CHAPTER

4

The Adolescent and his Family

In many countries, at least in western societies, adolescence has often been a period of harsh conflict in family relationships. Even where comparative amity prevails, strains and tensions are often not far beneath the surface. Obviously there is no inevitability about this pattern. But its occurrence has been found to be frequent enough to cause concern among parents and educators, to say nothing of the unhappiness and the heartbreak which many adolescents themselves suffer.

The causes of this turmoil are not hard to find. Adolescence has been shown to be a period of rapid social growth and new social and emotional adjustments. The growing person needs to establish himself as a person in his own right. This involves establishing an emotional independence from his parents and home, and seeking a focus of attachment among people of his own age. He is driven towards new social experiences of an adult kind. The fulfilment of this urge, however, holds a certain terror for the young person. He still needs the security of the home base and the love and support of parents, even though he may appear to reject them. His changing body invests him with a certain awkwardness, when he would wish to appear to best advantage. He often seems irritable, rude and ungrateful.
Parents themselves often contribute unwittingly to this conflict. They often do not understand the adjustments now required of them, and they tend to resent the apparent ingratitude of their children. They often find it difficult to loosen the tight emotional bonds and wean these children emotionally, permitting them to sally forth to new experiences. It is a difficult situation: what Levy and Munroe (1938) call, 'This second birth—delivery of children into the adult world.' The situation is aggravated by the fact that parents are all too often aware of the real dangers their children face at this stage. Unwanted pregnancies, for instance, are a constant fear of many parents. In their desire to protect their children they often impose severe restrictions on their movements, their company and their activities. Children in their turn see this as a lack of trust, and a refusal to accept the fact that they are responsible young adults, well able to take care of themselves. Thus conflicts grow and often sour a once placid and happy relationship.

Kingsley Davis (1940) speculates on the reasons for the extraordinary amount of parent-youth conflict in western cultures as compared to other countries, where the outstanding fact is not the rebelliousness of youth, but its docility. He suggests that the causes lie in factors peculiar to our society. Rapid social change creates an hiatus between the generations; the men's frequent absence from the home produces a problem of identification and a lack of understanding of the male role in the family circle. These make for conflict, and until a more satisfactory adjustment is made to them, conflict between the generations will remain.

Jamaica, as part of the western world, is also subject to these forces, and experiences conflict between the generations. Because of the rather sharp divisions between the various social classes, amounting at times to the occurrence of separate sub-cultures, there may be varying incidence of problems, and these may take different forms in each sub-culture, but it is common experience that, in this country, the period of adolescence is often characterised by conflicts between parents and their children. The problem is perhaps exacerbated by the fact that the climate of family relationships tends to be Victorian and authoritarian, and the parent a figure of authority whose influence is often prolonged into late adolescence or early adulthood. But Jamaica is