child is still a minor they cannot enjoy their inheritance: indeed, the child lives under the same rules that govern even the slaves in the household. Paul's point appears to be that while Jewish believers are waiting to inherit the blessings of the promises of God, they are subject to slavery under the law. The relational point between Jews and the law is uncontroversial because Paul makes a similar point in Romans 8 about captivity to the law. In Galatians 4.4 Paul does something unusual: he employs the first person pronoun 'we' in an epistle to gentile Christians. New Testament scholar Richard

Longenecker comments that 'almost all commentators today take the first person plural here to refer inclusively to all Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile'.²³ Similarly in his letter to the Romans, Paul argues that there is a universality to the human predicament, irrespective of our ethnicity.¹ Here in Galatians, uniquely, Paul employs the metaphor describing every one of us having been at one time like vulnerable children:

'So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world'

Galatians 4.3

There are a number of different interpretative theories as to what these 'elementary spirits' could be. Some argue that for Jews it refers to the law^m while for the Gentiles it refers to being held captive to pagan teaching or even spiritual oppression. What is not in dispute is the description of humanity as minors who have experienced enslavement. Paul is keen for believers to remember their situation before their conversion.

Paul in Galatians is constantly describing the previous history of two whole groups of people: Jews and Gentiles. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul employs a similar approach, but this time focuses it down on the individual experiences of believers.ⁿ

Remember the past

Paul encourages his readers in Corinth to reflect on their pre-conversion history and status. In Corinth he is focusing more individualistically and specifically than in his letter to the Galatians. Nevertheless, the emphasis is the same: believers need to remember their past. Paul employs the same strategy when describing himself as 'the worst of all sinners';^o he recognizes his personal history in order to remind himself of his dependency on the grace of God. Remembering our past is an important part of Christian maturity. This is an important tradition established in the Old Testament where God builds into the liturgical life of his people ways for them to remember their history. For example during the feast of First Fruits, worshippers who presented their offerings to God were told to recite:

¹ 'The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' Romans 3.22-23

^m See Galatians 4.1-2

ⁿ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' 1 Corinthians 1.26

^o 1 Timothy 1.15

'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.'

Deuteronomy 26.5

Too often in Christian worship, there are injunctions for us to forget our past and focus on our current identity in Christ. Sometimes it is couched in biblical language such as the need to remember that we are indeed a 'new creation'.^p Indeed, in some Christian adoption groups there is an emphasis on severing ties with a child's cultural heritage by welcoming them into the new culture of the church.²⁴

Scripture offers a different model; an acknowledgement of the past rather than an obliteration of it. In fact the rehearsal of our own history could be an opportunity to re-sensitise the church to the needs of the vulnerable. This is modelled in the book of Deuteronomy in the reiteration of the 10 commandments, including a Sabbath for all.

Sabbath is for all

The gift of Sabbath is to be extended to the aliens and slaves among the people of God, because Israel is not to forget that they were once slaves too. This same idea is repeated when it comes to someone who has become so poor that they have had to sell themselves into slavery. After the sixth year, a Sabbath from slavery is to be offered and their freedom is to be given to them. Remembering Israel's enslavement is to help motivate generosity towards those who have become enslaved due to poverty.^q It appears that the Festival of Weeks 'was ideally to be shared with the family, the servants, the Levites, the resident aliens, the fatherless and the widows.'²⁵ Family festivities were supposed to include outsiders because Israel shared a common experience of being a vulnerable minority when they were slaves in Egypt.

A final example from Deuteronomy should secure the exegetical foundation of this principle:

'Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road.' All the people shall say, 'Amen! 'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!''

Deuteronomy 27.18-19

Providing justice for the poor and vulnerable was to be motivated by God's gracious rescue of Israel from her slavery. Over and again in Deuteronomy the people are told to remember their condition before God's interaction on their behalf. The recitation was to lead to a sensitivity and concern for the marginalized and vulnerable in their midst. God reminds his people of their history in order to sensitise them to act compassionately to those in a similar state.

Resensitise the Church

Is it possible to identify this deuteronomic principle in the New Testament? Although Paul does not make the conceptual link between our having been vulnerable children in need of God's rescue and the needs of vulnerable children in our society, by using a metaphor that draws

^p 2 Corinthians 5.17

^q 'Rejoice before the Lord your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes.' Deuteronomy 16.11-12

attention to our vulnerability it does not seem too much of an exegetical leap to explore the theme. Much as the evangelical abolitionists utilised biblical metaphors of liberation to press for the ending of the slave trade, we can see the threads joining these texts together. John Newton and the other members of the Clapham sect were not ashamed to pen words that resonated with the spiritual experience of his congregation and the pressing needs of the struggle against slavery that he was engaged in. Could a recovery of the Galatian description of all Christians before their conversion as vulnerable children held captive by the elemental forces of this world, re-sensitise the church to greater compassion for vulnerable young people?

