

"One of the most revolutionary books I have ever read."

from the Foreword by Albert Ellis

# The Case Against

# Adolescence

Rediscovering  
the Adult in Every Teen

Robert Epstein, Ph.D.

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*A revolutionary proposal for raising  
responsible and happy teenagers.*

This groundbreaking book argues that adolescence is an unnecessary period of life that people are better off without. Robert Epstein, former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*, shows that teen turmoil is caused by outmoded systems put in place a century ago which destroyed the continuum between childhood and adulthood.

Where this continuum still exists in other countries, there is no adolescence. Isolated from adults, American teens learn everything they know from their media-dominated peers—"the last people on earth they should be learning from," says Epstein.

Epstein explains that our teens are highly capable—in some ways more capable than adults—and argues strongly against "infantilizing" young people. We must rediscover "the adult in every teen," he says, by giving young people adult authority and responsibility as soon as they can demonstrate readiness.

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Praise for  
*The Case Against Adolescence:  
Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen*

“*The Case Against Adolescence* is one of the most revolutionary books I have ever read.”

—Albert Ellis, Ph.D., The Albert Ellis Institute (from the Foreword)

“Perhaps it is time for a paradigm shift in how we understand the tumultuous time we call adolescence. Dr. Epstein’s landmark book may be just what we need to help enhance our understanding of and better serve those moving through this complex period of life.”

—Drew Pinsky, M.D., Co-Host, “Loveline”; Medical Director,  
Department of Chemical Dependency Services,  
Las Encinas Hospital, Pasadena, California

“Epstein’s book presents a serious and bold challenge to widely held views about teenagers: that they are inherently irresponsible, that they must be shielded from adult challenges, that they are not capable of making sound decisions about matters of health. Epstein demonstrates in a rigorous and persuasive way that teens are in fact highly capable—in some respects even more capable than adults. By shielding and protecting young people from adulthood, we have isolated them from their elders, from their spiritual roots, and from their heritage, leaving many of them angry and confused in the spiritually empty world of teen culture. We need to reexamine our basic assumptions about young people, and Epstein shows us how.”

—Deepak Chopra, *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof*

“This is a profoundly important book. Dr. Epstein is raising issues about our young people that we need to think about and evaluate carefully. Generally, I think the institutions that serve our young are sound, but this book points to some obvious problems—most especially the fact that our young people are largely isolated from the adult world. If you care about America’s young, this is a must read.”

—Dr. Joyce Brothers, author & columnist

"I believe what Dr. Epstein is saying one hundred percent. Young people have the ability to do great things; they just never have the opportunity to do them. They're also rarely placed in situations where they have to do them. We treat teens as if they're just kids, assuming they can't do very much, but when they're put into tough situations, they tend to perform just as well or even better than adults. As a teen I successfully impersonated an airline pilot, a medical doctor, a lawyer, and a college instructor. Imagine what I could have done if I had actually been encouraged to develop my adult capabilities. And imagine what today's teens might be able to do if they weren't so completely cut off from the adult world."

—**Frank W. Abagnale**, *Catch Me If You Can*; president, Abagnale & Associates;  
author

"Retired and in poor health, it is extremely rare for me to endorse any book these days. However, I feel powerfully called to write in support of Dr. Robert Epstein's book *The Case Against Adolescence*. I heartily believe in the validity of what he is saying. Furthermore, I believe what he is saying to have vast consequence for our society. All of America should take note of it."

—**M. Scott Peck, M.D.**, *The Road Less Traveled*

"The American education system, as we know it, was designed during a period of rapid industrialization. The mission of schools was to inculcate 'industrial discipline' as a means preparing our young people, in factory-like fashion, to work in the new industrial world. That antiquated system no longer prepares our young for the real world they will be facing in the years to come, and, as Dr. Epstein shows, it also isolates young people from adults in ways that have unfortunate consequences. If you care about the future of our young people, *The Case Against Adolescence* is an essential read."

—**Alvin Toffler**, *Future Shock and Revolutionary Wealth*

"Here are America's youth, regarded keenly, knowingly—with many popular assumptions and notions set aside in favor of an accurate and thoughtful portrayal of our young fellow citizens, and too, many of the rest of us, who may fail them by overlooking their achievements and possibilities."

—**Robert Coles, M.D.**, professor of psychiatry, Harvard University;  
recipient, Pulitzer Prize

“Robert Epstein’s critique of our conventional view of adolescence is timely. Of all its wide implications, perhaps the most significant is the one for education. Treating young people as adults and giving them the opportunity to embrace responsibility are strategies that the empirical research and analysis of Epstein’s work justify. This is a vital book for parents and policy makers on the state and federal levels. It is a long overdue contribution.”

—**Leon Botstein**, *Jefferson’s Children: Education and the Promise of American Culture*;  
president, Bard College; author,

“Teenagers are not children. Dr. Epstein convincingly demonstrates the harm caused by treating them that way. With an intellectual honesty not often seen, this book cuts through the mountain of prejudice and negative stereotypes and shows teens as they once were, and some day will be again. This is an important book, and one that strikes the next nail in the coffin of the bigoted “storm and stress” view of adolescence. This book should be required reading for all youth workers, all parents trying to better understand their kids, all politicians setting youth policy, and most especially for teens who instinctively recognize the injustice and harm of our system. This book is a powerful tool for articulating that injustice.”

—**Alex Koroknay-Palicz**,  
president & executive director, National Youth Rights Association

“Dr. Epstein has written a very provocative essay about adolescence. His arguments deserve serious consideration and open debate.”

—**Ellen Langer, Ph.D.**, *Mindfulness*; Professor of Psychology,  
Harvard University

“While human evolution has for hundreds of millennia trusted teens to be fully competent adults and parents, our present culture has somehow found it convenient to view them as children. Robert Epstein makes a powerful case for correcting this costly error.”

—**Jean Liedloff**, *The Continuum Concept*

“Parents puzzled about the reasons for changes in child-rearing since they were children may find some answers in Robert Epstein’s argument about what he calls ‘the artificial extension of childhood.’”

