

ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH -- SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR
AND THE SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE

by

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

As one of the world's richest, most developed and powerful nations we claim to be a society devoted to its young. We boast of free public education, Head Start programs for the disadvantaged, special education programs, and yet the number of American adolescents with emotional and mental problems continues to grow. (17:1).

The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection (17:5) estimated there were, at that time, at least 2,500,000 children with well-marked behavioral difficulties, including the more serious mental and nervous disorders.

The National Institute of Mental Health (17:5) estimates that 1,400,000 children under the age of 18 needed psychiatric care in 1966. The Clinical Committee of the Joint Commission on Mental Health of Children (17:6) reports the admission of teenagers to the state hospitals has risen 150 percent in the last decade.

The schools of our nation have taken on the great responsibility of the education of its youth; however, developing intellectual and vocational skills should not be their only concern. Considering the vast part of a child's life that is spent in school, it is easy to see the

potential influence the school has upon the child's total development. School, with its structure for learning and its housing of the peer group, is second only to the family as an avenue through which the adolescent's search for identity occurs. (18:264).

Today this identity search has become an even greater task than in the past. Thornburg (21:3) points out that today's adolescents are no different from those of past generations: the differences lie within our society. Sources agree that today's adolescents are under more of a strain and experience more stress than past generations because of vast technology, rapid social change, affluence, unrest and violence. Thus the generation gap caused by a changing society is widened; adolescents become confused and react by showing dissatisfaction with the adult culture, some may alienate themselves, others may become activists in their attempt to strike out at the establishment. This type of behavior, in some degrees, is common to the normal or average adolescent. Josselyn (17:372) states:

There is no symptom of the disturbed adolescent that does not one way or another fit into the category of normal adolescence. It is the degree, the crippling, and the unchangeableness of the symptoms that should be the criteria for evaluating whether the individual's behavior is that of a normal adolescent or an indicator that something, at least potentially, is going awry. (17:372).

As previously indicated, many adolescents go through this period of their lives experiencing only the normal

growing pains, others however, encounter problems and conflicts that for one reason or another they are unable to cope with. Unfortunately, some schools today may not be doing much to contribute to the mental upset of the adolescent student. It is this point, the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health, that is the concern of this report.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was undertaken to examine the influence of the school atmosphere on adolescent mental health in relation to self-destructive behavior. More specifically, the purposes of this study were: 1) to stress that the school should not be solely responsible for prevention of self-destructive behavior, but that the school atmosphere does have a potential influence on sound mental health development of adolescents; 2) to present evidence that the schools may be contributing to the occurrence of adolescent self-destructive behavior; and 3) to offer suggestions for creating a school atmosphere conducive to sound mental health and the prevention of adolescent self-destructive behavior.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Adolescence

For the purpose of this report, the term adolescence