

26

When Does One Become an Adult?

UNTIL ABOUT two decades ago, the age for reaching adulthood was twenty-one. The twenty-first birthday in those days was very important. British people used to say that it was the day when a new adult was given the key of the house, and was allowed to stay out late. I was not allowed to stay out after eight o'clock until I reached that magic age.

Now the age of adulthood, the age when young people can claim their adult identity cards and are qualified to vote, is eighteen. It seems to me nowadays that children much younger than eighteen stay out very late. Some even go to karaoke bars and late night dances, where they are in danger of being enticed into taking drugs if they are too weak to “say NO to drugs.” Young people do not always see danger ahead.

Personally I did not mind the restrictions against staying out late, because I studied beyond the age of twenty-one, and had no time to go out at night. I wonder how young people today react on this question of adulthood? I know that, a few years ago, a teacher in a Hong Kong school held a survey on the subject with some senior students. He wanted to know if they felt old enough to vote in elections. To his great surprise, most of the students considered that they were not mature enough to know

which candidate to vote for. That feeling may have changed now. You student readers can answer that question.

Actually, different people mature at different ages, both mentally and emotionally. Some, because of the family background, may take an interest in what is happening in their city, their country, or in the world at large. I think it is good for young people to take an interest in world affairs. However, I think young people should not be forced to accept any fixed opinion on religious or political issues. Every young person should be left free to form his own opinion later, because there is already too much racial, religious and political prejudice, formed too early in life through adult influences.

I greatly admire the enthusiasm of young people, because they put their hearts into what they believe. Nevertheless, it is better for them to keep open minds until they have more experience in the adult world and are better able to judge. Prejudices formed in youth can create hatred, and hatred creates war.