The incarnation is a response to human need

Returning to Galatians 4, we notice that a key element of the line of argument for Paul was that our vulnerable state leads to God's gracious action on our behalf. The response to our captivity was the sending of the Son. Thus the *Missio Dei* in this chapter of Galatians is portrayed as a response to human need. The Incarnation is described as a rescue mission.⁴ The sending of the Son was a compassionate

mission to liberate humanity from slavery. It is interesting that our attention is brought back to the Jewish relationship to the law. But in the New Testament in general, and in the specific use of the first person plural in Galatians 4.3, it is clear that redemption is not restricted to Jews. So perhaps the logical flow of thought here is that Jesus was born of a woman in order that he might redeem all those born of a woman. Jesus was born of a woman under the law, to redeem all those who were born under the law – so Jesus submitted to being under the law to redeem those who were under the law too. The incarnation involved the Son of God swapping the safety and glory of heaven for the vulnerability and suffering of the earth. Jesus experienced emotional and physical abuse in order to secure the liberation of humanity from enslavement.⁵

Redemption is a powerful and central narrative in Christian soteriology, the study of salvation. It has a rich and expansive usage throughout the history of the Christian theology. Our inherited understanding of redemption today, conditioned by liturgical tradition over two millennia, is soteriological, yet Paul's first audiences would have heard the word redemption as coming straight out of the slave market. Sadly redemption has

been spiritualised to the extent that our liberation is seen to be purely in terms of our escape from the future consequences of sin: namely judgement. We often conflate redemption and justification such that redemption is rescue from the legal consequences of sin, and so we fail to understand redemption in liberation categories.

The redemption narrative of moving from slavery to liberation needs to be read within the canonical context of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. Once it is read in that context then perhaps we can tap into the deuteronomic paradigm; that the Christian experience of redemption should sensitise us to the needs of others.

The New Testament does of course leave room for some of these connections: the parable of the unmerciful servant is a prime example of the redemptive experience – someone who has found themselves in such a serious financial hole that the just punishment is to be sold into slavery with their family members too. Here, the servant is liberated from this by the grace of the King, but this forgiven debtor's inability to apply the same grace to others is what disqualifies him from receiving the redemption that was available to him.

⁴ 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may receive adoption as children.' Galatians 4.4-5

⁵ Philippians 2 reiterates the compassionate, selfless motives behind the incarnation.

Liberation is only half of the gospel

Many attempts to explain the gospel stop with the metaphor of redemption. But this is not where Paul's articulation of the gospel ends in Galatians:

'And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!"'

Galatians 4.6

The purpose of our redemption, therefore the purpose of the *Missio Dei* as expressed in the fourth chapter of Galatians, is our adoption into God's family. Liberation in itself is not the fullness of God's plans for the salvation of humanity. God wants to give humanity more than just freedom, he wants the fellowship and intimacy that comes through adoption. Hence the three persons of the Trinity are mentioned here, working in concert to facilitate our adoption. The Father sends the Son who redeems us and makes us available for adoption, and then the Spirit is sent to confirm our adoption as sons and daughters and to grant us intimate access to the Father.

Application

There are over 68,110 children in care in the UK.²⁶ Most of these children have been removed from their parents due to neglect or abuse. Sadly, recent child abuse cases, involving paedophile rings in Rotherham and Oxford that have preyed on looked-after children, have demonstrated that these children are vulnerable to even further abuse. As Christians, having been vulnerable children 'held captive by the elemental forces of this world', the plight of these children should stir us. Their safety and security should be of particular concern to us. Not only are children more vulnerable in care, that vulnerability means that their life outcomes on leaving care are likely to be diminished. 38% of care leavers are not in education or employment or training (NEET).²⁷ 11% of the UK's homeless population are young people who have aged out of the care system²⁸ and they constitute 25% of the prison population.²⁹ The care system is failing to equip young people to enter adulthood safely. 'Adoption' is a theologically powerful way in which Christians can offer security and safety to vulnerable children. Those that do so are in line with God's adopting mission in the world. Adoption in Galatians means the security of God as

Father, Jesus as brother and the Holy Spirit as the person who confirms our adoption. Adoption guarantees us a future and an inheritance. What better lived parable of the gospel could there be than to offer these privileges to vulnerable children so that they receive a permanent family, a redeemed identity and a future. Not all children in care are able to receive this and so the offer of other permanency solutions such as secure long term fostering, special guardianship can also be a wonderful provision.

Perhaps as the church recovers a theology of adoption we can be re-sensitised to act on behalf of the most vulnerable children in our communities.

2.4 Did Jesus have good parents?

by Anne Richards

Introduction

In June 2012, it was reported that the Prime Minister, David Cameron and his wife Samantha, had left behind their elder daughter, eight-year old Nancy, in a pub where his family had been having Sunday lunch. Nancy went to the lavatory while her parents organised lifts back to the family home and they both thought Nancy was with the other parent. When they got home and realised Nancy was missing, they were horrified and upset and rushed back to the pub where they found Nancy happily being looked after by the pub's staff. She had been left for about fifteen minutes.

