

"Myth of the Teenager"

Article by Dr. Michael Platt

"We have two teenagers," I sometimes hear parents say. "Oh, I'm so sorry," I sometimes reply. Although I say it with a smile, the truth is sad. While the growing-up process is inevitable, natural, and God-given, the process of children turning into Teenagers is not. The Teenager was invented, fashioned, permitted -- let loose you might say -- by the generation of our parents and grandparents. Discovering that may help us to raise our children differently.

The Teenager is a Modern Invention

There were no "teenagers" before World War II. Ask those still living who raised their children before then. Or spend a rainy Saturday in the basement of your library, comparing old Life magazines from before the War and after.¹

Instead of Teenagers, there were Youths. Youths were young people who wanted to become adults. However confused, wayward, or silly they acted, however many mistakes they made, they looked to the future. They knew that adult life was different than a child's life. They planned to grow up, leave childhood behind, and become adults. They were aware that life is more than youth.

The Teenager has no such horizon. Beyond the "Teeny" world there is no adult life, no past with heroes, no future with goals.

Naming the Teenager

A new word was needed to describe these never-grown-up Peter Pans. Previously human beings between childhood and adulthood were called kids, boys and girls, young people, adolescents, and youths. These young human beings were addressed as "Young man" and "Young woman." Looking at them, their parents thought, "My growing son," and "My growing daughter," and they addressed them as "Daughter" and "Son." Sometimes others addressed them as "Master" and "Miss." Even the words "gentleman" and "lady" were sometimes heard. To name a kind or aspect of youth, lass and lad, stripling and maiden, whipper snapper and squirt, sport and shaver, minor and juvenile were employed, and the latter, juvenile, did not yet invariably go with delinquent. Words such as upstart, brat, tough, rogue, and slut described deviations from the general good of "youth," not its characteristic features. The word "teenager" did not exist. Compare the entries in Webster's Second (1934) and Third (1961) editions; only after the war does the adjective "teen-age" become the noun, "teenager."²

When parents today say "We have two teenagers," the reason why I can reply "I'm so sorry" is that they say this with a sigh. Indeed, there is a world of difference between having youths in your home and teenagers. Consider Tolstoy's *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth*. Author Tolstoy is honest to a fault; youth Tolstoy was a bag of vices, poses, and miseries. However, youth Tolstoy was never a Teenager, for in the midst of his confusion, he was always striving to become a man. The world of grown-ups was there around and above him, not shut out.

Youths associated with other youths, sometimes dressed alike, talked alike, but never separated entirely from their teachers and parents. When you saw youths with their parents, they were not pretending to be unrelated to the family. After all, they wanted one day to become like their parents, or like their grandparents, or like their teachers.

Youths chose presidents, inventors, scientists, explorers, warriors, saints, teachers, and parents for their heroes. In American history they looked to the likes of Washington and Jefferson, Boone and Crockett, Lincoln, Lee, and Grant, Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, and Clara Barton. In literature they looked to the likes of the Virginian, Robinson Crusoe, Hamlet, Odysseus, and Leather-stocking. The

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cowboy and the saint filled their imagination. Above these they looked to Abraham, Moses, Paul and Christ.

The Teenager has no such heroes; he may be miserable, he may not like himself, but his heroes are no more happy or worthy than himself. The highest desire of a Teenager is to become a more perfect Teenager, a Rock or movie star, certainly not a man or a woman.

What a Youth Wants and a Teenager Does Not

A youth wants to be trusted, given responsibility, and the opportunity to deserve esteem. Youths make more mistakes than adults. Usually their mistakes lead to lighter consequences, but they suffer more from them than adults; they like their mistakes less; they feel more shame. Shame is the other side of the respect they have for the virtues they see in adults.

Being immature, youths will always be tempted by pleasures, by flattery, and by illusions, but with an adult world around them, they will be able to make comparisons and judgments. Candy is candy, candy is sweet, candy can be given to you, but nothing in the world can substitute for knowing how to ride your bike. No one can give that to you. No one can do that for you.

Youths tend, then, to know the difference between the things that are really your own -- the virtues -- and the things that come from others, such as wealth, or come easy, such as the pleasures. Good youths like good tests. They want to enjoy adult pleasures after they have earned them by performing adult duties. Thus during World War II many of them served their country, as young husbands on the front and as young wives at home, before they could enjoy the mature "blessings of liberty." Like many others, Audie Murphy was a hero before he could vote.

