

## CHAPTER 12

# What's Happening to Us?

Parents!

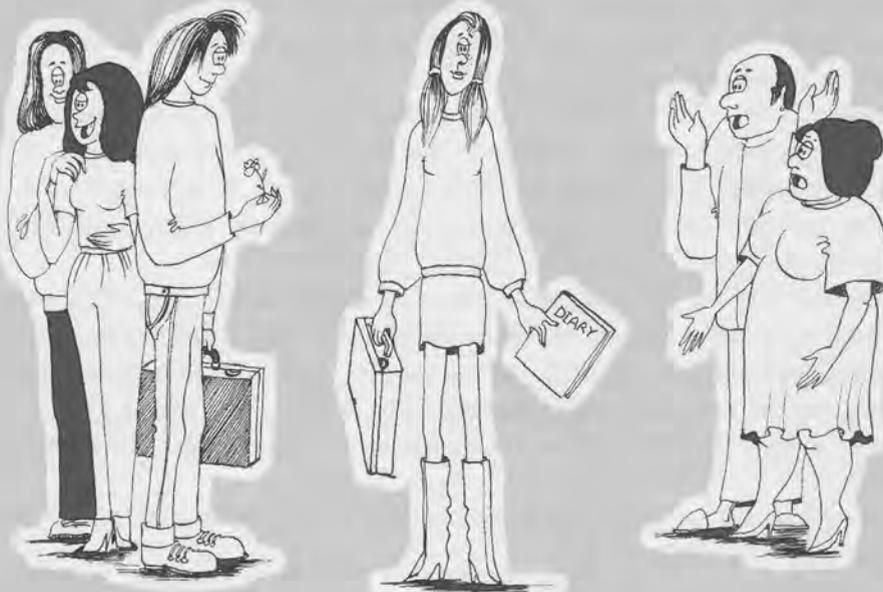
I cannot go on like this anymore. I have to speak my mind and I am past caring who I speak to.

What's happening to us, and more to the point, what's happening to me? Why, only two years ago everything was so easy and so much fun, but now wherever I go—be it school or home, I feel I'm going to die from depression?

Why have I become such a clumsy fright? A heron's legs are sticking out of these "fantastic" Finnish high-boots my parents paid a small fortune for. But why can't they see? Of course, the boots are great, but not on my legs! And the heels. I'm like a clodhopper as it is, and such footwear will make me two heads taller than everyone else in my class!

Why is everyone else normal while I'm five foot six, long-nosed, and bound to get pimples soon? Who would want me like this? There was a dance at school on Saturday, and again I was stuck in the corner all evening.

Or take today. Our teacher began to "educate" us again. "Do this, don't do that. This is moral, that is immoral". But we are adults! Can't she understand? She treats us like babies. She been teaching us since fourth grade and maybe six years are nothing to her,



but haven't we grown up since then? When will these grown-ups finally see that we are not babies any more?

At home it's no better. There didn't seem to be any problems before, but now it's different. As soon as you get home you hear: "Well, what's going on at school? Did you study anything new?" As if there is nothing in the world but school! You turn on the music and hear: "Your tape player is too loud again! How can you listen to such noise!"

In general, my parents are alright, and I am really fond of them. But why have they become so difficult to get along with? Sometimes I come home and want to have a normal conversation; but in a couple of minutes I lose my temper and the talk turns into a shouting match. So it's better not to start. They say they "want the best for me", but how can they be so sure they know better than I do myself? Why can't they just trust me a little bit? I'm nearly grown-up now, not a toddler!

So the only way out is to shut myself in my room, put on the earphones or bury myself in a book. But I can't sit in a room the rest of my life!

If only I could find some way to relax! At least before, I could share everything with Olga, but now she's head over heels in love with some guy. So I'm absolutely alone. If only I could fall in love, too! But with whom?

Last week I met a boy (he was even as tall as me—such a rare piece of luck!), but my "prince" wanted to neck at once. This is called love?

Parents and teachers, basically all grown-ups, think there's nothing but thoughts of love in our heads. My parents are not too bad in this sense, but Olga's parents... Every evening it's the same: "Instead of chasing boys, you'd better do your math or do the laundry! You only know how to put on your mini-skirt, paint yourself like an Indian and go off who knows where!"

Goodness, I'm ready to run away to the end of the world if only I could find someone to understand me. Isn't there any way to get out of this depressing situation?

