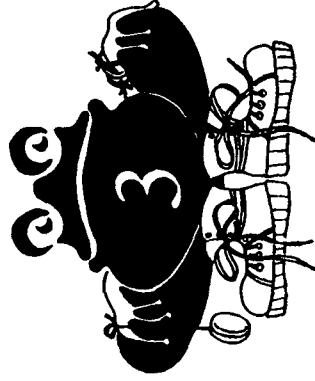


that we have a delicate "frog" who is not ready to make the transition to this new stage of life.

If youngsters are going to be prepared to make the transition from the dock (elementary school) to the boat (middle-level school) comfortably, they had better come off this dock having already made independent decisions, and having already been taught guidelines and values from which to make difficult decisions; having already spent time away from home, and with a positive outlook about going to this new school. The new life of being a "frog" will not be easy and it is here that the kissing will be difficult. The success of the next few years will be more dependent on what we have established in this youngster's life while he was on the dock, than on the uncertainties of what lies ahead in the boat.



## BEHAVING AS FROGS

Once in the boat, our "frogs" are going to be obsessed with trying to get an answer to one basic question; that is, "NOW THAT I'M IN THE BOAT, HOW CAN I IMPRESS MY FRIENDS?" No question about it, the more you look into studies about early adolescent behavior, the more you see that between the ages of eleven and fifteen, one of the strongest determinants of human behavior is peer influence. These "frogs" are going to be influenced more by other "frogs" on a day-to-day basis than by perhaps anyone else in their social lives!

Writing about the characteristics of "frogs," David Elkind describes this transitional period as a time when youngsters enter INTENSE EGOCENTRISM. All of a sudden, they become centered on themselves. They begin to play to an "imaginary world." Every morning they will spend twenty minutes in front of the mirror getting themselves ready. As parents, we need to remember that they are not getting themselves ready for us. No . . . they are getting ready for their imaginary audience. Once they enter school, they are certain that they will be center stage and that everyone else will be focused on them!

Whenever they talk to us, they won't even look at us if a mirror is close by, or even if a window is at hand. They will invariably look right by us at whatever might project an image of themselves. They enter into

this stage of narcissism coupled with an egocentrism that insists on their admiring themselves whenever possible.

If you want to see what this imaginary world looks like, take a minute to look in their bedrooms! Everything in the room reflects their imaginary world. Parents are not invited into this room; younger brothers and sisters better not enter this room; but whenever a friend comes to visit, where is the first place he or she is taken by your "frog"? Yes! Right up to the bedroom, so both can continue in this imaginary world. They put the posters of their personal fable heroes up on the wall, have the stereo going full blast, and together they play as active participants in this world.

They will envision themselves as indestructible, immortal human beings. Because we try to bring them back to reality, it is often hard to carry on a long conversation. They don't want to deal with the real world. It doesn't quite work as nicely as the imaginary one. Consequences are not part of their world, which makes the parent role as a disciplinarian even more difficult. They will seldom see problems that might lie ahead as a consequence of present behavior.

We hope these "frogs" eventually move out of this stage. Perhaps at the age of fifteen or so, they might find themselves asking a different question in the boat. Not, "Hey . . . how do I get everyone to notice me?," but, rather, "HEY . . . ANYONE KNOW WHERE THIS BOAT IS GOING?"

For about three years or so, while in this transition period, most of these kids could not care less where this boat is going, or if it is in danger or how many miles it is from shore, or whether or not it is overloaded, or where it is heading. They will be so preoccupied

with each other, so relationship-oriented that the rest of the world will seem dull and unimportant!

Until our "frogs" ask the question, "Where is this boat going?," most of what is taught in school or at home will not be viewed as a means to an end. This question, when answered, gives direction from which commitment to goals is derived. Self-discipline does not develop until it is preceded by commitment. Until "frogs" are willing to commit themselves to goals, they will need to be trapped into learning and will make life miserable for many of those who are in the business of teaching.

Some people think that "frogs" ought to be committed! (I don't mean incarcerated!) Seriously, there are those who think these youngsters should show long-range commitment over their adolescent years. In my experience, I have seldom seen "frogs" take long periods of time to get organized, much less to draw up long-term goals!

Notice their conversations when talking to their friends over the telephone. They seldom say, "Mary, this is Alice. Tonight, even though we are only twelve years old, we are going to dispense with our regular conversation and talk about long-range goals! Let's see if we can draw some priorities for our life! Get your paper and pencil out and let us try to structure our lives for the future!" No, not too many "frogs" talk like that. Here is what you might hear: "Mary, this is Alice. What are you going to wear to school tomorrow? Think Billy really likes me? What a jerk I made of myself today! Think anyone saw it? Come on over and see the new poster in my bedroom. How about the latest record? Did you watch MTV yesterday? Got tickets to the next rock concert?"

When you listen to what "frogs" talk about most, you will find that it is about early adolescents! It is about what is going on in their world right now. They are wise enough to know that few adults like early adolescent lifestyles, because they don't fit the adult ego ideal. Adults want them to begin thinking about college, jobs, a cancer cure, paying bills, and being responsible. This is why they have such solidarity with each other, why they block us out of their lives at times. They know everyone wants them to "grow up" and become serious about life! To them, the present is all that counts.

This egocentrism is very important to understand when trying to help our "frogs." To them, roughly between the ages of eleven and fourteen, the future is not going to appear real or important. You find yourself saying until you're blue in the face, "You'd better study now if you're going to be ready for high school!" (high school teachers will shout loudest in this regard), or, "This is a cruel world and you'd better grow up soon if you're going to survive!"

"Frogs" are not, for the most part, future thinkers! Their egocentrism does not make them sympathetic to problems of life, nor do they care about the solutions. Try telling a group of twelve-year-olds about the hunger in India and see how sympathetically they respond! Many of them simply do not want to see adult reality. They prefer to live in the imaginary world their egocentrism demands.

Over these early adolescent years, it just does not work to motivate "frogs" by using the future as leverage. We need to find ways to let them be early adolescents and yet feel a sense of pride and enthusiasm in being able to regulate their lives successfully within their capabilities.

Well, while these "frogs" are floating around in this boat for three or four years, keep in mind how difficult the task might be. They are not operating on long-range goals. They will be inconsistent, loving you one day and hating you the next. They will not be structured in their lives. They will not always follow through on our instructions and will use enormous energy trying to convince us that our perception of their evasiveness is not at all true!

All these maneuvers are characteristic of egocentrism; and just think how difficult it must be for all those teachers out there who work with 120 centers of the universe each day of the school year! These people must be Herculean to get our "frogs" to learn a curriculum when their very nature is so opposed to it! Very few people would ever choose to be with 120 early adolescents for 180 days as a profession!

Lest I have caused you to book passage to a far-off place, let me tell you that this egocentrism will not last forever. Teens will de-center themselves as they enter the job market to make some spending money. They will soon learn that the boss is not concerned about the imaginary world, so for the sake of making extra money, they might take objective feedback.

They will move to more intimate relationships which they soon will find won't work unless they are willing to take feedback. These and other developments will help in the de-centering process. Perhaps most important to this process is to help our "frogs" move to that all-important question, "Where is this boat going?" Once this is answered, then sacrifice and hard work might be in order.