What a Teenager most fears is a child of his own. His second greatest fear is death. And his third greatest fear is solitude. The thoughts "I can beget a child," or "I can bear a child," "I will die," and "I am alone," have often been the beginning of wisdom. The Teenager flees them. The Teenager cannot stand to be alone. For such a human being the natural mode of association is the gang. And how does one picture a gang of Teenagers, if not in a car speeding down the road, listening to rock music, and on drugs? Or at the rock concert in a gang of gangs? Or at the orgy?

These pleasures are powerful, absorbing, and "quickie." The Teenager craves a melody that will rock him around the clock forever, seeks an experience so intense that he will forget what time it is, and so absorbing that it will blot out all eternity.

Never does one see a smile on the faces of those enjoying these pleasures. The Teenager is the most free and the least happy of beings. Thoreau said most people lead lives of "quiet desperation." The desperation of the Teenager is not quiet. With the Rolling Stones, they shout, "I can't get no satisfaction." A being less acquainted with joy there has never been. A being more dangerous, it is hard to imagine. "Paint it black."

So far as I know, there have never been such youths on earth before. The Teenager is a novelty not only in the history of twentieth century America, but in the history of the human race.

Teenagers are Youths Orphaned by their own Parents

The day the Teenager was created was a sad day for every youth in America. Imagine yourself young again, unsure of yourself, swayed by strong passions, by turns ashamed and proud, sometimes shy,

"Myth of the Teenager"

Article by Dr. Michael Platt

sometimes assertive, always awkward, filled with new desires and hard on yourself for having them, drawn toward cliques, tempted by clique cruelty, by affectation, by enslaving pleasures, and by premature bonds, but fighting on, knowing that you want to become something better, someone capable of good work, deserving your own respect, and maybe one day becoming a good parent -- imagine such struggling youths hearing their own parents say, "Relax, take it easy, enjoy yourself, adulthood will happen, don't sweat, this is the time of your life."

We see this parental neglect in the films of James Dean, especially in *Rebel Without A Cause*, where "Jimmy" must face his trials alone, hindered by a contumacious mother and a helpless father. An even less justified self-pity was inculcated by the effete Salinger in *Catcher in the Rye*, when he taught young readers to "trust no one over 14." In *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac taught that pleasure never disappoints. Waiting in the wings were other dubious adults: the porn merchants Henry Miller and Hugh Hefner. A new music, Rock, through whose dances the couple was annihilated, contributed mightily to the destruction of courtship. The pill divorced eros from responsibility. Owning a car provided a hideout from home. Dope became a way of life. And TV brought soft versions of all this corruption right into the home. Behind these intermediary causes was the deepest one -- the altered relation of man to eternity. The substitution of daily newspapers for daily prayers is the briefest indication of it. All these things went into the "creation" of the Teenager, but no one was more responsible than the parents.

These parents said, "The kids have to work things out on their own," felt guilty, and gave them discretionary money. The junk, record, porn, and dope merchants said, "Let us at 'em." And the statesmen watched; Ike grinned and Jack joined in. In other words, the most vulnerable were exposed to the most predatory by those most naturally interested in their welfare, their own parents. Absolutely astonishing!

What Plato thought no parents would ever do, turn over their own children to others to be reeducated, the parents of America did after World War II. Before then there were no TVs, a few disk jockeys, and some movie stars, but they were seldom allowed in the home, and certainly not allowed to educate the children. Suddenly after the War, into the American home came hordes of them. Few parents would have invited these persons in as guests and yet they turned over the souls of their own children to them to be educated.

In raising Teenagers these parents were committing a crime against their own children. No one complained. In raising Teenagers these parents also committed a crime against society, but although society noticed the crimes of the children, as "juvenile delinquency," it did not point to who was responsible, the parents. It is true that nearly every piece of social or court legislation since then has weakened the family, but alas equally true that the voters, that is the parents of the nation, have either supported the legislation or acquiesced to the legislators.

I'm a Teenager, You're a Teenager

We are now into the third generation of Teenagers. This means most people have had considerable experience of things that made the Teenager. In truth, many parents today are not much different from Teenagers. To disapprove of the Teenager, then, they would have to disapprove of much in their past and much that still exists in their lives. The truth is that modern parents are often mixed beings; our experiences have not always been good, our deeds virtuous, our hearts true, our minds clear. Parents who want to do better than this by their children have to face up to and repudiate their own past and present Teenage sins. I doubt that anyone is really o.k. who is still justifying their past and present Teenage

"Myth of the Teenager"

Article by Dr. Michael Platt

behavior. Such people cannot think clearly, live well, or help others. When they form a group large enough to determine the social policies and mores of a nation, that entire nation takes on the characteristics of a Teenager. The Prodigal Daughter is a portrait of America at the present time, free but not brave enough to be virtuous, discontented but not enough to free herself from bondage.