The papers made much of this incident, as an opportunity for some political point scoring. The insinuation was that the Prime Minister and his wife were somehow bad or neglectful parents.

Well, if they were, then I certainly was! I once completely forgot to collect my younger son from a music lesson. I picked up my elder son in my car and was busily chatting about his day at school, when I became aware of something wrong, something not done, something missing. Since my children did not then have

mobiles, I did not register what I had done until I was nearly home. I then tore back to the music centre to find a very disgruntled child leaning on his trombone outside the doors wondering what had happened. I am still teased about it, and whenever I am, I remember the worry, not just about whether he would be all right, but whether he would be upset about being left, being forgotten. I felt I had broken an unwritten promise to be there always; I had failed him.

Jesus in the Temple

These stories of children left behind echo another, very famous, story in the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is left behind in Jerusalem by his parents. They set off for home, then discover that Jesus is not with them, so they have to retrace their steps to look for him.^t

We can imagine the sort of field day today's press might have had with a story like this. The Holy Parents – chosen by God above all others to bring Jesus, the Messiah, into the world, entrusted with this precious child – they travel for a whole *day* before wondering where Jesus is. And they look in all the wrong places

before they finally find him? Had they simply had enough of bringing up the Son of God by the time Jesus was becoming an adolescent? Were they too busy gossiping with the rest of their family or the travellers in their group or were they simply so arrogant as to assume everyone else would keep an eye on their precious child? In short, did Jesus have neglectful, bad parents?

So let us look at the family background. What do we know? The Christmas card picture or typical nativity scene offers us a serene, untroubled mother and protective, loving father lit by their own heavenly radiance, bowed over a calm, smiling infant, being offered gifts by adoring adults.^u Parenthood, it seems, is effortless and untroubled. Yet the gospels also offer us recipes for concern mixed in with the attending angels and songs of joy for the world.^v A young woman receives a vision from God telling her she is going to have a baby even though she is a virgin.^w She gets pregnant out of wedlock but her fiancé doesn't believe all that stuff about God and a special baby – he's going to get rid of her. But somehow he has a dream that they have to get married and he has to help shelter and feed the family.^x Meanwhile, they have

^t Luke 2.42-52

^u Matthew 2.11

^v Luke 2.9-13

^w Luke 1.26-35

^x Matthew 1.18-21

^y Luke 2.6-7

^z Matthew 2.13-16

the stress of Mary giving birth in the animals' shelter while visiting Bethlehem^y and have to run for it when they learn that the baby is on a maniac's hit list.^z

There are already red flags all over the image of the 'Holy Family' suggesting that there is here a history of difficulty, tension and concern on the road to Jesus' adulthood and eventual ministry.

Surely, then, the story of Jesus left behind in the Temple is inserted into Luke's Gospel to make us think more about his pivotal experiences as he became adolescent and then an adult. What did being separated mean to Jesus? What did that experience mean to his parents?

Luke tells us that the story had a good ending: a reunion, relief and probably a bit of yelling from the distraught parents. We are told that Jesus behaved himself after frightening his parents like that.

^{aa} Yet what the story of Jesus in the Temple also tells us is that there is a time in adolescence when a bit of letting go, (as opposed to the not-caring of neglect) becomes necessary. The experience of absence, of space out on your own, albeit stressful and distressing for parents, can be good for young people, as they stand at the

threshold of adulthood. Testing the boundaries, experiencing a bit of freedom in safety, as well as testing to check that parents will express their anxiety and relief when their child returns, offers both a sense of new independence and reassurance.

You can step out confidently if you are sure that someone is there to catch you when you fall.

Many family rows are caused by the failure of thoughtless young people to send a text message, to stay out far too late, to not be where they are supposed to be, yet despite the sulking and moaning about parental restrictions, teenagers grow confident on the certainty of their parents' care; that they will be missed if they go missing. My son, as he grew up, often assured me that he would be fine walking to school or getting around on his own, because on the day I didn't appear he had already decided what he would do to get back to me if I failed to get back to him. He learned a little bit about his own resources, while still being certain that I would, in the end, be there for him.

Another story...

But now I want to tell another story.

Yolande was a young offender on licence who was required to keep to a curfew. Despite knowing the penalties for breaking it, she went out and broke it anyway. When she was reported missing, the police officer who found and collected her asked her why she did it when it would only mean more trouble for her. 'Because,' she said, 'I want you to come and find me'.

That, it seems to me, is the difference between the experiences of the stories of Jesus, Nancy and Yolande. Nancy Cameron was found happily helping staff in the pub, secure in the knowledge that her parents would miss her and would make every effort to come and find her and take her home. Jesus, too, was found sitting among sympathetic adults, sure that his parents would come back for him, only surprised that it took them so long to find him in 'my Father's house'. Yolande, however, who had never had anyone to miss her really, or lose sleep over where she was, had to become a 'missing person' so that she could have the experience of someone coming to find her and take her home. It was a pale shadow of the love and care she craved but had never had, but it was all she could get. Neglect is not the fact that children and young people

can wander out of sight, but the failure to care that they have done so. What Yolande did was to articulate her loss by triggering, through the authorities, the sense of someone out there keeping her in mind, caring about her welfare and putting effort into finding her and bringing her home. So what she tells us is that there is a big difference between making a mistake and the painful, debilitating experience of deliberate neglect and absence.