—**George F. Will**, columnist

“Epstein’s book on adolescence is a fresh and timely look at what makes teens miserable, and how their condition can be helped. It is a very original approach, sure to ignite discussion and controversy. A great deal of what he says is right on the money, and few people have written on this subject with his combination of expert knowledge and clear prose.”

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*; Professor of Management,  
Clairemont Graduate Center

“*The Case Against Adolescence* constructs a powerful argument against trivializing a significant fraction of the population in the interests of an illusion. Whether you’re a parent, a teacher, a policy maker, or a recovering victim of enforced childishness, you need to read this book.”

—John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down* and *The Underground*  
*History of American Education*; former New York City and New York State  
Teacher of the Year

“Dr. Epstein offers a compelling mixture of historical evidence and modern insight into the present problem of infantilization of youth. If we trust our youth with the inevitable responsibilities of modern life sooner rather than later, we can reinvigorate our society. Dr. Epstein’s ideas provide an academic framework for a number of issues—like allowing teens to vote in municipal elections at age 16—that are close to my heart and crucial for the future of American society. In this iconoclastic work, Dr. Epstein shows not only how much we lose by belittling teens, but also how much we stand to gain by empowering them.”

—Gale A. Brewer, Member, New York City Council

“We are all individual and desire to be treated as such. Dr. Epstein makes a good case for adolescents to be treated not as a group with a formula, but as individual unique people.”

—Suzanne Somers, actress and author

“Because of my family’s troubled history and because I’m the mother of two teens, I have a deep interest in the mental health of young people. This book has opened my eyes, and it will open yours too. We’ve completely isolated teens from the people they’re about to become, and we’ve trapped them in a meaningless world controlled by peers and media. We’ve forgotten how capable young people are, and they know it and are frustrated. We need to completely reexamine how we treat America’s teens.”

—Mariel Hemingway, actress

“This is an amazing book, long overdue. I’ve been saying for decades that the way to bring out the best in young people is to give them meaningful responsibility and authority, and the Guardian Angels have shown in countries around the world how powerful this model is. The surest way to make teens miserable is to treat them like kids, and the best way to make them strong is to let them grow up. Dr. Epstein lays out these issues like no one ever has before.”

—Curtis Sliwa, Founder & President, Guardian Angels; co-host,  
‘Curtis and Kuby in the Morning,’ WABC Radio, New York

“Dr. Epstein’s ideas about teens are revolutionary. Many of our teens today have serious problems, and if Dr. Epstein is right, those problems are largely of our own making. This book will bring our ideas about teens down to earth.”

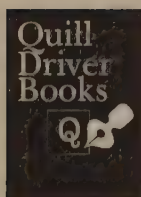
—Buzz Aldrin, Ph.D. (Col., USAF, ret.), Apollo 11 Astronaut



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**Adolescence**

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Adult in Every Teen

*Robert Epstein, Ph.D.*



Sanger, California

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To Jordan and Jenelle,  
may you grow up in a world that judges  
you based on your abilities,  
not on your age.

We are suffering heavy casualties during the years of growth and development, and these casualties not only are tragic for the individuals but also bear heavy costs for American society.

—David A. Hamburg, *Today's Children*, 1992

The psychological events of adolescence in our society are not a necessary counterpart of the physical changes of puberty, but a cultural invention—not a deliberate one, of course, but a product of an increased delay in the assumption of adult responsibilities.

—L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church, *Childhood and Adolescence*, 1957

Constitutional rights do not mature and come into being magically only when one attains the state-defined age of majority. Minors, as well as adults, are protected by the Constitution and possess constitutional rights.

—United States Supreme Court, *Planned Parenthood of Missouri v. Danforth*, 1976

Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilisation? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?

—Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 1928

The task of youth is not only its own salvation but the salvation of those against whom it rebels.

—Jane Addams, *The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House*, 1930

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# Foreword

*The Case Against Adolescence* is one of the most revolutionary books I have ever read. It presents many challenging and little-known facts about young people, some of them quite breathtaking. It suggests that our contemporary disregard for the civil rights of young people is abysmal and that their parents, teachers, and society are doing much harm and little good by over-restricting them. Epstein shows that although conditions have improved in some ways for adolescents over the past century, in many ways teens are far worse off than ever before. Incredibly, we still often discriminate against teenagers when it comes to education, sex, censorship, and many other areas.

Epstein's final chapters contain his program for social change—quite the chapters! He proposes that young people be “extended full adult rights and responsibilities in each of a number of different areas as soon as they can demonstrate appropriate competence in each area.” Good! To give adolescents more responsibilities when they are set to handle them is an excellent pragmatic goal.

The form of psychotherapy I originated in 1955—Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy—tries to teach people to retain their goals and preferences but stubbornly refuse to make them *dire necessities*. People thereby take responsibility for their own disturbances and gain the power to prevent and change them. Does this include adolescents? By all means. They, too, can largely control their emotional destiny if they think, feel, and act as if they can. This won't make them all miracle workers, but it can help tremendously to keep them less disturbed.

Chapter Thirteen of Epstein's book describes twenty-nine rights that he believes society had better give to adolescents. Some of them, such as the right to marry without parental or court consent, may seem extreme and impractical (as Epstein admits), but I would still tend to endorse them, at least experimentally. If we give adolescents all the rights that Epstein asks us to grant them, many may fail. *Maybe*. Let us experiment and discover!