Hey, my prince! Where are you?

Take Olga again. From hearing her parents, you might think she's dating every day, sitting together in the last row at the movies or kissing in a doorway somewhere. Not at all! She has simply found a caring person! Her Sergei is so nice and easy to deal with, no rudeness or moralizing.

But other boys! Well, how can anybody understand them? They're capable only of so-called "clever" jokes, as if they've just learned where children come from. Can they really expect to win a girl's attention in this way?

Sometimes it seems to me that we are all playing some game that we have long been sick and tired of, but are somehow ashamed to admit it. Can anyone really enjoy this? As soon as we get together, boys begin to tell dirty stories or boast. They cannot seem to avoid colorful "epithets" (while pretending they do it accidentally—"Oh, sorry, this is not for a girl's ears"). And, on the other side, girls just giggle and blush.

If you venture to speak about something else, they'll wonder what's wrong with you. But I'm sure everybody is dreaming about the same thing—escaping from this charade and finding real love that will last for the rest of your life. Haughtily showing off to classmates, saying, "Now I too have tried everything", just doesn't cut it after a while.

Hey, parents! It's a charade, nothing more! Rudeness, two earrings in one ear, parties till midnight!

But where is the real me then? When am I, my real self? Just alone with this notebook? What do I really want from life?

— From the diary of Sveta, 15

My dear daughter, we haven’t talked for such a long time. I know how hard it is for you now. Your father and I were also fifteen once. We also had the experience of dating for the first time. Our parents did not understand us also and neither did we understand them.

My darling girl, we love you so much! We want you to grow up to be pretty and happy! How can we learn to understand each other, to love each other? Because no matter what happens, I have nobody as close and dear as you.

I know you suffer now because of your height. You stoop and are afraid to wear high heels. My darling, in a couple of years the boys will have grown up, and you will have become a slender pretty girl that everybody will gaze at! By then, your height will be just a little bit more than average. Don’t stoop and your clumsiness will disappear soon.

Yesterday I had a day off, so I stayed at home, made a nice dinner and bought some ice-cream. I thought you would come home from school and we would have a good chat. But you came in, grumbled something without looking and shut yourself in your room again, turning on your tape player full volume. Of course, I lost my temper and began shouting at you. So there was no nice chat.

Perhaps my time was different, and the problems were different, too. But I love you! Why can’t we understand each other?

Now, about this boy. Last week late at night I saw you two kissing near the entrance of our building. Sveta, I am so afraid for you! I am afraid in your inexperience that you will do foolish things just because you do not want to be a “wallflower”.

One day you’ll be a mother, too. You’ll have a daughter of fifteen, and you’ll quarrel with her during the day and suffer at night, just like I do now.

Or maybe we can find a common language? You see, it’s hard on me, too. You are growing up, changing, so our relationship is changing as well.

Let’s try once more, okay?

— From the diary of Anna Vassilyevna, Sveta’s mother

Oh, Svetka, Svetka,

What must I do for you to notice me?

Do you remember? I invited you to dance at the last party, but you looked down on me with such contempt as if I were not human being. If it were not me but that smart fellow from the 11th grade, I think you would have jumped at the chance!

What kind of people are you girls? You dress up, put on make up, and whisper in corners, but if anyone tries to come near you, you’re like a stone wall. Of course, you are grown-up ladies, and we boys are only into playing games.

With this attitude you show displeasure at every little thing: “You vulgar things”—and shower us with contempt. One would think you must have something else in mind.

Svetka, Svetka . . . Why don’t you see all this? You know I am sick and tired of playing the class joker myself. But tell me, please, what should I do for you to notice me?

Listen! I also hate all those stupid jokes. I wish I could be a proud handsome guy, suave and sophisticated. Then you would be sure to fall for me.

What a fool I was selling newspapers and saving money. I so much wanted to buy you a birthday present. And when I tried to give it to you, all you could say was, “Oh, my parents already gave me a similar chain”. I don’t know how I stopped myself from throwing that chain away right there and then.

Svetka, I like you all the same! But how can I convince you that I’m a person, too? What must I do for you to pay attention to me?

I can’t stop thinking about you!

— From an unsent letter of Yura, 15



Most of us will come across such problems in our relationships with people, whether it's our classmates, friends, parents, or teachers. That is why it is so important to understand these problems and the way to overcome them.

What is happening to us? And what is happening to those around us?