One of the saddest stories I ever heard was told by Anglican priest John Pridmore, about a child who fell asleep during a school assembly. The child was worn out because no one cared if he went to bed at night or went to sleep. No one got up to help him get to school or to give him breakfast. Ignored and neglected, he succumbed to exhaustion. To know that there are no boundaries and that no one will care if or when you return has the effect of demoralising and destabilising young lives: neglect tears away the foundations for human flourishing.

We can see this difference from the story of Jesus in the Temple. He was found calmly learning and asking questions of teachers and was anxious to share with his parents what he had learned

about his vocation in relation to God his Father. His parents made no secret of their worry and their relief and they went home together, reunited. Yet in that space, Jesus surely learned about more than rabbinic teaching and interpretation of the Scriptures. Some of the most powerful of Jesus' parables, like the one lost sheep, whose recovery after long, intense searching brings such rejoicing,^{bb} or the Prodigal Son,^{cc} come from the experience of being the one looked for, and found by those who love us.

Further, we can see this intertwining of experience and theology in Jesus' teaching when he tells his followers about how God is and about the kingdom of God. God is Abba, the loving father who forgives us when we stray from him.^{dd} For God is one who comes to find the lost and save them; God never gives up, but continually searches for those who are so eternally loved.^{ee} Yet it is precisely people like Yolande that Jesus comes for. He demonstrates this by going out to find and recover even those who are neglected or outcast by their society for fear of contact with their mental and physical diseases,^{ff} even to the extent of recovering Lazarus from his grave and restoring him to his grieving family.^{gg} Further, Jesus'

healing miracles often include restoring relationships, giving sick or dead children back to parents, reconciling that sense of loss, guilt and sadness that comes from separation.^{hh} Jesus actively searches out those who are separated and alone, as in the case of Bartimaeusⁱⁱ and Zacchaeus,^{jj} surprising them with his ability to heal and restore what was left behind. Jesus does not neglect those whom he loves: even at the point of death, Jesus takes care of his mother^{kk} and it is to his mother and to his grieving friends that he returns after his resurrection.^{ll}

Conclusion

So if even Jesus' parents can make mistakes and temporarily find our children 'out of sight, out of mind', perhaps I (and the Camerons) can forgive ourselves somewhat. What matters is that children should be secure in the knowledge that they are loved and will never be abandoned, and in that security can find the space to grow. It is that concern and searching which leads to restored relationships, as Jesus showed over and over again in his teaching and healing. Yet Jesus, too, shows us that it is up to us also to care for those who are neglected and overlooked, the ones left at the margins, hoping and waiting to be found.

^{bb} Luke 15.3-6

^{cc} Luke 15.11-32

^{dd} Matthew 6.9-13; Luke 11.1-4

^{ee} John 18.9

^{ff} Mark 5. 3-7

^{gg} John 11.44

^{hh} For example, Luke 8.40-56

ⁱⁱ Mark 10. 46-52

^{jj} Luke 19.1-10

^{kk} John 19.26

^{ll} John 20.19



Part three: responses

The purpose of a collection such as this is not simply to educate and inform – but to inspire us to prayer and to action. In the final essays, Nigel Varndell and Gail Adcock offer two very different and complementary responses. Nigel Varndell draws out some of the theological themes running through the previous four essays. Gail Adcock explores the role of the Church in supporting families.

The final piece offers a summary of the Seriously Awkward campaign, a practical response to the theories of the previous essays.

3.1 Growing together: teenagers and the common good

by Nigel Varndell

Introduction

A surface reading of the Bible might suggest it has little to contribute to a debate on the place of adolescents in society – and in particular, on the ways that they are either nurtured and cared for or marginalised and neglected. The Ancient World did not recognise the existence of teenagers, both boys and girls moving from childhood into adulthood with no acknowledgement of an intermediate stage of development. We might therefore anticipate that it would be hard to construct a theological approach to adolescence from biblical material. However, such a belief would be wrong. The essays within these pages put paid to such a notion, providing a rich resource for reflection on how families, faith communities and societies might better care for their young people.

Who am I?

As I read these essays two inter-related themes emerge: identity and relationships. Several writers suggest that the teenage years see young people actively forging their identities as they grow and mature. Not only this, but during a time of social development young people also go through a parallel process of psychological development – a point well made by Jennifer Lau. In a period of

change when young people are learning to make choices, but have not always developed the psychological capacity to understand their implications, young people are left vulnerable to social and cultural pressures. Rowan Williams makes this point explicit in his essay and warns of the dangers of commodifying and sexualising identities in young people and leaving them open to an exploitative market place for which they are ill-equipped, in part because of the psychological changes they are going through. Not only might these pressures damage the formation of young people as they grow but they also provide a context in which young people come to view what are normal human relationships. The overt sexualisation of these may well provide a cultural context in which other more damaging relationships, including sexual exploitation, can occur.