Albert Ellis, Ph.D.  
Albert Ellis Institute  
New York City



# Acknowledgments

I collaborated with Dr. Diane Dumas in developing the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood*. Diane also painstakingly collected and analyzed competency, infantilization, and psychopathology data from subjects in several states as part of her dissertation work. Bill Milburn, another graduate student, did some of the initial investigative work on Boys Town. Dr. Ann Sasaki of the San Diego Sheriff's Department provided assistance in the collection of inmate data. Dr. Michel Antoine, a professor at the Université de Marne-la-Vallée in France, assisted in the translation of French materials. Rabbi Sheldon Moss of Tucson, Arizona, checked my use of Hebrew. Translator Yasushi Ito of Osaka, Japan, helped with Japanese terminology. Dr. Hugh Cunningham, a history professor at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom, provided detailed comments on Chapter Two. Dr. Mike Males of the University of California Santa Cruz gave me many useful insights through extensive correspondence. And Dr. Eric H. Monkkonen of UCLA's history department shared some of his unpublished data on the history of adolescent crime. Dr. Helen Bond of Edinburgh University and Dr. David Elkins of Pepperdine University provided helpful comments on Chapter Twelve. And Dr. John Wixted of the University of California San Diego reviewed technical material in Chapter Seven. Dr. Herbert Kelman and Dr. David Hamburg were kind enough to help me track down references to their writings. James Kirchner of Detroit, Michigan, provided information about teens in Czechoslovakia. I offer special thanks to Dr. James Garbarino of Cornell University, Dr. Jerome Kagan of Harvard University, and Dr. Mark Phillips of San Francisco State University for critiquing my case. Needless to say, I take full responsibility for any inaccuracies in the book, many of which are still present, I suspect, in spite of the sensible feedback I've received. I'm also grateful to my hardworking assistants for conducting library and Internet research and in other ways for helping me to assemble this manuscript: Nicholas Albrecht, Amy Barth, Joshua Blitt, Katie Codon, Meg Day, Marin Fantino, Marnette Federis, Erin Hayes, Tamara Hurst, Gwyneth Hyndman, Vanessa Johnston, Melissa Karnaze, Marie Kent, Kari Kientzy, Sachiko Kuwabara, Justin La, Christina Lee, Randy Lie, Avery Marvin, Elizabeth Morrison, Jessica Nager, Jill Nelson, Lily Niu, Heather Rolfe, Amanda Solar, Cassandra Timm, Regina Warfel, Emily Wear, Lauren Wong, Rachel Wood, and Chrissy Wontorsky. One assistant, Angela Chen, had just turned eighteen when she helped me create an abridged version of the *EDTA* (Appendix 1). Finally, I'm especially grateful to my agent, Pierre Lehu, and to Steve Mettee of Quill Driver Books for believing in this book when others doubted.

Robert Epstein, Ph.D.  
San Diego, California



# A Note to the Reader

*The Case Against Adolescence* can be read on different levels. If you just want the gist, you might be satisfied with the detailed overviews at the beginning of each of the fourteen chapters. The overviews are fairly free of jargon, and they capture the essential arguments. To get answers to key questions on each of the chapter topics, you can skip to the end of each chapter, where you'll find answers to the most common questions people have asked me about teenagers over the years.

If you want to know how well you measure up as an adult, go to Appendix 1, where you can take an abridged version of the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood (EDTA)*. You'll be able to score the test yourself using a specially designed scoring sheet included in the appendix, and you'll end up with both an overall score and several "subscale" scores, which will tell you how competent you are in skill areas that are key to mature adulthood. Once you've taken the test, feel free to give it to some teens. They might surprise you.

For more detail, you'll need to read the main text in each chapter. The writing is informal and, I hope, friendly. On the other hand, I've also included material that's unusual for a mainstream book: I use graphs, tables, and other scientific tools when I think the "case" will benefit, and sometimes I explore technical matters in great detail. If you're not interested in technical material, you can skim over it or skip it entirely. You'll still get the idea. The chapters also include magazine-style boxes that contain stories about young people, interesting tidbits, and literary material that's pertinent to the chapter. Most of the boxes are just for fun; I hope you enjoy them.

If you want to dig deeper, consult the material included toward the end of the book: notes, a list of relevant readings, and some statistical data.

All in all, even if you don't agree with every point, I hope this book will get you thinking in new ways about young people, and I hope it will give many capable young people new options and opportunities.



# Introduction

By the time he was fourteen or fifteen, my son Justin was more or less capable of living on his own. He did well in school without any prompting from me, did numerous chores around the house (also with minimal or no prompting), and kept a schedule and lists of things to do, just as I did. He demonstrated that he was ready to drive by stealing my pickup truck several times. I was angry about the deceit, but I had to admit—to myself, not to him—that he seemed to have been driving safely. He dealt with adversity with remarkable maturity and flexibility. He was and still is expert at what therapists call “reframing.” In other words, he knew how to put a positive spin on almost anything.

Even more significant, he had achieved enormous balance in his life. He worked hard, but he also played hard. He had lots of friends, and even though I knew he had experimented with drugs, he seemed highly resistant to peer pressure and ultimately to be reasonably cautious. He said no to his friends when he had homework or chores to do, even though he must have been under enormous pressure at times to run off. He learned to surf, jump bicycles, skateboard, and so on, with his peers, and when I refused to drive him places, he found creative ways to reach remote destinations on his own. At times, I found myself envious of the delicate balance he had achieved between work and play, between the intellectual and physical, between the structured and the wild. It was obvious that he was going to go to college and then get on with his life, with or without me. And so, in fact, he did—mainly without me, which has made me feel quite proud of him.

Justin wasn't a prodigy; he was just mature—that is, adult-like—more mature than his elder brother, and even more mature, in some respects, than I was. But what, I wondered, did we mean by *maturity*, and how did Justin get that way? And if Justin was so capable, why couldn't he drive my truck legally, and why did he have to go to school every day, and why wasn't he allowed to make even minor medical decisions on his own? In short, why was society—and, for that matter, why was I—continuing to treat him like a child?

Social psychologist Ellen Langer reminds us that many of our practices, both individual and societal, are quite mindless. We do them without analysis or thought, often simply because someone else once did them long ago. In her modern classic, *Mindfulness*, she tells a story about a woman who always cut a piece off her roast before putting it in the pan. She did this because her mother always had, so one day she asked her mother to explain the practice. Her mom said only that her mother had always

done the same, so the woman posed the same question to her grandmother, who said, “I only had one pan, and it was too small to hold the meat.”