Why do we feel ourselves to be grown up, but our parents and teachers still treat us like babies? Why does nobody seem to understand? Why don't our parents trust us?

And what is love? A classmate invites me to the movie theater. Is it love already? A girl, who before did not pay me any attention, tries to speak to me during breaks and invites me over to her house. She's in love with me, right? And what about me? How do I feel about her?

Often, when we are searching for answers to these questions we are only concerned about our own feelings: *I feel bad, I am not understood, I am liked by somebody.* But what about the people around us? Do they feel bad, too, and suffer as much as we do because they don't feel understood either?

Maybe if we try to discuss these things honestly and openly, we could resolve all these harassing problems, doubts and contradictions. What do you think?

## Time of changes

We are all probably aware that we have gone through a lot of changes during the past few years. First of all, our appearance has changed. We have also discovered new desires and interests. The people we liked before do not seem to be so interesting to us anymore. Why are these things happening? Because it is part of the process of changing from children into adults. It is natural that as we grow older our attitude towards the world and people will change. It is a process that we all go through. It is good to understand this process so that as we go through it we will cause the least harm to ourselves and others.

So, what do we know about this period when the adult trying to emerge out of us gradually is ousting the child in us?

One difference between a child and an adult is that a child is still dependent on its parents. In the early years of a person's life dependence on adults is necessary. But, step by step, the realm of freedom expands. The desire for independence, for the right to freely choose the course of our life is in all of us, and especially grows in the teenage years.

This is the most attractive thing in being an adult—the freedom to make your own decisions, whether it is how you spend money or what kind of friends you associate with. No one dictates to adults how they should live their life. Quite the contrary, other people depend on them, such as their subordinates and their children.

This transformation from a child into a grown-up takes place gradually and involves



no magical instant transformations. Then, why is it often so painful? Why do problems continually crop up—problems in dealing with friends, parents and teachers? Why do we feel grown-up, but are treated like children? Why are parents always complaining of the “difficult age”? Are we really so difficult to deal with? If so, what exactly is the difficulty?

It is very important to find the answers to these questions. If we can, perhaps the problems will not look so awful.

So let us try to understand what is happening to us. We shall begin with the simplest issue—with the biological and physical changes that take place.

### *Teenage years: A physiologist's viewpoint*

From the perspective of physiology, the teen years are characterized by intensive growth, increased matter exchange, and greatly intensified activity of the internal glands. Considerable change occurs not only in the physiological but also in the psychological sphere. These changes are not necessarily simultaneous. The rate of reconstruction of different areas is different. This includes a divergence in the formation of different psychological qualities (for instance, the development of will may lag behind the development of intellect), and different bodily characteristics (height and weight do not increase proportionately), as well as some features of sexual development. Often, due to individual peculiarities of development, social and psychological maturity lag behind sexual maturity, and this engenders a certain disharmony, especially in relations with other people.

Except for the first two years of life, never does a person grow so quickly as during adolescence. A teenager's height increases by 3-5 inches per year! Girls grow most actively at the age of 11-12, while the most intensive growth of boys takes place at 13-14. Thus, boys, who at first lag behind, after 15 overtake girls in height.

The motor apparatus is reconstructed, while the chest and respiratory muscles develop rapidly. The lungs grow; their volume and area increase as well as their vital capacity. The growth of the size of heart during this period is also great, its volume increasing by almost a quarter each year. The state of the nervous system is also changing; the activity of the sub-cortex increases, which causes greater nervousness, lack of restraint and unstable emotional reactions. The brain develops, especially its higher parts around the forehead (frontal lobes). This gives a teenager increased possibilities in his thinking: perception becomes clearer and focused attention is more deliberate. In plain language a teenager is becoming more clever.

But the greatest changes take place in the area of hormonal regulation. The internal secretion glands are entirely reconstructed. Under the influence of hormones produced by the internal secretion glands, turbulent physical growth occurs. Sexual maturity is also greatly affected by these glands. The sexual organs develop as well as secondary sexual features.

The reaction of the nervous system is also connected to the rapid growth and changes in the organ systems. Teenagers become more emotional and they easily get tired. This can manifest itself in sleepiness as well as in increased excitement. This often brings about an inadequate (either too emotional or, on the contrary, too apathetic) reaction to events. This often leads to problems in communication, especially with adults.