All the Excuses

The most potent impediment to modern parents acknowledging their negligence is the doctrine of choice. "Yes, we see rock music is bad; we don't like it ourselves. Yes, we see TV is shallow. Yes, we see that loose money is not good for our children. They have so much more than we had. Yes, they are not better off for it. But what can you do? The kids have to have some responsibility. You have to give them some choice." Thus runs the pro-choice excuse for negligence.

Its plausibility derives from two sources. In our political life, it is often good to tolerate deeds we would not commit and listen to opinions we do not hold. Of course, there are limits to this tolerance. Still, in a republic many points of view deserve toleration and consent is one principle of good government.

However, what is right for a federal republic is not right for a family. A family run on "democratic lines" with all members, children as well as adults, considered equal would be unnatural, for it would deny the difference between adults and children. Such a family cannot educate its younger members. "One child, one vote," is a formula for the end of the family. Parents who encourage their children to call them by their first names should not be surprised when they do not respect, seldom will obey, and do not often learn from them. To forgo the high titles Mother and Father is not benevolent; it is negligent; and it does not win friends; it loses children. Not to be able to call someone "Mother" and "Father" is to be an orphan.

The second plausible excuse for negligence is that it is good for young persons to take responsibility for their deeds. An example often supplied is how desirable it is to have an allowance, to own your own bike, to save up for it, and be responsible for its upkeep. Well and good, provided the chores contributed to family life are greater than the allowance. When older children keep all the money they make at a summer or after-school job, something has gone wrong. What could be more irresponsible than to get your room, board, laundry, and education fees from your working parents, and have all your paycheck for discretionary purchases?

We know how welfare recipients often lose their spirit, unlearn responsibility, and fall into dependency. As a class Teenagers are less deserving of welfare and are just as debilitated by it. The parents who set up a "pro-choice" version of welfare are as unlikely to exhort their children, discuss responsibility with them, give them maxims, or give them examples of responsibility, fiscal or otherwise as the current Federal Government is. And even if the parents do exhort their children, by setting them up with discretionary money they are showing them the way to avoid such discussions.

Few such parents will exhort their children anyway. The advantage of welfare for them is that you don't have to exhort your children. You don't risk a stormy argument. You can just forget the children and get on with your own life. To justify this negligence parents who "welfare" their children say, "We are tired." Recognize a "right to be tired" and you can justify anything.

"Myth of the Teenager"

Article by Dr. Michael Platt

Growing Up

Fortunately, third generation Teenagers are not the only parents in America now. Having experienced the emptiness of the material advantages their negligent parents gave them, many parents have resolved to give their children something truly good, an education in the virtues.

Nothing should make us more happy about our children today and more confident about our future public life than the number of parents who have chosen to educate their own children at home. In order to teach you must know and in order to know you must learn. Thus both generations grow up at once. Parents leave their own Teenage behind and become true adults. Children never have to become Teenagers at all.

The benefits last unto the third generation and beyond. A generation of parents whose good children could declare, "You set us on the good path you first trod" would constitute a mighty nation, might reconstitute this once almost chosen one, and would surely please God.

1 Cf. the issues for 6/6/38, 6/14/43, 6/11/45, 12/20/48, and 4/2/56.

2 In the nineteenth century, the words "boy" and "girl" extended up to adulthood; for example, college students were called college boys. And they were called this despite the fact that more was expected of them, in the way of diligent study, moral conduct, and good manners than is now. Even in the late 1930s, F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing to his daughter at Vassar and expecting a lot, speaks of once being a Princeton boy. In the sixteenth century Ascham speaks the same way, and also calls those from seven to seventeen "young gentlemen." "This day I go out of my teens" wrote Queen Victoria in her diary upon her twentieth birthday, not "This day I am no longer a teenager." (Oxford Book of Ages, ed. A. & S. Sampson, s. v.) The word "teenager," as we now use it, was first noted in the third edition of Webster's (1961); it was not in the second (1934); there it is noted only as an adjective "teenage."