

The Breakfast Club

Utilizing Popular Film to Teach Adolescent Development

David L. Kaye, M.D.
Emily Ets-Hokin, Ph.D.

*Under increasing pressures to teach an explosion of information, residency training programs need to look for effective and efficient ways to convey information. Utilizing films lends itself well to teaching about development and psychotherapy and has the advantage of being enjoyable to faculty and residents. In this article, the authors examine the film *The Breakfast Club* as a vehicle for teaching about multiple aspects of adolescent development, analyzing specific scenes of the film and their corresponding developmental themes. (Academic Psychiatry 2000; 24:110–116)*

As they leave this stage, adolescent boys and girls are beginning to feel real, to have a sense of self and of being. This is health. From being comes doing, but there can be no do before be, and this is their message to us.— D. W. Winnicott, M.D. (1)

Although the length of psychiatry residency has remained the same, increasing demands on resident training programs have led to added difficulty in preserving what has been done well in the past. Two areas of related concern have been maintaining psychiatry's tradition in understanding development and the doctor-patient relationship. Given these time limitations, we have looked for ways to effectively and efficiently teach these areas. In this article, we describe an important part of our approach to teaching about adolescent development. This approach grew naturalistically over the years, but started with our personal enjoyment of the popular film *The Break-*

fast Club. As we discussed the film, we thought it would be an unusually rich vehicle for engagement and learning about adolescent development and psychotherapy. The film portrays the relationships and inner journeys of five suburban high school students serving a one-day detention at school. In the course of the film, each student moves from the posturing and external identity of prototypical mid-late adolescents (i.e., *The Criminal*, *The Athlete*, *The Brain*, *The Basket Case*, and *The Princess*) to a revealing recognition of their inner worlds and the similarities that exist between them. We have found that this film has not only promoted an active learning process for the residents but also has been enjoyable. Films have a long tradition as teaching vehicles in psychiatry (2), and this tradition continues to the present (3). Using storytelling through film has the advantage of providing emotionally meaningful experiences that make for lasting teaching-points. Discussion of films allows for an integration of material between cognitive/verbal and affective levels. Over the past few years, the list of films we have utilized has expanded to include *Lord of the Flies*, *Breaking Away*, *Boyz in the Hood*, *Ordinary People*, and the TV series *The Wonder Years*. In this article, we will focus on the use of *The Breakfast Club* to teach about adolescent development, recognizing that similar principles underlie the use of the other films as well.

Dr. Kaye is Associate Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Director of Training in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, SUNY at Buffalo School of Medicine. Dr. Ets-Hokin is Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, SUNY at Buffalo School of Medicine. Address reprint requests to Dr. Kaye, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Children's Hospital of Buffalo, 219 Bryant St., Buffalo, NY 14222. e-mail: dlkaye@acsu.buffalo.edu
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METHODS

When we first began, this seminar took place at 8 A.M. Because we brought bagels along for the residents and showed this film to begin the teaching sequence, the whole seminar on adolescent development came to be known by the residents as "The Breakfast Club." We assign students, before viewing the film, two of Erikson's papers (4,5) as background reading. In working with this film, we have used two different approaches. Our preferred approach is to show it in its entirety (1 hour, 32 minutes) initially, then follow up in subsequent teaching sessions with a closer look at specific scenes. Other times, we have watched the film from the beginning, pausing to discuss relevant teaching issues as they occur. The entire film is then reviewed bit by bit over a series of meetings. All together, we have devoted approximately 5 hours, typically in 1¼- to 1½-hour sessions, to the viewing and discussion of this film. For General or Child and Adolescent Psychiatry programs wishing to devote less time, the film can be viewed and productively discussed in 2 to 3 hours. As the discussion unfolds, relevant supplementary readings are distributed to provide more in-depth theoretical background for the material. These, in turn, would be discussed at future teaching sessions.