But against this threat of impersonal forces shaping young people's identities is the far more positive notion that identities can be shaped through positive personal relationships. This idea also regularly recurs, not least in the essays by Angus Ritchie and Krish Kandiah.

For an organisation such as The Children's Society, concerned with the nurture of young people and the care of those most vulnerable and abused,

understanding the wider societal context in which neglect and abuse takes place is crucial. And, in order to build some solid theological foundations for action on issues that affect young people, understanding notions of human identity and relationships is a good place to start.

Mutual dependence

One theological theme that is common right across Christian denominations and traditions is that of humans as relational beings; an idea deeply rooted in Trinitarian notions of God. This theme has been deeply explored in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, including in the work of Vladimir Lossky.³⁰ Lossky's notion of the human is of people not being reducible to a series of statements, even when these statements are true of the person in question. True personhood rests on being in a network of relationships, both with God and with other humans. A person exists at the point where lines of relationships intersect: this is what makes each person unique. The irreducible nature of our humanity is comprised of a set of unique human relationships and is not based on what we do for a living, where we live or how much we own or earn. Such a notion of what it means to be properly human contradicts the notions of young people as consumers as Rowan Williams suggests

so strongly in his essay. What it means to be properly human then, is to live in relationships that are of mutual inter-dependence, not to be consumers in a market place.

If this theological anthropology is correct then it has implications for the way we nurture and build identity in young people. One of the things that we hold true about parenting and development is that one aim is to enable young people to navigate the uncertainties of adolescence without being harmed. However, we often assume the only way to do this is to create independent, self-sufficient young people with the skills and knowledge to look after themselves. An understanding of humans as relational beings would question whether this is the right strategy and suggest instead that the best way to create resilience is to help young people foster supportive relationships. In these relationships of mutuality and reciprocity, not only is identity forged but vulnerability is protected.

Of course, the other implication of this reciprocity is that adults too have to learn from and be nurtured by their relationships with young people. Listening to young people and encouraging their participation is not simply essential for their care and

upbringing but also essential for adults too.

A safe place?

A place of mutuality and reciprocity might be a more helpful way to envisage the role of families, churches and wider society: places where mutual supportive human relationships are allowed and encouraged to develop. At the level of the family this is the challenge posed to us by Phil Raws' essay. He points out that as young people develop, the emotional support they receive tends to decrease, opening them up to potentially neglectful relationships within a family environment. But this is not just true of the role of families in the nurture of young people, but also for the church, as Gail Adcock points out. Her essay clearly makes the point for the church to be a place that fosters better relationships across a spectrum of human interactions and institutions, relationships that she sees as being crucial for limiting the impact of neglect on young people.

But relationships are also formed in a wider social context too. Young people do not only exist in a family and community setting but also in a legal and social framework whose origins lie in institutions and legislation. It is perhaps at this point that

The Children's Society has something additional to offer to the debate. Following the argument through means that one of the key factors for legislation affecting young people is how it nurtures human relationships in which they can grow and thrive. This is the context for Mo Baldwin's contribution highlighting the current ambiguity within legal frameworks for young people that mirrors an ambiguity in wider society. When do young people become adults and when should they take on more adult responsibilities, and bear the consequences of their actions?

At the moment this legal ambiguity means that young people have limited protection at the ages of 16 and 17. As they develop into adults, making and breaking relationships, establishing identities and notions of self they reach an age where legislation lets them down. The systems that should be there to protect them, at a stage when they are still maturing, leave them vulnerable to relationships that could be damaging and exploitative, rather than nurturing and loving. The *Seriously Awkward* campaign by The Children's Society is one way in which such legal loopholes can be challenged and a more supportive legal framework created.

A common good?

But there are other ways in which the societal context of young people needs to be challenged, issues that move beyond a purely legislative framework. Issues around the sexualisation of young people, that are drawn out in Rowan William's essay, concern the way society establishes what normal behaviour looks like and how young people negotiate their relationships. It should therefore be a concern for all of us if our culture establishes an environment in which the exploitation of young people might be easier. Public attitudes then are rightly the concern of anyone trying to create an environment for nurturing relationships.

There is perhaps one final point that bears mentioning. While I have concentrated on the need for adults and society to produce an environment, familial, community and legislative, that encourages the carefully protected formation of relationships for young people, there is a reciprocal element to this theological narrative. If what it means to be human is to be caught up in reciprocal relationships of love and support, then what we do for young people is also part of our own humanity. Our relationships with young people are not merely

instrumental in that they have an impact on those young people, but at a fundamental level they are also about who we are as human beings before God. In our campaigning for children and young people we are not only trying to do the best by people who would otherwise be vulnerable and open to exploitation, but at the same time we are defining our own humanity. Are we people who love and care in mutual reciprocity, or ones who establish or allow to be established, exploitative and extractive human relationships?