Could it be, I wondered, that Justin had to be treated like a child because of principles and practices that were long out of date—because, in effect, decades or centuries ago someone’s pan had been too small?

I was dimly aware that teenagers hadn’t always been treated like children, but I didn’t grasp much of the picture. The Bar Mitzvah—the centuries-old Jewish coming-of-age ceremony—had always been a mystery to me: why did we say that this ancient ceremony indicated that a boy was now a man when we clearly didn’t mean it? Was the modern ceremony just a cruel joke, a kind of tease? “Sure,” says the rabbi, “Now you are a man (heh, heh).” Had the Bar Mitzvah ever meant that a boy had attained adult status? I also knew, vaguely, that in other times young people had had more responsibility and authority than they have today, but I had never thought to ask about what had happened to all that responsibility and authority. When—and why—did it disappear? My curiosity grew stronger as the years passed, and, over time, I filled file drawers and book shelves with relevant materials. Teens, I learned, had been treated like adults throughout most of human history. It’s only recently that they’ve been infantilized.

As a parent, a citizen, and an occasional teacher of developmental psychology, I was also aware that modern teens were a pretty scary, confused, and angry group of people, and I began to wonder whether infantilization—or what one might call “the artificial extension of childhood”—could be the culprit. What I’ve learned has confused me, surprised me, and, at times, shocked me. Over time, and based on my own research as well as findings from psychology, anthropology, history, biology, and other fields, I’ve discovered that Justin and millions of other teens have gotten a raw deal—that shortly after puberty, most of us have the potential to function fully as adults, emotionally, physically, and mentally.

And that’s what this book is about. As you’ll see, I’m not the first person to have expressed concern about the artificial extension of childhood, and I’m sure I won’t be the last. But I hope that this volume will present a case so compelling, and perhaps so disturbing, that it will stimulate a long-overdue discussion about how we’re currently raising our teens, and perhaps set some changes in motion.

# Part 1

## The Case Against the Artificial Extension of Childhood



## Chapter 1

# The Chaos and the Cause

---

*His thoughts are whacked, he's mad so he's talkin' back, talkin' black,  
brainwashed from rock and rap. He sags his pants, do-rags and stocking cap,  
his step-father hit him, so he socked him back.*

—Eminem, “Sing for the Moment”

**Overview.** American teens have long been in chaos, suffering high rates of depression, suicide, crime, substance abuse, pregnancy, and other serious problems. Until about a century ago, however, the teenage years were relatively benign, and adolescence as we know it barely existed. Through most of human history, young people were integrated into adult society early on, but beginning in the late 1800s, new laws and cultural practices began to isolate teens from adults, imposing on them an increasingly large set of restrictions and artificially extending childhood well past puberty. New research suggests that teens today are subjected to more than ten times as many restrictions as are most adults, and adulthood is delayed until well into the twenties or thirties. It's likely that the turmoil we see among teens is an unintended result of the artificial extension of childhood.

In the late 1990s Americans had a gruesome wake-up call: Eight schoolyard shooting sprees took place in less than a year, resulting in seventeen dead and thirty wounded—all at the hands of males under eighteen. As a result, carrying a dull kitchen knife to school is now grounds for expulsion at many schools, and teens continue to plot or carry out elaborate attacks against their schools.<sup>1</sup> Here are some other disturbing facts about America's troubled teens:

- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among teens, after accidents and homicides. According to a 2003 survey, 8.5 percent of high

school students had attempted suicide in the previous twelve months, and nearly 17 percent contemplated or planned suicide.<sup>2</sup>

- For the vast majority of crimes, the peak age for arrest in the United States has long been eighteen for both whites and minorities.<sup>3</sup> According to an extensive study published in 2004, eighteen is also the age at which Americans eighteen and over, and especially females, are the most depressed.<sup>4</sup>
- For the first time in history, we are now seeing a substantial increase in crimes committed by young females, especially some violent crimes. Between 1995 and 2004, for example, assaults by young males decreased slightly (following national trends), whereas assaults by young females increased by 25 percent.<sup>5</sup>
- Before new security systems were installed in recent years, nearly a million students in the United States brought guns to school each year.<sup>6</sup> Between a quarter and a third of young people who enter our school systems never graduate from high school, and for blacks and Hispanics, the proportion is closer to one-half.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2001 more than 60 percent of high school students who were surveyed reported that drugs were kept, used, or sold at their schools.<sup>8</sup> In 2002 hospital emergency rooms treated 97,029 teens suffering from adverse drug experiences—mainly overdoses of illegal drugs—up from 82,904 in 1999.<sup>9</sup>
- Although declining, the birth rate among teens in the United States—about forty-nine births for every thousand teenage women—is still the highest by far in the industrialized world. The teen birth rate in both France and Italy is about nine per thousand.<sup>10</sup>
- A 2006 report by the FBI attributes the recent spike in violent crimes in major cities nationwide to the activities of minors as young as ten.<sup>11</sup>

How can we understand the school-yard tragedies at places like Littleton, Jonesboro, and, more recently, Red Lake, Minnesota? What's causing so many young females to become violent? And why are so many of America's young people depressed, angry, high, or out of control?

There are the obvious reasons: the easy availability of guns in the United States, fatherless homes and the abandonment of traditional values, rap music that extols violence, guts exploding on video games, the testosterone-driven aggression surges of post-pubescent males, and the fact that more and more young females are getting

involved with gangs. But there's another factor—a more subtle one—that's rarely examined. It's a factor that might help us understand many of the horrific problems of adolescence in America—the high suicide rate, the high crime rate, the violence, the frequency of teenage pregnancies, the drugs, the ennui, and the anger. *For the first time in human history, we have artificially extended childhood well past puberty.* Simply stated, we are not letting our young people grow up.

