

A 'Teen-Age Bill of Rights

In the current debate over 'teen-agers, the pendulum has swung between "What is wrong with our children?" and "What is wrong with us?" One result is that the average parent finds himself bewildered.

To help end the confusion, a group of experts of the Jewish Board of Guardians, child-guidance and delinquency-prevention agency of the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, recently met to plan a series of studies and papers based on the lengthy experience of the agency.

Out of the board's discussion came the effort to put down ten simple points covering young people's rights. What follows is substantially "The 'Teen-Age Bill of Rights" that resulted.

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I

THE RIGHT TO LET CHILDHOOD BE FORGOTTEN.

WE were all children once. But the 'teen-ager likes less than anyone to be reminded that he was a child only yesterday * * * and to be treated as if this were yesterday instead of today.

Parents often hate to give up their child's childhood—his cuteness, his naive tricks and remarks. They overlook the fact that what is still cute to them is embarrassing to him, that he is as eager, as they are reluctant, to forget his childhood.

Joe is 14 years old. He has always looked up to the "big kids" of 14, and now he is ready to look up to himself. He has a chance of making the track team in

Here is a ten-point charter framed to meet the problems of growing youth.

By ELLIOT E. COHEN

manners, Mr. Sommers is coming to dinner." No wonder he feels his parents are living in his past, and don't understand him. There's nothing quite as infuriating as the tolerant smile—"After all, you're still just a child."

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II

THE RIGHT TO A "SAY" ABOUT HIS OWN LIFE.

Decisions affecting the 'teen-ager should be made largely by him—certainly with him—never for him.

At every stage parents resist dropping control over their children. A child is born completely helpless, completely dependent and, by immeasurable degrees, takes on small responsibilities. In the process of growing up it is the wise parent who can gauge when the child is ready to do something for himself. It is hardest for both parent and child during his adolescence, because then he is reaching out toward adult responsibilities and is most jealous of his independence. And, of course, just at that point parents are most anxious that decisions affecting his future should be wise ones.

Jack wants to be an airplane mechanic when he grows up, maybe a pilot—he's not sure which. But either way, he wants to go to a vocational high school, and sees no point in anything else. His father wants him to take academic courses, and after

make now and which it would be wiser for him to postpone.

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III

THE RIGHT TO MAKE MISTAKES. TO FIND OUT FOR HIMSELF.

Parents see a 'teen-ager grown up one day and childish and scared the next, and find it difficult to take the grown-up part seriously. But that is the more important part, because it is the growing part. He needs to be encouraged, even at the risk of mistakes, but not "thrown on his own."

When something goes wrong, he is not ludicrous—it is part of the process of learning. That's as true of the boy who becomes ill smoking his first cigarette as it is of the 13-year-old girl who studies her first experiment with lipstick in the mirror.

It's funny, but it's not childish, and the parent does well not to laugh. Nothing so quickly widens the gap between himself and his child.

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IV

THE RIGHT TO HAVE RULES EXPLAINED, NOT IMPOSED.

The 'teen-ager realizes that there are restrictions on his freedom laid down by society or by his parents which affect his behavior, his work, his schooling. He insists, however, that he understand these restrictions and their purposes, and that

body is growing; he needs lots of sleep and rest. But it is only to the extent that Harry understands this that the rule will cease being a restriction and become O.K. with him. And if, on a rare occasion, he does come in fifteen minutes late—well, it is hard sometimes to tear one's self away.

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V

THE RIGHT TO HAVE FUN AND COMPANIONS.

The 'teen-ager wants a full and rounded life, fun as well as work. He wants an opportunity for companionship, playing, dancing, reading, having friends. When the community does not provide it, he is forced to seek it himself.

Doris tells her mother, "It's my turn to entertain the girls Thursday. Will you have cookies?" From past experience, her mother knows what a nuisance this means: enough chatting and giggling to give her an all-day headache, crumbs and shoeprints on all the furniture (she sometimes wonders what kind of homes these girls come from—except that Doris acts exactly the same). If she says "No," she can expect Doris' hurt, "What can I tell the girls? . . . I'll never be able to go to their houses." If she's wiser, she says, "Of course, dear, but just remember about the shopping, and the cleaning up afterward."

