

The tooth of the matter

by Sabine Eiche

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“I cut my teeth on Sabine,” a former professor of mine once announced to a group of my friends. His toothy metaphor startled some of them, but all he meant was that I’d been one of his very first students. To cut one’s teeth signifies to gain experience in a new situation.

The idea of linking dentition – the process of teething – and psychological development has a long history. The ancient Romans used it, along with numerology, as a benchmark for the stages of life, starting from day one. In fact, they considered fetuses and children who either were born dead or died before cutting their first teeth to belong to a distinct category and hence gave them a different funeral rite – burial instead of cremation.

In general the Romans divided childhood into two phases. The first lasted until age seven, when a child loses its milk teeth, the second until 14, by when a child has cut its permanent teeth and thus approached the next stage, considered by some to be adulthood. However, adulthood was often postponed to the age when a person grows the third molars, usually between 17 and 25. The Latin term for these molars, “*dentes sapientiae*,” teeth of wisdom, indicates that the Romans linked adulthood with good sense and prudence.

Naturally, there were different views about how to divide and define the various stages of life. The ancient Roman Varro believed there were five stages, from the beginning to age 15, from 15 – 30, 30 – 45, 45 – 60, 60 until death. His near contemporary Cicero named four divisions, associating them with different characteristics – childhood with “*infirmitas*” (weakness), youth with “*ferocitas*”

(impetuosity), adulthood with “gravitas” (seriousness) and old age with “maturitas” (ripeness).

The association Cicero made of young age with weakness is evident in some English words. Infant and infantile, for example, are based on the Latin “infans,” which signifies not speaking (from “in,” not, and “fans,” the present participle of “fari,” to speak). Along the same lines, our word puny stems from the French “puis nè,” born afterwards, that is to say younger – we use puny as a synonym for weak, feeble.

To reach the next stage of its development, the weakling – the child – must be nourished. The Latin for nourish is “alere,” which is related to “alescere,” to grow. “Adolescere” (composed of “ad,” to, and “alescere”), meaning to grow up, is the source of the English word adolescent. Adult derives from “adultus,” grown up, the past participle of “adolescere.”

According to some, there was a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood called youth. Varro placed it between the ages 30 – 45. Youth and young man in Latin – “juventus” and “juvencus” – gave us such words as juvenile and junior.

By the time he passed 45, an ancient Roman was a “senior.” When he turned 60, he became an old man, “senex,” the root of our word senile. Suffering the weaknesses of old age – senility – and often toothless, the old person has much in common with the weak and toothless creature he was at the beginning of life’s journey. What better reason to treat the senile with all the love and gentle care we lavish on infants?