Considering all of these biological changes, we should note that despite the fundamental reconstruction of the physiology of the person taking place at this age, it would be too simple to think that puberty is just a biological phenomenon. It is also accompanied by a widening and deepening spiritual and social maturity.

Within a few years not only physical, but mental, moral and social growth takes place. The sprouts of adulthood are appearing everywhere. The physical self is reconstructed, one's self-concept changes, relationships with adults and peers change, interests shift and cognitive activities become richer. Everything is in motion at this time: some features gradually disappearing while others emerging. All this takes place in a rather short time, accompanied by unexpected surprises since the development process has such an uneven character. Personal problems may manifest themselves in various forms, especially with respect to adults, such as rudeness, hostility, stubbornness, resistance and secrecy.

So, what are the main features of the personality formation of someone who is soon to enter the adult world?

### *A psychologist's viewpoint*

Psychologically speaking, the unique features that emerge in a teenager's personality is a sense of unique identity and an intense desire to be considered grown-up. (We are not little kids any more and want others to recognize our adulthood, don't we?). This phenomenon is called "the sense of adulthood" by psychologists and is explained by a number of reasons.

The first reason is puberty. These very palpable changes make a teenager appear more adultlike to others and to oneself.

Another reason is the teenager's growing independence as reliance on parents decreases.

The notion of one's own adulthood appears more concrete as teens look toward the adult world and find much of interest and in common. They search for possible professional and social identity. Often teenagers choose fields of activity where they feel most confident through their knowledge of some subject, success at a sport, etc. Connected to this, some teenagers will test the knowledge and skills of an adult, to find some weak point and in this way feel superior: "I can assemble a radio-set while he can't even replace a blown fuse". (Let us admit to ourselves that we have done such a thing more than once, haven't we?)

This sense of adulthood also emerges through communication with older friends. In the course of such communication a teenager feels impelled to claim his rights—the same independence and "freedoms" that his older friends already possess.

The passage into adulthood implies a transformation of the rights, duties and privileges of childhood. This demands a reorientation from old norms and values to new ones—from childish to adult ones.



So, we want to claim new rights. These claims come out mainly in our relationships with adults. What do we desire most of all? We want adults to treat us as equals. Why should other people be able to tell us with whom we may be friends or when we should come home? Who gave them the right to have such unlimited authority?

We want to be trusted, respected as persons and have independence, don't we? And if not, our unrealized desire manifests itself as protest. But sometimes neither we nor adults realize that the protests themselves are not the end, but the means by which we are trying to end the childish norms of our relationship and to live according to new norms. (By the way, can't you remember some occasions in your life when such protests went too far and did become the end? There seemed to be no real reason to protest, but because of your pride, you didn't stop).

Probably we are all suffering from the same types of problems. We want more freedom and more rights. But are we ready to take on bigger duties as well? We don't realize that duties and responsibilities make up a substantial part of adult life. Thus, it is difficult to speak about the greater freedom of adults because with freedom comes responsibility. Sometimes the responsibility can be such that the person feels not free at all. This is also part of growing up: realizing one's responsibility, one's duties to those around us.

### The inevitable romanticism

What else do we desire besides independence?

Everybody has thought about the future. What will it be like? What does life have prepared for us? We may have quite different ideas about our future life, but all of us want to experience something significant and great. If it is love, it must be an all-absorbing passion; if it is monetary gain, it must be sufficient not only for a simple life, but for a glamorous one. We may not outwardly admit such desires because we realize in quite an "adult way" that big dreams often break into pieces as they meet the reality of life. But deep down inside we still hope that one day our dreams will come true in spite of everything and that our life will never become humdrum and dull.

Such romanticism is an inevitable feature of youth and it would seem that it shouldn't cause problems. But if we think about it, sometimes it does lead to a kind of alienation from reality, an ignoring of the facts, that gives worry to our parents and teachers. A sign of maturity is being able to balance our romantic ideals with reality.



### Absolutism and skepticism

Another feature inherent in adolescents is the categorical and straightforward voicing of judgments. Often this kind of frankness is accompanied by reluctance to accept anything that differs from their beliefs, especially when comes from authority figures. Whereas previously a child will accept the voice of an authority without question, as a teenager it no longer carries the same weight. In the process of growing up and becoming independent, questioning authority is a natural expression of one's moral and intellectual quest. However, if the person does not develop his own set of values, he can easily adopt an attitude of moral relativism and begins to justify all kinds of dubious behavior. The teenager can be at the same time both a judgmental



moralist and an indifferent cynic. He oscillates back and forth between absolutism and skepticism.