For The Children's Society, this collection of essays is about how and why we should be involved in the lives of young people. It is about the dangers of neglect and about a call to create an environment in which truly fulfilling human relationships can flourish. This is something that needs to be encouraged in the family, but also in society, through our faith communities and at the level of societal attitudes and public legislation. Part of our role as the church is to shape and change society, and the new Seriously Awkward campaign is part of that obligation. But the final point might be that as well as making life better for the young people with whom we live and share space, in our campaigning and lobbying we are also shaping who we are as human beings in the love and service of God.

3.2 How might the impact of neglect be reduced by church support for families?

by Gail Adcock

Introduction

A local footpath was recently resurfaced – the paving slabs were cracked, distorted and broken and it had become quite a hazard to pass, with children coming off scooters, adults stumbling and everyone complaining about the uneven ground. How pleased we all were to see the brand new, smoothly-tarmacked path once the work was complete. Yet within weeks new cracks appeared – for the path is lined with established trees that continue to grow and thrive due to their robust roots below ground, forging their way through the soil, path or no path! Aside from a giant storm and strong winds, those trees are secure because the roots run deep. More than a third of a tree is usually hidden below the ground.

Our human ability to flourish and develop likewise requires healthy, deeply-driven roots: roots that can provide support and sustenance are the key to ensuring our lives are able to unfold confidently. For many of the young people described in the first section of this collection of papers, the conditions that enable such roots to be put down were simply absent. They lacked the kind of nurturing environment that cultivates a sense of well-being and purpose, permitting life to flourish. In such situations, the local church has a vital role to play.

Creating ‘root networks’

At its best, a church can provide some of the healthy conditions that enable young people and families alike to create ‘root networks’ of mutual support, care and compassion. In *Theology and Families*, Adrian Thatcher writes of the potential for ‘wider, caring influences’ that prevent families from becoming isolated. He suggests that ‘part of the ministry of the local church is to sustain family members...to be a community of mutual love.’³¹ This is a way of fleshing out the theological imperative given in the essays by Angus Ritchie and Krish Kandiah.

A young woman, Patricia, experienced neglect and abuse in her youth. She has slowly come to recognise the genuine love and concern offered by her church – demonstrated in both word and action. This has fostered a sense of self-worth that has enabled her in turn to share the love and care she has received. Patricia is now a leader in her church’s ministry to young people. Being part of a congregation that embodies God’s love for His people, and which provides a safe place for people to enter as they really are, has had a huge impact on Patricia’s life.³² She can now bless others, as she has been blessed.

The Christian community needs to give a great deal of thought

to how its common life, and especially its worship, can enrich the lives of the adolescents who participate – and especially to those who have experienced adolescent neglect. The wider church needs to move from being mere spectators in the lives of its teenagers to a more active support and engagement.³³ In Hebrews 12.1 we are told that ‘we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.’ This is an image of the Body of Christ that should inspire our earthly organisation: a picture of an extended family that offers encouragement and roots for those who are struggling. Such community, if it truly welcomes and facilitates the participation of all its members, has the potential to be life-transforming for all concerned. Young people bring gifts as well as needs: they can ‘make real contributions to our shared life in God’, if they are supported and empowered.³⁴ Without the support of the ‘extended family’ found within such a supportive community, Devries warns that ‘a young person’s life can easily become a fragmented and rootless search for identity.’³⁵

The local congregation should consider the opportunities presented by its wider context. Are there ways in which it can work with schools and other local organisations dedicated to

the well-being of young people? How can church, family and the wider community develop 'interrelated support structures' – reflecting the *koinonia* at the heart of New Testament. The local church is uniquely placed to develop partnerships across the boundaries and borders of other agencies to ensure that they care for young people and their families in a truly holistic way.

As Rowan Williams has reminded us, the church can play a vital role in fostering the stability and trust which teenagers need in order to flourish. Those who have experienced insecure attachments because of 'unreliable caregivers'³⁶ find it particularly hard to form positive relationships. More than most, they need a supportive community in which people offer a consistency of care – so that they can come to appreciate the stability and support found in genuine relationships.

Much of this care can take place informally but on occasion circumstances may require greater intentionality. Devries, Garland and Balswick & Balswick identify the potential of more structured mentoring within the context of faith communities to developing healthy family relationships.³⁷ As Devries observes, forming 'a web of cross generational relationships ... will

not come easy.' It takes patience and flexibility to respond to complex needs and challenges such as disengagement or chaotic lifestyles. A specially trained youth worker may take the lead in the provision of such care, but it needs to be seen as the responsibility of the whole congregation. If mentoring can be offered to the family as a whole, as well as to those individuals who have experienced neglect in the past, this can generate more positive future interactions that empower 'family relationships to grow from hurting to healing behaviour.'³⁸ Churches can train, offer and match mentors who seek to listen, explore and support specific needs, responding sensitively to the issues raised by those who have experienced neglect.