Film Synopsis

In order to more easily find specific sequences for teaching purposes, we will now review the film scene by scene. Set in 1984 suburban Chicago, the film, which is rated *R* for adult language, opens with a quote from the rock singer David Bowie about the adversarial nature of the relations between adolescents and adults. This is quickly followed by the narrator (Brian, the Brain) further setting the stage and basic premise of the movie. He informs the viewers that while the five adolescents serve out their detention in the library of their school, they have been instructed to write an essay on the topic "Who Do You Think You Are?" by their nemesis, a teacher named Mr. Vernon. Vernon then enters the library and establishes the outside authority that can only serve to galvanize the disparate students. Vernon then leaves for his guard-post position in the office across the hall. The next sections of the film portray the students'

initial defensive posturing while they feel each other out. The wise-guy Bender (the Criminal) forces much of the action and, in a pivotal scene, vandalizes the library door so that it must remain closed, effectively forging the group. Bender insistently pushes much of the interaction, pressing toward greater honesty with each other and a consequent deconstruction of their roles. Through fits and starts, they begin to trust each other. These scenes are punctuated by a brief appearance by the janitor, Carl, who, after being insulted by Bender, responds genuinely and holds his ground, which establishes him as the only legitimate authority figure in the film. After this scene, the protagonists all whistle together "Bridge Over the River Kwai." This leads to further exploration of their relationships with their families and their pressing sexuality. Then, in a telling scene, they have lunch, each capturing the essence of their relationships with their parents. Bender then explodes, telling his story of growing up with alcoholic, abusive parents. When Andrew (the Athlete) challenges his veracity, Bender starkly shows the group a cigarette burn on his forearm. When Vernon leaves his office, the group, again led by Bender, pushes the envelope. After some reticence, the group as a whole leaves the library to retrieve marijuana from Bender's locker. On their return to the library they discover that they are trapped and will be caught by Vernon. Sacrificing himself for the group, Bender "falls on his sword" by drawing the attention of Vernon so the others can safely return to the library. Once caught, Bender is put by Vernon into solitary confinement in a storage room. He finds an escape route through the ceiling but then falls (without hurting himself, of course) through the ceiling panels, back into the library. Vernon comes rushing in to find out what's going on, and the group closes rank beautifully, returning the favor of protecting Bender. After Vernon leaves, they have another bonding experience, smoking Bender's marijuana. More talk about sex, authority, and families ensues. The action then moves to a telling conversation between Vernon and Carl about their own midlife issues. Cutting back, the group talks (more) about sex and why they are in detention. In a particularly moving scene, Andrew tearfully describes his humiliation of another student as the reason for his detention. As they continue to deconstruct their roles, Brian plaintively asks, "Are we going to be like our parents?" and, more point-

edly, "What's going to happen on Monday? Are we still friends?" Wondering if they can also reconstruct themselves, they have intense discussions of these questions. As the movie comes to a close, Andrew and Allison (The Basket Case) pair up, as do Claire (The Princess) and Bender. In the final scene, they all say goodbye and return to their families. A song, "Don't You Forget About Me," plays in the background, and the narrator has the last word, reading his essay aloud.

DISCUSSION

Part I: Scene-by-Scene Exploration of Developmental Themes

Innumerable themes are raised by specific scenes as well as the movie as a whole. The movie can be stopped at a host of points for fruitful discussion. In this section we review selected scenes we have found particularly evocative, followed in Part II by themes raised by the movie as a whole.

1. *All the world's a stage.* Adolescence is a time when various roles are enacted and modified on the "stage" of life. It is also a stage/phase of development in which identity formation is the major task of the actor. The opening scene sets the tone and foreshadows the major themes of the movie. As noted above in the synopsis, the film opens with the quote from the David Bowie song, "Changes," printed on the screen, in which the songwriter berates the adults intervening in the adolescents' world and admonishes them that their children are well aware of the tasks before them.

This epigraph literally explodes and segues into a shot of the front of a typical suburban, 1970s-built high school. With this in view, the narrator speaks:

Dear Mr. Vernon,

We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was that we did wrong. What we did was wrong, but we think you're crazy to make us write an essay writing about who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us—in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions. You see us as a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at 7:00 this morning. We were brainwashed.

This scene clearly places the film as being in the eyes of an adolescent. Winnicott writes that adolescents need "to prod society repeatedly so that society's antagonism is made manifest and can be met with antagonism (p 47)." (6) Vernon creates a "punishment" for the adolescents—to write an essay about "who you think you are." Unwittingly he has promoted their consideration of their identities, the major psychological task of adolescence. The narrator conveys the sense of the mid-adolescents' narrowly defined roles of identity, and he foreshadows their journey toward the deconstruction and reconstruction that takes place in the film. He also raises the issue of the dialectic between the adolescents' self-image and the adults' image of them.