Through most of human history, our ancestors began to produce children shortly after puberty, just as the members of all nonhuman species do to this day. Whether we like the idea or not, our young ancestors must have been capable of providing for their offspring, defending their families from predators, cooperating with others, and in most other respects functioning fully as adults. If they couldn't function as adults, their young could not have survived, which would have meant the swift demise of the human race. The fact that we're still here suggests that most young people are probably far more capable than we think they are. Somewhere along the line, we lost sight of—and buried—the potential of our teens. When and why did this happen, and what were the consequences?

## DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON TEENS

Paul Koretz is a man with a mission. A Democratic assemblyman from Hollywood, he recently sponsored a bill in the California state legislature to raise the legal smoking age from eighteen to twenty-one. At the same time that a legislative committee was considering the bill, tens of thousands of American eighteen-year-olds were carrying heavy weapons and putting themselves in the line of fire in Iraq. Under the circumstances, some committee members thought it seemed hypocritical of them to think about denying eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-year-olds the right to risk damaging their health by smoking.

The committee stalled the legislation, but, spurred by California's powerful medical lobby, legislators had considered similar legislation before, and they'll probably consider the same bill again in the future.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, eighteen is still the cutoff age for smoking in California and many other states, presumably because a millisecond past midnight on the day we turn eighteen, we make a quantum leap in our ability to make sound judgments about the merits and demerits of smoking.

But do all eighteen-year-olds really exercise better judgment than all seventeen-year-olds? Do such legal prohibitions actually work? Do they have any negative consequences? And were seventeen-year-olds (not to mention five-year-olds and ten-year-olds) always prohibited from smoking?

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Sixteen-Year-Old “Children”

*From a recent newspaper: Two San Diego high school teachers were placed on paid leave recently for showing their sixteen-year-old students the infamous videotape of the recent beheading of American Nick Berg by Muslim extremists. Parents complained that the school should have asked for their permission before showing their “impressionable children” this disturbing tape. Some students defended the teachers, saying that the material was “relevant to learning about war.” But school superintendent Terry Ryan said that teachers don’t have “academic freedom to cause unfettered emotional and psychological damage to children.” Teachers have been ordered not to show the tape, and the school district has adjusted its Internet filters “to block Berg’s name and the words ‘beheading’ and ‘beheaded.’” California’s Education Code prohibits the teaching of “harmful matter without redeeming social importance.” Teaching teens—only a year or two away from the age of military service—about the brutality of terrorism serves no such purpose, according to school officials.<sup>13</sup>*

### Schoolyard Scuffle

A few years ago, when Edward Brand was superintendent of the Sweetwater Union High School District (located in San Diego County, serving about thirty-three thousand students in grades seven to twelve), he published a provocative essay proposing a simple way of improving secondary education in America.<sup>14</sup>

Brand aptly noted that it’s difficult to teach everything one needs to know about the modern world in just twelve years of schooling. That might have worked a hundred years ago, he said, but the world was largely agrarian back then. Some have said that the solution is to extend the school day, or at least to extend the school year, but that, Brand said, won’t work. “[These] approaches raise the danger of learning burnout: Many students are easily overloaded by too much information for too long.”

He didn’t address the fact that our education system actually teaches many students very little—that twelve years of schooling in American schools (thirteen, with kindergarten) leaves many students unable to read or perform long division. According to a recent report, 47 percent of incoming freshman at California State University had to enroll in remedial English and 54 percent in remedial math.<sup>15</sup> Nationwide, only about 22 percent of high school graduates are considered qualified to take many basic college courses, and performance levels have been flat for at least the last decade.<sup>16</sup>

Brand also failed to note that most of our high school students think school is a waste of time.<sup>17</sup> These omissions aside, he certainly identified a legitimate problem.

His proposal was to add not just “a few more minutes to the school day or a few more days each year” but to extend secondary school “by years”—specifically, to add grades thirteen and fourteen to the school curriculum:

*Imagine what students could achieve in that time. From mastering a foreign language, to getting another year of science and English under their belts, students would have greater opportunities to develop the foundation of knowledge requisite for the new millennium.... Extended schooling would mean more time for courses in fine arts, computers, and electives where students could explore special interests and career-related subjects.... Learning from a place of maturity would be another benefit. At age eighteen and nineteen, students are more likely to take their studies more seriously.<sup>18</sup>*

More recently, Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, lamenting the fact that 30 percent of our young people never finish high school, has called for extending the mandatory school age to twenty-one.<sup>19</sup>

Contrast the proposals of Brand and Weaver with the dark and disturbing views of another prominent educator, John Taylor Gatto. Gatto, an extraordinary jack-of-all-trades, earned his main living as a teacher in the New York City school system, where he taught for more than thirty years. Gatto was named New York City Teacher of the Year three times, in 1989, 1990, and 1991, and New York State Teacher of the Year in 1990 and 1991.<sup>20</sup> That year, announcing his intentions in an Op Ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>21</sup> Gatto quit being a teacher, saying he could no longer stand “hurting children.”

Gatto pulled no punches, insisting among other things that:

*Government schooling...kills the family by monopolizing the best times of childhood and teaching disrespect for home and parents....*

*David learns to read at age four; Rachel, at age nine: ...when both are 13, you can't tell which one learned first.... But in school I label Rachel “learning disabled” and slow David down a bit, too. For a paycheck, I adjust David to depend on me to tell him when to go and when to stop. He won't outgrow that dependency. I identify Rachel as discount merchandise, “special education” fodder. She'll be locked in her place forever....*

*I can't teach this way any longer. If you hear of a job where I don't have to hurt kids to make a living, let me know.*

Following the publication of this bombshell and Gatto's subsequent resig-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### The Prom Police

