

What Is a Teenager?

In our American culture a teenager in many families is a person that causes grief, confusion, disharmony and a feeling of impotence and personal failure. This adolescent has the unique ability to turn a parent into an irrational, judgmental, critical, over-bearing being. In such a family a teenager strips parents of their sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, and goodwill. A teenager even has the ability to make a parent's life feel worthless, full of despair, and anxiety. As a result, parents often lose the positive feeling and support of their spouse as each first looks to the other for insight, then when that fails, sees their spouse as the root cause of the teenager's unacceptable behavior. Blame leads to polarization, and a weakening of the family bond, and divorce can often follow.

Mother, "You're the man. He's your son. Do something."

Or

Father, "You're the woman. She's your daughter. Do something."

The greatest complaint of parents is that their teenager refuses to be responsible, to participate in family activities, puts off helping out, seeks just to be self-pleasing, and refuses to grow up. If one views this culturally that complaint might be almost universal, meaning that most parents are all saying the same thing about their teenager. So, it could be safe to say that the teenager's values, attitudes and behavior may be a cultural phenomenon. Most parents would swear that they brought their children up to be better than that. Certainly they didn't role model this irresponsible behavior. To me then perhaps the parents are innocent to some degree and actually, being a teenager is a social creation.

Historically, healthy cultures supported their children's acquisition of adult skills culminating with the rite of passage into adulthood when puberty was reached, with marriage following quickly. With marriage and adult skills the young person was able to feel connected in a good way to their spouse, their family, and to their community. Our culture does not support this historical model of maturation. In fact, it prevents it and imposes a break in the natural development of its children. It has created a break in the flow, a delay that is imposed upon children, preventing them from maturing at a normal and healthy rate, which relates directly to puberty and the assumption of the adult role.

In my experience, basically, even in a technological society, there are no adult skills that a healthy person coming out of puberty can't acquire. The truth is, in our culture children are not allowed to develop adult skills at a healthy and normal rate. Generally, there is nothing in graduate school that could not be taught starting in High School if the lower grades were redesigned to support that purpose. Actually, isn't graduate school just an incredibly expensive and "glorified" vocational training program, which has been delayed in its delivery to stretch out the years that people have to stay in school.

To me, teenagers are really just people who are being prevented from growing up. There are numerous cultural reasons why teenagers are prevented from assuming adult responsibilities. Let's review some.

1. There aren't enough jobs for adults, so why would society flood the market with a larger labor pool by allowing teenagers to develop the skills to compete?
2. Society does not want teenagers to learn adult skills because it would demystify adulthood.

3. Society wants teenagers and parents to be in conflict so that their attention can be diverted from poor decision-making on the part of governmental and corporate authority.

Simply put, teenagerhood is a holding pen, a stock warehouse for people whom the society does not yet need, and for whom there is no current contributory role. Teenagers are cruelly stuck by society in a netherworld, where they have no cultural function. Naturally, teenagers resent this emasculation and develop anger from the frustration of being trapped in an artificial societal limbo. It gets worse when they expressive their anger. This results in the culturally appropriate response, Punishment. The parent's sneer, "You're no adult, you can't even clean up your room. When you act like an adult, we'll treat you like an adult." This sounds so reasonable except it is the parents who have prevented their children from getting the adult skills and it is the educational system, which has prevented the teenagers from acquiring the vocational skills

Sadly, for the parent/teenage relationships, the adults are also stuck into "appropriate" juvenile viewpoints of teenagers, trapped by the rhetoric of our society. The parents/adults actually believe the society's infantilizing rhetoric. The adults see the teenager's reaction to their mistreatment as proof of their immaturity, redefining it as opposition and defiance; thus warranting the "consequences" of what is basically punishment. Somehow, in providing "consequences" the adults and parents feel mature, wise and reasonable. Yet, in reality they are fostering the illusion of teenage defiance when actually it is a healthy expression and assertion of the fact that there is something very wrong.

The immobilization of teenagers also causes other breakdowns. The most critical of these is in preventing teenagers from connecting intimately with peers of their choice. There are numerous studies that demonstrate that people in order to be healthy need human contact. Until a child goes through puberty there can be a great deal of physical non-sexual contact between parents and children. Upon going through puberty, this contact is abruptly cut off. Consenting adults can have physical intimate contact, but it is only the teenager that is not allowed the physical contact with other humans that actually is essential to a healthy mindset. What of the need of the teenager to be touched, held and to hold? Culture prevents it and punishes the teenagers when they seek it. It is outrageous that society takes the teenager's natural effort to reach out to others for physical and emotional contact as a sign of poor morals, a lack of discipline, and bad judgment.

Basically, culture creates a serious dysfunction within itself by fostering an infantilizing of the teenage years and then shifting the blame for this dysfunction onto the teenager and placing the parents and authoritative adults into the role of policing the reactive youth. Generally it is not only an injustice to all concerned, the culture's dysfunction and misdirection of energy causes debilitating friction and the dissolution of good will.

The conflict between adults and teenagers is a classic situation, yet the teenager's point of view has not been adequately expressed. Relationships are a combination of people's values and attitudes and it is important that each party hears the other's point of view and respects it. So far only the adults have been heard. I hope that the above will be viewed with good will as an expression of the teenager's experience and hopefully it will provide a foundation for further exploration.