2. *Alone and in the group: the need to belong and to find something real.* After the protagonists arrive at the school and file into the library, they meet with Vernon. Shortly after this, Bender suggests that they close the door that Vernon has instructed them to keep open. When no one joins him, Bender takes matters into his own hands and vandalizes the door so that it can no longer stay open. When Vernon discovers the door closed, he angrily asks the group, "Who closed the door?" The group responds that they didn't know how, but that it had closed "by itself." Bender then presses the other group members to "get real" and drop their role masks.

In this scene the adolescents draw a boundary, creating their peer group. In doing so, they separate themselves from the adult world. This leads to a consideration of the necessity of separating from parents, and the critical role of the peer group in providing transitional support for adolescent individuation and identity formation. Winnicott states that "the adolescent boy or girl does not want to be understood (p 40)" (6). The endorsement of "the door closed by itself" underscores this peer-group consolidation as the natural order. Within this crucible, adolescents explore the new worlds of identity and sexuality. Bender presses for "major truths" about "who they think they are," while the bursting exploration of sexuality runs throughout the film. As Levy-Warren states: "The world of sexuality also dominates the middle-adolescent picture. Adolescents must permit themselves to become aware of those to whom they are attracted, what they wish to do with them, and how it feels to be involved physically and emotionally with the same

person" (7). It is a critical task of adolescence that this component of overall identity be integrated over time.

3. *The lunch scene: basic trust, nurturance, security, and other safe havens.* Next, we jump ahead to the lunch scene. This scene captures the essence of each adolescent's relationship to their parents. Brian has a nondescript, colorless square meal; Andrew has a shopping bag filled with more food than he can eat; Allison has a can of Coke that spills all over; Claire has sushi perfectly presented in a beautiful lacquered box with matching chopsticks; and Bender has nothing.

This scene shows us each of the adolescent's perceptions of their parents and where they are each positioned with regard to dependency, basic trust, and nurturance. As they reveal in the film, Brian feels disconnected from his parents by virtue of their humorless and deadly expectations of academic perfection; Andrew feels oppressed by his parents' relentless pressure to "win;" Allison is an enigma who does not feel her parents can relate to her, leaving her neglected and ignored; Claire is made to feel "special" by external trappings and materialism; and Bender gets nothing from his parents. Erikson's epigenetic concepts begin with Basic Trust and its Primary Virtue, "Hope," as the cornerstone of future development (4,5). The film beautifully portrays these adolescents' identity formation as being scaffolded on the development of hope, trust, and security. Winnicott adds that adolescents "need to defy in a setting in which dependence is met and can be relied on to be met (p 47)" (6).

4. *On the edge: risk-taking and self-esteem.* A short time later, the group, led by Bender, leaves the library en masse to retrieve marijuana from his locker. The group wonders if this is a good idea. Bender responds that "Being bad feels pretty good, huh?"

This scene captures the adolescent's healthy need for exploration and the need to feel enlivened. Adolescents need to define themselves as separate from parents and other adults and resonate with "shows of strength," which serve to reassure them about their own uncertainties and vulnerability. In turn, this garners self-esteem "points" from the peer group. Excessive risk-taking can be seen as a substitute for feeling alive. Avoiding risk-taking can be seen as a preempting of healthy strivings.

5. *Toddlers with wheels and hormones: the second major separation/individuation period.* In another notable scene, the group is discussing their relationships with their parents. In a conversation between Andrew and Allison, the latter states that her "home life is unsatisfying." Andrew responds by saying, "Everyone's home life is unsatisfying. Otherwise no one would leave home."

Whereas Anna Freud (8) and others have suggested that adolescence is primarily a time of resurgence and reworking of Oedipal issues, Blos (9) suggests that the primary focus is on issues of separation/individuation. Harkening back to toddlerhood as the original stage, this has been captured by the notion that adolescents are "toddlers with wheels and hormones" (10). Blos (9) states that "What is in infancy a 'hatching from the symbiotic membrane to become an individuated toddler' (Mahler), becomes in adolescence the shedding of family dependencies, the loosening of infantile object ties in order to become a member of society at-large or, simply, of the adult world." Winnicott has also written that "growing up is inherently an aggressive act" (11) and that "young adolescents are collections of isolates (p 42)" (6) that temporarily need to rebuff identifications with parents and the larger culture.