Once in a while all of us have the desire to analyze, criticize, judge and condemn everything around us pitilessly. This feature is typical of young people as they realize that the people who have taught them values are not infallible and that

society is not a safe haven. It is easy to criticize people who have brought the world to its current state. The question remains, however, whether we can improve what previous generations have left behind.

### *The new communication style*

Of course, communication with peers always has been important to us. As the years pass, however, friendships change and evolve, so that certain ones acquire a special place in our lives. Why are these friendships so important to us? The reason is simple. We are attracted to their essential equality, in contrast to our relations with adults. Our peers are those with whom we are passing through life together. We share similar experiences. They seem to understand us. We have a common language. These friendships are evolving along with our own maturing. As our personality and interests develop, solitude becomes unbearable. We feel the need to share our perspective on life as well as new feelings and emotions as we experience them. We seek to be taken seriously, which often seems not to be the case with adults.

The values that prevail in these new, deeper friendships are respect for personality and human dignity, equality, honesty, loyalty and a willingness to help each other. Each of us dreams of having a true friend and of being a true friend to someone. But even such a noble desire sometimes brings on rather unpleasant emotions, such

as feelings of resentment, anger and jealousy, as when our friend begins to demonstrate warm feelings towards someone other than ourselves. Because our friendship is precious to us, we can become too demanding and sensitive. We are all subject to such feelings to some extent, and there is nothing wrong about this. The important thing is the way we deal with these feelings.

### *Age of love?*

In our changing relations with others there is one more dimension which cannot be ignored. Until recently, you probably communicated and made friends exclusively with those of your own gender: boys with boys, girls with girls. Now your circle of friends is changing. Every once in a while you notice a boy and girl about your age talking a walk, sitting on a bench or going out to the





movies together. They may claim to be just friends. But this is a special kind of friendship based on a new feeling—on romantic love.

The development of such love is in part related to the advent of puberty, which marks gaining the biological ability to become a mother or father. This happens naturally and does not depend upon our desire. It comes with the age and can be neither hastened nor postponed. It is also quite personal; for some the time comes earlier, for others later. Its early coming is not a merit, and its late coming is not a fault. Everything depends on the physical constitution of the person. This said, the feeling of love is not simply the result of the physical changes taking place in our bodies. It is primarily a spiritual phenomenon, connected with the desire for deeper communication.

This kind of love has long been a subject of fiction, so it is quite easy to find examples in literature. Such literary images such as Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra or Cyrano de Bergerac and Roxanne help us to understand the infinite beauty and difficulty of love.

Nevertheless, many people wonder “What is love? How do I recognize it? When do I know that I truly love someone ?” All these are valid and vital questions. The uncertainty associated with these questions has been the cause of much unnecessary heartbreak and pain. Many young people have suffered due to premature efforts to discover answers before they were ready to handle such relationships.

It is natural to be interested in love, to seek to understand and experience its fragrance. Love is not easily grasped. Often patience is a necessary virtue for discovering the answers to the questions we so desperately seek to answer. It is important that we don’t jump into something blindly and foolishly because we feel the need to experience what love is. But what is just as important is not to try to experience love as soon as possible out of fear of being late bloomer, or out of the desire to look grown-up and experienced in the eyes of our peers. Love is too serious to treat it as simply a sign of our “adulthood”. In these vital years of transformation, we undergo so many changes it is essential that we devote our energy toward our own personal growth. It is a time when we can learn about our individual uniqueness and discover

our talents as well as develop our ability to love. At this time of our life our emotions and feelings are usually very close to the surface. Infatuation and physical attraction can often be misinterpreted as love. However, love is not something based on mere infatuation. If we can learn not to act on the first feelings of infatuation and instead dedicate these years to our spiritual and moral growth, in the future we will undoubtedly discover a much deeper kind of love on the foundation of the development of our heart. A heart that wasn't thrown away on previous so-called love relationships will be ready to give and receive a more profound and genuine love.

## For Your Journal



Imagine that you are a movie star. You are 25 years old and have thousands, if not millions, of admirers, especially among teenagers. You have been asked to give an interview for a teen magazine. Your words will influence the minds of many young people throughout the world. Remembering the problems you faced when you were a teenager, you would like to use this opportunity to give help to the readers of this magazine. Write in your journal some of the things you might say.