*In Texas recently, a teacher was fired for inviting a student to the prom. That's defensible, perhaps, but in May 2006 at the Pearl River Central High School in Mississippi, eighteen-year-old senior Leah Lott was forbidden from bringing her boyfriend to the prom because he was over twenty. The boyfriend, Chris Raffo, a U. S. Marine who had been granted a leave to attend the prom, was twenty-one. And in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, the dates of six high school students were denied prom entrance because "background checks" had revealed that they had misdemeanors on their records (like underage drinking). According to a recent article in TIME magazine, more schools nationwide are now requiring pre-screening of prom dates and are becoming increasingly selective about whom they'll admit—all in the name of protecting our vulnerable and incompetent young.<sup>24</sup>*

nation, he was invited to give hundreds of talks worldwide in which "hungry" audiences reveled in the truth he seemed to be revealing.<sup>22</sup> He also published several provocative books proposing radical changes in the education system—all of which has led to exactly nothing. Our schools, caught in a tangled web of unions, politicians, and regulations, are a tough nut to crack. Even when it looks like change is coming, it often turns out to be illusory. As Yale educator Seymour Sarason said in his classic text, *Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, when it comes to the American education system, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" ("The more things change, the more they stay the same").<sup>23</sup>

To Gatto, government-run schools do little more than warehouse young people, stifling creativity, initiative, a love of learning, and the rugged individualism that built America in its early years. In *The Underground History of American Education*, published in 2001, he also complained, quite explicitly, about the artificial extension of childhood:

*During the post-Civil War period, childhood was extended about four years. Later, a special label was created to describe very old children. It was...adolescence, a phenomenon hitherto unknown to the human race. The infantilization of young people didn't stop at the beginning of the twentieth century; child labor laws were extended to cover more and more kinds of work, the age of school leaving set higher and higher. The greatest victory for this utopian project was making school the only avenue to certain occupations. The intention*

*was ultimately to draw all work into the school net. By the 1950s it wasn't unusual to find graduate students well into their thirties, running errands, waiting to start their lives.*<sup>25</sup>

Who is right? Is mandatory public schooling so valuable in the modern world that, as Brand says, young people need to get a lot more of it, or is it, as Gatto says, a root of great weakness in our society? Where did mandatory schooling come from in the first place? Were young people always required to attend full days of school up to age sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen, as they are today? If not, how, if at all, did they get the education they needed to function? Are there any rational alternatives to full-time mandatory public schooling in today's complex world? I'll offer answers to the various questions I've posed as we go along, and some, I think, will surprise you.

## TREATING TEENS LIKE CHILDREN

Are American teens really infantilized? Diane Dumas and I approached this issue recently by asking a hundred teens between thirteen and seventeen in seven locations around the United States (three in California, one in Florida, one in Tennessee, one in Texas, and one in Georgia) to complete a checklist of forty-two restrictions that adults—or at least adults who aren't incarcerated or in the military—virtually never face but that very young children face frequently.<sup>26</sup> (See box, *Measuring Infantilization in Teens*.) The higher the score, the more restrictions one faces. If you're over eighteen, when was the last time you were given a "time out" or sent to your room? When were you last forced to undergo medical treatment against your will? When did someone last confiscate your personal property or search your bedroom? When were you last spanked as a punishment for misbehaving?

Not recently, I suspect. But our respondents scored surprisingly high on this scale. On average, they had "regularly or routinely" experienced more than *twenty-six* of these restrictions since they were thirteen, and seventy-four of the teens scored between twenty-two and forty (meaning that the distribution of scores was skewed toward the high numbers). Four of the respondents said they had regularly or routinely experienced *forty* out of the forty-two restrictions. Again, keep in mind that adults over eighteen (outside of institutional settings or the military) should, in a perfect world, tend to score near zero on this scale.

To find out how adults score on the infantilization scale, I administered it recently to twenty-five noninstitutionalized adults in the San Diego area, twenty-four United States Marines on active duty (at Camp Pendleton in Southern California), and thirty-two incarcerated felons (at a county prison in the San Diego

## MEASURING INFANTILIZATION IN TEENS

Since you were thirteen years old, have adults regularly or routinely restricted your activities in any of the following ways?

1. Sent you to your room?
2. Listened in on your phone calls?
3. Restricted your phone use?
4. Cut off your allowance?
5. Restricted your driving privileges?
6. Confiscated your personal property?
7. Grounded you?
8. Searched your room without your permission?
9. Violated your privacy?
10. Restricted your use of the Internet?
11. Restricted your television use?
12. Restricted your use of videos or CDs?
13. Prevented you from getting a tattoo or piercing?
14. Prohibited you from changing your hairstyle?
15. Restricted the way you can dress?
16. Prohibited you from associating with certain friends?
17. Spanked, paddled, or hit you?
18. Prohibited your friends from coming over?
19. Prohibited you from attending a dance, party, or club?
20. Prevented you from drinking alcohol?
21. Prevented you from smoking cigarettes?
22. Forced you to take medication?
23. Forced you to participate in a meal or social event?
24. Forced you to attend a summer camp or go on vacation?
25. Given you a time out?
26. Required you to take a shower or bath?
27. Restricted your sexual activity?
28. Tried to silence you?
29. Given you a curfew?
30. Required you to go to bed at a certain time?
31. Restricted your dating activities?
32. Forced you to attend school?
33. Required you to get certain grades?
34. Required you to get a job?
35. Forced you into psychotherapy?
36. Forced you to undergo medical treatment?
37. Forced you to go to church or synagogue?
38. Forced you to exercise or play sports?
39. Forced you play a musical instrument?
40. Required you to take dance or participate in other extracurricular activities?
41. Required you to take certain courses in school?
42. Restrained you physically or restricted your movements?

*(Adapted from the Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood)*

area). One would think that military personnel—obligated to follow orders without question—and prisoners—stripped of most of their rights by the criminal justice system—would be far more encumbered than noninstitutionalized teens.

But that's not what I found. Noninstitutionalized adults indeed scored near zero on the scale (2.3 out of a possible 42), but teens outscored prisoners and soldiers by a large margin (26.6 for teens vs. 14.6 for prisoners and 10.9 for soldiers). Even with these small samples, the differences in these scores were, from a statistical standpoint, highly significant. In other words, *teens appear to be subjected to about twice as many restrictions as are prisoners and soldiers and to more than ten times as many restrictions as are everyday adults.*

So teens really do undergo a wide variety of very specific restrictions, and there are even movements afoot to increase those restrictions. Teens aren't just imagining this, and sometimes they get angry about it. Why? Because their bodies and brains are screaming, "I'm an adult," just as evolution intended, while parents and other authority figures are replying, "No, you're still a child. Now take out the garbage before I ground you."