However, alongside the need for Christian community to provide a genuine welcome and loving environment, there is a responsibility to be alert to indications that neglect is continuing.³⁹ This is a shared enterprise; the church as a whole seeks to be concerned for the well-being of each individual. While the support of the wider church can often help families to cope, Garland warns us that 'families in trouble tend to withdraw from community.'⁴⁰ The church may need to explore innovative ways to maintain

contact and provide ongoing support during these periods.

Families do not exist in a vacuum. To return to the image at the start of this essay, the local church is an important part of the ecology of the family, the whole environment that with care and attention, can play a vital role in nurturing healthy roots, which offer security, and a sense of identity and purpose. It is a demanding task, but one that can bear incredibly rich fruit.



Seriously Awkward campaign recommendations

'Give us a focus and a goal and give us as much support as is needed for young people to succeed.'⁴¹

16-17 year old with experience of being in care

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 and states they must be afforded rights to protection from harm, provision of services and participation in decisions about their own lives⁷ – this is as true for a 17 year old as for a younger child.

The government, local government, and service providers all have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in society. Our report shows that all 16–17 years olds face increased risks and less protection due to their age – but this situation is even worse for the most vulnerable teenagers.

We all have a role to play to improve the situation for older teenagers including parents and charities, like The Children's Society. In particular, in this report we are calling for:

1. Better legal protection for 16–17 year olds

The new government should rectify and streamline the legislative framework which currently fails to protect the most vulnerable older teenagers, by conducting a full review of relevant legislation and ensuring that vulnerable 16–17 year olds are fully protected from risk of harm and exploitation.

2. Increased and more flexible service provision for vulnerable 16–17 year olds

The government should change the law to recognise the specific vulnerabilities faced by older teenagers and create a new status specifically for vulnerable 16–17 year olds, which would entitle them to additional and flexible support during these late childhood years and post-18, to ensure that they are not abandoned when they are most at risk.

3. Greater involvement and participation in decisions that affect their lives

We can all do more to listen to the concerns of young people and support a successful adolescence.

The government and local authorities should ensure vulnerable 16–17 year olds have a right to advocacy, so they are supported to make fully informed decisions.

We would also like to see a number of specific changes related to specific themes highlighted in this report:

■ Protective relationships

The government should raise the age of a victim of child cruelty and neglect from 16 to 18 in the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, to ensure that 16–17 year olds living at home are offered the same protection as younger children. The Housing Act legislation and guidance should be amended to ensure that 16–17 year olds at risk of homelessness can never be evicted from their accommodation and become 'intentionally homeless'.

■ Health and well-being

The government should establish a right for 16–17 year olds to be entitled to support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health services (CAMHS) when they need it. This support must be available as early as possible, and long before mental health needs turn acute.

■ Risks of exploitation

The government should raise the age for Child Abduction Warning Notices from 16 to 18, to ensure that the police can intervene where vulnerable 16–17 year olds are targeted

by predatory adults for the purposes of exploitation, either of a sexual or otherwise criminal nature.

■ **Poverty and inequality**

The government should change the law so that families are automatically entitled to continue to receive child benefit and child tax credit for children living with them until they reach 18.

For those in Apprenticeships, the minimum rate of pay should be aligned with the under 18 rate of the Minimum Wage.

■ **Future aspirations**

The government should extend eligibility for the Bursary Fund so it benefits more 16–17 year olds who are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or face vulnerabilities beyond the current group. Automatic entitlement should be extended to those living in families with an income below £16,000 and to all those known to the local authority as a ‘child in need’.

How to sign up to the campaign

You can sign up to take action on these issues through our latest campaign by visiting childrenssociety.org.uk/seriouslyawkward

By joining our campaigns, you help us build momentum and demand the change that children need. The more people who support us, the louder our voice will be – and the more impact we will have. Help us change the law and protect 16–17 year olds from harm, abuse and neglect.

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- ¹¹ The Year 10 survey - referred to as The Children's Society Survey, 2014 - and the Year 8 survey, part of an international study of subjective well-being ('Children's Worlds') are reported on in the *Good Childhood Report, 2014*.
- ¹² Restricting the analysis to this group - for whom we had the most complete dataset - reduced the sample to 736 (79% of the overall sample), as around a fifth of the Year 10 students lived regularly in two homes.
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- ³⁹ Garland, op. cit., p.411.
- ⁴⁰ Garland, op. cit., p.407.
- ⁴¹ From consultation (interviews or focus groups) held with vulnerable young people carried out by The Children's Society in 2014-15. The young people were either aged 16 and 17, or reflecting on their experiences at that age.

Biographies

Rachel Treweek is the Bishop of Gloucester and the first female diocesan bishop in the Church of England. She was previously the Archdeacon of Hackney. Before that, Rachel worked as a Paediatric Speech and Language Therapist and served on the Child Development Team at the Royal Free Hospital.

