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# EDITORIAL

## Great Transitions

David Hamburg, a former president of AAAS and of the Institute of Medicine, is currently president of a major foundation—the Carnegie Corporation of New York. He has skillfully employed some of the foundation's resources to tackle major societal problems. In these efforts he has had the help of a distinguished council, including Beatrix Hamburg.

In early October 1995, the Carnegie Corporation issued a 167-page document entitled *Great Transitions*,\* which deals with problems that have arisen from the changed circumstances in which children pass through adolescence. Formerly, young people spent most of their time in the presence of adults in a cohesive family environment. Now, both parents (or the single parent) often work away from home. Children have much less parental interaction, and the TV set is the baby-sitter for many. In addition, there are threats to the well-being of young people that were unknown to their parents and grandparents, from sources such as AIDS, drugs, and lethal weapons.

Young people aged 10 to 14 experience freedom, autonomy, and choice at a time when their judgment is immature and they especially need nurturing and guidance. Because of today's high divorce rates and the growth of single-parent families, more than half of all U.S. children will spend at least part of their childhood or adolescence living with only one parent. Under these circumstances, many children will obtain most of their guidance from peers and the media.

The guidance of peers leaves much to be desired. *Great Transitions* reports that about two-thirds of eighth graders say that they have tried alcohol, one-fourth say that they are current drinkers, and 28% say they have been drunk at least once; 18.6% smoke cigarettes, and marijuana use increased from 6.2% in 1991 to 13% in 1994. In 1988, 27% of girls and 33% of boys had had sexual intercourse by their 15th birthday.

The media are probably even more influential than peers. Adolescents watch television for 22 hours per week on average, and some watch as much as 60 hours. By the time they reach 18, adolescents as a group will have spent more hours in front of TV sets than in classrooms. During his or her viewing time, the average child will see about 1000 murders, rapes, or aggravated assaults each year.

*Great Transitions* lists many actions and programs that should be expanded. One is that parents should increase thoughtful interaction with their children. The report recommends that parents watch TV shows with their children and initiate discussions about the messages being communicated. The report states, "Knowledge . . . of the ways commercial messages are shaped and used to manipulate audiences may help protect young adolescents against strong advertising pressures to smoke, drink, have sex, or eat unhealthy foods."

Many parents interact with teachers when their children are in primary school, but this effort usually declines when children reach middle school. The report recommends that parent-teacher interaction be maintained during the adolescent years.

A comment of special interest to scientists has to do with improving the health of adolescents. The report notes that a life sciences curriculum in the middle schools that is matched to the needs and interests of young adolescents can provide them with essential concepts in biology. It can then relate these concepts to problems that students encounter in their daily lives and improve prospects for lifelong good health.

Among many other comments and recommendations, the report mentions the possibility of expanded roles for community programs. Some of these provide attractive and monitored environments for adolescents during time not spent in classes. One such program would encourage the participation of young adolescents in improving their own communities. The young people should be involved in day-to-day planning, and their contributions should be regularly and publicly recognized.

*Great Transitions* is the product of 10 years of devoted effort and contains much important information. If it serves to alert parents and concerned adults and leads to action, it could be a turning point in the process of preparing adolescents for life in a new century.

Philip H. Abelson

\**Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, P.O. Box 753, Waldorf, MD 20604).