6. *The gap: the parallel crisis and dialectic of midlife and adolescence.* A bit later, Vernon and Carl have a heart-to-heart. Vernon complains about the "kids these days" and is confronted by Carl, who tells him: "It's not the kids who've changed, it's you." Carl goes on to challenge Vernon with the reality of his own shattered ideals, and when Vernon says he "shudders to think that when I get older these kids are gonna take care of me," Carl responds with "Don't count on it."

In this scene, Vernon faces his own midlife crisis; he is no longer youthful and is wizened by disappointment. Facing Erikson's questions of Generativity vs. Stagnation (4), Vernon struggles to find some peace. Externalizing the problem brings befuddlement and no relief as he ponders the fruit of his own generativity. With his own mortality visible in the rear-view mirror, he faces his own existential crisis as the adolescents face theirs. This parallel crisis is common in family life and is often compounded by the midlife parents also facing their own parents' demise and death. With all three generations facing major

turning-points, it is no surprise that this is such an emotionally laden time.

7. *How low can you go? The need for sponsorship.* In one of the most poignant scenes in the film, Andrew begins a soliloquy about how he received his detention. As he tells the story, he breaks into sobs, then angry tears as he recounts how he brutally humiliated a nerdy boy by physically overwhelming him and taping his buttocks together. When the tape was removed, the boy was in anguish as hairs and skin were removed in the process. Andrew describes how his friends "laughed and cheered me on." But, worst of all, he recognizes he did this to gain the approval of his father, whom he experienced as relentlessly challenging his masculinity and desire to "win, win, win!" He concedes, "I wanted him to think I was cool," then notes how he secretly wishes his knee would give out, both to remove himself from the race and to gain revenge.

This scene movingly portrays the adolescents' need for what Spencer Bloch has called "sponsorship" (12). Optimally, this comes forth from the parents, but it may also be provided by others, including psychotherapists. When this is not available to adolescents, their growth becomes twisted or aborted. Andrew, like so many adolescents, is willing to compromise his "forward movement in favor of gratifying the parents" (12). Andrew's sadism can be seen as carrying out the wishes of the parents.

8. *The future.* As the movie comes to its conclusion, the group discusses the future. Andrew asks "Are we going to be like our parents?" Allison answers affirmatively and adds enigmatically "when you grow up your heart dries out." Brian then asks what's going to happen after they leave this room. Will they still be friends? Will they even say hello in the hallways on Monday? Claire answers resignedly: "Honest? You want the truth? No." This prompts outrage from others in the group. "You are a bitch!!" Then two other members genuinely tell their stories of why they're in detention.

The deconstruction of their roles has begun, but will they turn back? Is it also possible to reconstruct their roles? Is true change possible? Of course, the movie ends with a resounding "Yes!" as they move beyond the confines of their role identities and connect on a deeper, more intimate level. This follows

Erikson's framework (4) of identity-formation resulting from the integration and consolidation of earlier stages, while foreshadowing the next stage (Intimacy vs. Isolation). Adolescents need hope based on something real, or in Winnicott's words: "Young people can be seen searching for a form of identification which does not let them down in their struggle, the struggle to feel real, the struggle to establish a personal identity, not to fit into an assigned role, but to go through whatever has to be gone through (p 46)" (6).

9. *Don't you forget about me: the continuity of self and object relations through time.* The film ends when all have left each other and returned to their families. A song, "Don't You Forget About Me," plays in the background. As the film fades out, the narrator, after repeating the beginning of his essay, finishes

but what we found out is that each of us is a brain, and an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Does that answer your question???

*Sincerely yours,
The Breakfast Club*

As they leave the haven they have created and the possibilities they have imagined, the protagonists need to hold on to their new-found discoveries. The plaintive cry of the others in the group to remember each other is mirrored by an intrapsychic need for continuity. Not only do they need to hold on to the future, but the past, as well. They need to feel some continuity to not only their own past but also to previous generations. There is a need to retain continuity with their family's as well as their culture's histories and traditions.