Angus Ritchie is the Director of the Centre for Theology and Community (theology-centre.org). He has served in east London parishes since 1998, playing a leading role in community organising campaigns for the Living Wage and against exploitative lending. He is an Honorary Canon of Worcester Cathedral.

Jennifer Lau is a Reader in Developmental Psychopathology at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London and the Director of the Researching Emotional Disorders and Development (REDD) team at King's College London and the University of Oxford.

Mike Stein is an Emeritus Professor in the Social Policy Research Unit at York University. For the last 30 years he has been researching the challenges faced by vulnerable young people, including care leavers and neglected and maltreated teenagers.

Phil Raws is a Senior Researcher at The Children's Society. He is leading on a programme of research on adolescent neglect having previously studied disadvantaged young people, and the effectiveness of services to support them, for over 20 years.

Mo Baldwin is part of The Children's Society Church Participation team, managing Church communications and with responsibility for Church school partnerships. Her published work includes prayer and prayer activity collections, and training resources on family wellbeing.

Rowan Williams is a bishop, theologian and poet. He is currently Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. Before that, he was Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002-2012.

Krish Kandiah is the President of the London School of Theology, the largest interdenominational, evangelical theological college in Europe. He is also Founder and Director of Home for Good, a charity finding loving adoptive and foster homes for vulnerable children.

Anne Richards is the Church of England's National Adviser for mission theology, new religious movements and alternative spiritualities. She is the convener of the ecumenical Mission Theology Advisory Group (MTAG) which provides resources for churches on mission and social justice.

Nigel Varndell was the Director of Church and Community Participation at The Children's Society until July 2015. He has 20 years of experience working for the church on issues of social justice, international development and inter-faith relations.

Gail Adcock is a Family Ministry Development Officer with the Methodist Church in Britain. She trained initially as a primary school teacher before becoming Family Pastor at Stopsley Baptist Church and recently completed an MA in Children and Family Ministry.

Commendations

I am grateful to the Children's Society for this collection of essays which tackle the difficult and sensitive topic of adolescent neglect.

Sadly, there are many teenagers in our society who suffer from neglect, both physical and emotional, and this undoubtedly impacts significantly upon their development and wellbeing; approximately 10% of children and young people in Britain currently suffer from a diagnosed mental illness.

This collection provides information alongside theological reflection, drawing on, amongst others, the symbolism of the Holy Trinity as an icon of community, and the story of the adolescent Jesus in the Temple, as an image of the caring family. It calls us all, as members of the Church of the God of love, to respond to this need and offer support both to young people and their families.

Gill Dascombe

Vice-President of the Methodist Conference 2014-15

This is a fantastic resource that takes seriously the reality of the lives of young people and the challenge this poses to our church communities. Adolescence isn't easy, especially for those who are neglected, and this collection helps us to stand back and remind ourselves of this. It helps us to think about how we can walk alongside them, serve them and challenge those things in our society that can make their lives even more difficult. These articles also remind us of the distinctive contribution we can make to support the on-going development and flourishing of the lives of young people, and why they're not just the future of the church, but more importantly the present.

Chris Knowles

Editor of CatholicYouthWork.com, a website for those working in youth ministry in the UK

The Children's Society has often been the voice of children and young people whom society, and even the Church, has been willing to ignore. By contrast, Jesus welcomed them. In this collection we are reminded of the difficult and challenging nature of the lives of some young people in this country and hear a clear theological call to action.

I hope that these articles will be widely read and that The Children's Society's Seriously Awkward campaign will be supported within the Churches and beyond.

John G Ellis

Moderator of the General Assembly of The United Reformed Church 2013-16

What I most liked about this important collection of essays was the constant reminder that young people, even those suffering neglect, are not simply a problem for the church to solve, but a vital part of the life of our churches and communities. If we are genuinely to be church we need to hear and respond to these young people, to include them in our congregations, embrace what we can learn from them and... yes, when necessary seek to solve the problems and challenge the systems that cause them to be neglected. In offering this profound resource to churches, The Children's Society is also offering us a challenge; to care for our young people. It is a challenge I hope we can rise to.

Stephen Keyworth

Team Leader of Faith and Society, Baptist Union of Great Britain

Too old, too young?

Theology on the ambiguity of adolescence and the impact of neglect

Notes

Notes

**The Children's Society is a national charity
that runs local projects and campaigns
for change, helping children and young
people when they are at their most
vulnerable and have nowhere else to turn.**

We work with some of the most vulnerable teenagers, facing issues like child sexual exploitation, family neglect, domestic abuse or mental health problems.

Help us change the law to protect 16–17 year olds
from harm, abuse and neglect:

#SeriouslyAwkward
childrenssociety.org.uk/seriouslyawkward

**The
Children's
Society**

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Names used in this report have been changed to maintain anonymity. All photographs posed by models.