## TEENS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To put those restrictions in perspective, try to envision what a teen's life was like two hundred years ago. The Industrial Revolution was barely off the ground (the steam engine was invented in England in 1763), and life was largely agricultural. Young people worked side by side with their parents as soon as they were able, as they still do in many countries around the world, and, shortly after puberty, boys often left the family to learn a trade. Couples married and had children young, which made sense considering that the average life span for males was only 38.3 years in 1850.<sup>27</sup>

Were there any rules or laws that prevented young people from smoking, drinking, working, riding a horse, or driving a buggy? Were there any restrictions at all on the behavior of teens? And did "adolescence," defined by pioneering psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904 as a period of "storm and stress," even exist?

Consider a few landmark dates in human social history:

- In 1788 England's Parliament passed landmark legislation prohibiting children under eight from working as chimney sweeps, but the law was routinely ignored, and it remained common for decades for four-year-olds to perform this unpleasant and sometimes dangerous job.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Alexander the Great

*The Greek king Alexander III (356–323 B.C.E.), also known as Alexander the Great, had significant power by age sixteen. He founded his first colony at that age, calling it Alexandroupolis. At sixteen, he also suppressed a revolt in another colony when his father was away. At age twenty, he may also have played a role in his father’s murder, which made Alexander king of Macedonia.*

- Nearly a century later, in 1878, legislation in England raised the minimum work age to ten for factories and workshops. In addition, employers in those settings now had to restrict the employment of young people between ten and fourteen to consecutive half-days or alternate full days.<sup>29</sup>
- By 1900 more than two million young people between ten and fifteen were working full-time in the United States—a huge number, considering that the total population was only seventy-six million.<sup>30</sup> In 1916, the United States Congress—for reasons we’ll explore later—passed a law prohibiting young people under fourteen from working in nonagricultural trades, but two years later the United States Supreme Court struck down that law on technical grounds.<sup>31</sup>
- Between 1883 and 1890, roughly twenty-five states passed laws prohibiting the sale of tobacco to young people under certain ages: fourteen in Maryland, eighteen in South Carolina, and sixteen in most other states.<sup>32</sup> Before the 1880s, it appears that no such restrictions existed. In any case, such laws were largely ineffective.
- The first comprehensive law in the United States that explicitly prevented young people from drinking alcohol wasn’t passed until the end of Prohibition, in 1933. It allowed states to pick a minimum drinking age of eighteen or twenty-one.<sup>33</sup> Before the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1919, which prohibited all alcohol consumption, young people in many states were generally free to drink without restriction, subject mainly to the particular wishes of their parents. According to legal scholar James F. Mosher, in the late eighteenth century “adolescents saw drinking as a part of adult life and with adult encouragement openly experimented with adult drinking

norms. Boys as young as twelve were often seen entering public taverns to drink.”<sup>34</sup>

With today’s mind-set, we can’t help but interpret such laws in a positive light. Clearly, most people would say, these laws must have been passed because (a) young people were being abused, and these laws were needed to protect them, and (b) young people were incapable—or, to be precise, most or all young people were incapable—of handling the rights and responsibilities that these laws took away. But, as you’ll see, the truth is not so simple.

Whatever the origins of these various restrictions and whatever the motives behind them, it’s clear that the many ways in which we limit the behavior of teens today came about relatively recently in human history—mainly within the last hundred years. Some of these restrictions might have made sense at one time and in certain contexts, but in a very different world, they make no sense at all.

In Chapter Two, we’ll look more closely at the sequence of events that embody the artificial extension of childhood, at the motives behind some of those events, and at the multiple consequences of those events—some of which were both unintended and harmful.

## HUMAN RESOURCES AT RISK

“Adolescent” is defined in modern society as a person in turmoil, and the toll that turmoil takes on our teens, our families, and our society is enormous. That’s one reason we need to reexamine the nature and plight of adolescence, but there’s another, less glamorous, but perhaps even more important reason: young people are capable of making great contributions to society, but they currently have virtually no way of being heard. As we’ll see in future chapters, in times past young people often accomplished great things; it’s tough for them to do so in today’s America.

When we restrict the rights and activities of young people—say, the more than twenty million people in the United States between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, or the more than one billion teens that exist worldwide (more than one-sixth of the world’s population)—in some sense we throw them away, just as much of the world still discards women, the elderly, and various minorities.

Not long ago mainstream American males firmly believed that blacks were idiots who needed to be treated like children, that women were inherently weak and delicate and could not function outside the home, and that the elderly were feeble-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Queen and King of Clubs

*Already champion jugglers when they were twelve and fifteen, respectively, California residents Olga and Vova Galchenko—now fifteen and eighteen—hold the world records for people juggling ten clubs (378 catches), eleven clubs (152 catches), and twelve clubs (52 catches). According to fellow performer Penn Jillette, “If you’re talking about club passing, the two of them together are the best in the world. Not just the best in the world. The best there has ever been.”<sup>31</sup>*

mind—incapable of vitality or of making significant contributions to society. Gradually—with painfully small steps—we’ve put aside these preconceptions, accepting in various degrees four fundamental new ideas, which I call the “Enabling Premises.”

### Enabling Premise Number One: Individuals Are Unique

We’ve become increasingly sensitive to the fact that every person is unique and that any particular individual might not fit the stereotypes that sometimes accompany his or her age, gender, religion, or ethnic background.

When I was in graduate school, one of my undergraduate advisees was a young black man who had grown up on the streets of Boston. He was taking a seminar I was teaching on intelligence, and he was disturbed to learn that on a widely used IQ test, blacks, on average, scored lower than whites. I explained to him that although it’s true that the average scores differed, it was also true that the *range* of scores was identical for blacks and whites; that is, both blacks and whites scored at both the bottom and the top of the IQ range. So an individual black or white could have any IQ at all. He wasn’t reassured, unfortunately.