This is equally true on a neighborhood level. Parents who dislike unsupervised cellar clubs and poolroom hangouts have a responsibility to help set up organized community centers. Youth will seek out social centers and their level depends on what society offers.

is new and the adult is the unquestioned authority. He is interested in the how in a much more critical way, taking very little for granted. Parents seldom suspect that he talks with his friends about politics, sex, religion and race relations perhaps as often as he does about Sinatra and the chances of the Dodgers. So when he injects himself into a discussion and is told, "You don't understand" or "This is too deep for you, wait till you grow up,"

it is natural for him to figure that "Maybe you don't know" or "You're avoiding the issue."

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VII

THE RIGHT TO BE AT THE ROMANTIC AGE.

To the 'teen-ager love is serious. He does not recognize the existence of "puppy love" and resents adult misunderstanding and cynicism about his romances. When

a 'teen-ager falls in love, he or she falls hard. There are no reservations.

When Mary suddenly realizes that her English teacher is the smartest and wittiest and handsomest man in the world, it may be a "crush" to her parents, but to her it is the real thing. Of course next month she'll begin to see the virtues of Alex next door, but this is this month. And if she happens to mention what a wonderful man Mr. Maynard is, a sensi-

tive parent should accept it at face value, not laugh. Mary has a right to her brief dream.

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VIII

THE RIGHT TO A FAIR CHANCE AND OPPORTUNITY.

The 'teen-ager wants opportunities, in education and vocation, and he wants to be able to compete fairly for them, regardless of sex, (Continued on Page 54)

high school, and if he does, that's important. His name will be in the school paper. Or there is Don. He's on his class debating team, and only last week took the affirmative of the question, "Should the United States pledge its armed forces if necessary to preserve the peace?" His teacher said he was very convincing. He knows a lot about the Cardinals, Congress, Crosby and communism, and he's learning fast. But when he gets home, he's still a kid. He hears phrases like "Watch your

he graduates from high school, "You'll be old enough to talk about your future then." In this controversy there can be no right or wrong. But the father who says, "I'll do your thinking for you, you're too young to know your own mind," is inviting the inevitable "It's my life!" Perhaps it would be easier for both if father recognized that Jack has a right to an opinion about his future, and Jack was helped to understand which decisions are his to

they be administered fairly.

Harry somehow can never get home by 10 P. M., his middle-of-the-week curfew hour. It's not that he does anything unusual; he just kids around with the fellows; if there is some money, he may go into Joe's for a soda. "What harm is there in that?"

The harm, of course, is that his mother has trouble rousing him for school; he is sleepy and disgruntled. A few days of going to bed late, and Harry looks it. His

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VI
THE RIGHT TO
QUESTION IDEAS.

Ideas and attitudes are not necessarily right because they come from an adult. The 'teen-ager does not consider any question closed to him. He has a right to question and to get an answer, and to argue things out.

The 'teen-ager has long since passed the acute "Why?" stage, when everything

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race, color or creed. When these opportunities are denied his frustrations are deep and sometimes explosive.

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X

THE RIGHT TO PROFESSIONAL HELP WHENEVER NECESSARY.

The 'teen-ager is growing fast in mind and body. When something interferes with that growth or his personality adjustment or with his health, the necessary professional help should be available to him either through his parents or from community resources.

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IX

THE RIGHT TO STRUGGLE TOWARD HIS OWN PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE.

Each generation feels that it is the future. To the 'teen-ager nothing is more important than to find out where he fits in in relation to life around him. It is a serious quest, often a painful one. The wise parent will stand by him ready to help and giving it when he senses that it is sought. It is always sound for a parent not to be dogmatic and it is especially important to be flexible and understanding toward this search on the part of his child for a philosophy of life.

Parents reach wisdom when they understand that a child's rights and a child's needs are pretty much synonymous. They must learn the real art of letting

a child test out his own muscles
at the same time being always at
hand when needed. That is the
real key to a secure relationship
between a parent and his 'teen-
age child.