Part II: Themes Raised by the Film as a Whole

In addition to themes arising from specific scenes, there are also themes that arise from the movie as a whole. Some of the themes that can be prompted by discussion of the film follow.

1. *What's the matter with kids today? Cultural and historical considerations.* Although many psychiatric residents grew up in a similar context to the movie, most in the world, and many in our own country, would not resonate with this film. It is a reminder not

to take our situation for granted as if this is “the way” of “true” adolescence. Adolescence is an evolving historical concept that varies from culture to culture. Our current view of adolescence has changed dramatically over the past hundred years in this and other countries around the world. Our modern version of adolescence hinges on plentiful food, clothing, and shelter, as well as the mandatory extended period of dependency and education necessary for economic survival. The concept of adolescence as a moratorium is quite recent in the history of the world (13,14). The search for identity so prominent in this film, therefore, is not a “given truth,” but more an artifact of our times. Even in our own country, and more so in less affluent countries, the struggle for survival is paramount, and the search for identity is a far-away notion. While these issues bear reminding, at the same time the search for meaning is an existential question that has been raised for thousands of years across religions and cultures. Similarly, this film is an excellent vehicle to help acculturate those international graduates less familiar with American adolescents.

2. *When I was 17, it was a very good year: differences between early, middle, and late adolescence.* The distinction between early, middle, and late adolescence is a useful one. We find Dulit’s chapter especially helpful here (15). The characters are firmly oriented toward the development of identity, are sexually curious, and at least have an eye toward leaving home. Explicitly recognizing that the film depicts mid-late adolescents helps to contextualize the film. This allows for some discussion of the distinctions between these stages. For example, it is useful to recognize that this film is not about later adolescent issues of leaving home and consolidating identity, nor is it about the early-adolescent issues of coming to terms with their changing body, puberty, etc.

3. *I’ve looked at life from both sides now: cognitive changes in adolescents.* The film clearly portrays the hallmarks of adolescents’ cognitive development. They can categorize and talk about their inner experiences; that is, they show the metacognitive capacities of self-reflection and abstraction (16). They recognize the future moving towards them with a growing appreciation of its implications. Sophisticated emotional perspective-taking is also in evi-

dence, along with the ability to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence.

4. *I fought the law and the law won: adolescents’ relationship to authority.* The movie, presented from the point of view of the adolescent, paints the main authority figures (Vernon and the parents) as hopelessly out-of-touch, unidimensional, arbitrary, and adversarial. Is this typical of adolescents, or does it reflect the protagonists’ experiences in dysfunctional families? What is the “normal” adolescent’s relationship to authority? These questions lead to a discussion of “ Sturm und Drang” theories (8,17), Offer’s work on normal adolescents (18,19), and Winnicott’s view of “the adolescent doldrums,” a “phase in which they feel futile, and in which they have not yet ‘found themselves, (p 46)” (6). He continues, “They do not know what they are going to become. They do not know where they are, and they are waiting. Because everything is in abeyance, they feel unreal, and this leads them to do certain things that feel real to them and that are only too real in the sense that society is affected. . . . We do in fact get caught up with this curious thing about adolescents, the mixture of defiance and dependence (p 46)” (6).

5. *Who do you love (or at least identify with)?* Asking the residents which character they most identify with and which group(s) they belonged to in high school often stimulates memories of their own adolescence, typically leading to spirited discussion! In addition to promoting the cohesiveness of the resident group, it further solidifies their empathic base for understanding and differentiating themselves from adolescent patients. This is also helpful in clarifying aspects of their own development that may be at odds with community standards or optimal development.

SUMMARY

In this article, we have described an approach to teaching adolescent development through the use of popular film. We focus on *The Breakfast Club*, an extraordinarily rich and contemporary film, and highlight some of the many developmental issues portrayed. Although identity-formation and the role of the peer group are central, myriad other discussions can be generated from this film. Residents and faculty have

enjoyed this approach to teaching and learning. In a future article, we will discuss the use of other films,

such as *Boyz in the Hood* and *The Wonder Years*, to teach about other aspects of adolescent development.

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