Stereotypes—sometimes based on averages and sometimes on nothing at all—are powerful things. But society seems to recognize, more and more, that the individual is indeed unique and that statistics and gossip are no substitute for the facts.

### Enabling Premise Number Two: People Are Competent

We’ve moved away from a preoccupation with “traits” (like IQ and impulsiveness and introversion) in favor of a “competencies” view of human ability.

Traits are fixed and stable throughout one’s life, and although it’s true we have some relatively enduring tendencies, we also are capable of enormous learning and flexibility. Beginning a half century ago, pioneering researchers such as the late David McLelland began to develop tools that size people up in a humane and rational way:

instruments that measure an individual's "competencies"—real and potential abilities to behave in various ways. Once you dissect some area, such as leadership, into competencies, you can both measure and train those competencies.

Today it's common for major business and all branches of the military to measure and train leadership competencies. Rather than simply labeling someone as a "natural born leader"—and throwing away everyone else—we've gotten increasingly adept at improving the leadership skills of almost anyone, and the competencies approach is proving itself in many areas, including stress-management, motivation, relationships, parenting, and even creativity.<sup>36</sup> The competencies perspective is about as positive and humane as you can get; the trait perspective, by comparison, is wasteful and demeaning.

### **Enabling Premise Number Three: People Have Unrealized Potential**

We've come to realize that where someone is now—his or her current set of competencies, if you will—doesn't necessarily tell us how far he or she might be able to go.

With appropriate training and experience, one can continue to grow and develop in significant ways throughout one's life. Drug addicts and alcoholics often recover; criminals often reform; and in today's fast-paced society, technophobes inevitably find themselves carrying MP3 players, cell phones, and PDAs, and people are increasingly likely to make radical career changes at some point.

Although IQ—a measure of logical reasoning ability—stays relatively stable over the course of one's life,\* we tend to put more emphasis these days on a potpourri of "intelligences," including so-called "emotional intelligence," most of which turn out to be trainable competencies. We're more open to asking what a person's potential is, rather than sizing him or her up based merely on current performance.

### **Enabling Premise Number Four: Labels Are Dangerous**

Finally, we've become increasingly wary of labels—not just epithets but *any* labels that imply limits on how a person might perform or what a person might become.

In the mental health field, for example, many mental health professionals have become increasingly critical of the "DSM"—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—the standard compendium of labels for mental health problems. Although therapists are forced to use these labels in order to get insurance reimbursements, many have become dissatisfied with this diagnostic system, because it invariably simplifies complex problems; it's difficult to fit an individual's unique signature into a little box without misrepresenting that person or at least omitting

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\*This applies only to IQ scores and not to intelligence itself. Intelligence actually changes dramatically and predictably over the course of one's life. More about this in Chapter Seven.

important details. As the famous Rosenhan study showed decades ago,<sup>37</sup> labels like “schizophrenic” are sometimes used recklessly by poorly trained professionals.\*

Modern political correctness also discourages labeling, zealously forcing us to abandon disparaging labels (like “retarded”) in favor of kinder, more optimistic designations (a “developmentally disabled” individual, a person with “special needs”). Diversity training in schools and businesses also discourages labeling, reminding us to avoid putting people in boxes.

### Implications for Teens

We’ve been learning to apply these premises to various minorities, to women, and, lately, to the elderly. Applied to teens, the Enabling Premises have clear implications: Teens need to be judged (a) as individuals, not as a group, (b) based on their competencies, not on their age, (c) based on their potential for learning and growth, not merely on their current characteristics, and (d) without disparaging labels like “adolescent,” which imply limits or flaws.

## CONVERGING EVIDENCE

Although the Theory of Evolution is called a “theory,” most scientists these days consider it a fact. In the 1930s a “Grand Synthesis” of information from a half dozen fields—paleontology, archeology, geology, and so on—all pointed with enormous consistency to the same idea: that species on earth evolved over millions of years through a process of natural selection. If one or more disciplines had turned up contradictory evidence, the theory would have been on weaker ground. Converging evidence from multiple sources is pretty convincing.

As I hope you’ll discover in this volume, the theses I’m putting forth—that adolescence is a historical anomaly, that we infantilize our young people unnecessarily and extremely, that many or most teens are capable of functioning as adults in a number of ways, and that infantilization has serious negative consequences for our society—are also supported by converging evidence from multiple fields.

### History

The historical record is every bit as revealing as the geological record. There is simply no question that teens throughout history were integrated into adult society much earlier than they are today and that the tumultuous period that defines adolescence today probably never existed until recent times. See Chapter Two.

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\*In the early 1970s, David L. Rosenhan of Stanford University sent eight normal people to various psychiatric facilities complaining of hearing voices but showing no active symptoms of mental illness. Even so, all were admitted and labeled as mentally ill, and even upon discharge some were labeled schizophrenic “in remission.”

## Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Studies

To this day, teens in many cultures around the world, especially in preindustrial nations, grow up much sooner than they do in the United States, apparently without ever experiencing the turmoil of adolescence. Margaret Mead's classic book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*,<sup>38</sup> described a peaceful society in which adolescence as we know it appeared not to exist. Although subsequent researchers have questioned some of Mead's claims, there is overwhelming contemporary evidence from other cultures that supports the idea that adolescence is not a necessary stage of development. See Chapter Three.

## Rehabilitation

Programs like the original Boys Town (but not its current manifestation) were able to help troubled youths by putting them in charge of their lives. Boys Town was a real town, run from top to bottom by the troubled young men who came to live there. Contemporary programs like Outward Bound also work on this premise—that one of the most effective ways to straighten people out is to inoculate them with a significant dose of responsibility and authority. In Chapter Four, we'll look at a number of programs of this sort and, in some cases, the dramatic changes they produce in young people.

## Psychology

Studies show that our cognitive abilities are fairly sophisticated—more-or-less fully developed, in fact—around the time of puberty. Jean Piaget, the eminent Swiss psychologist, said we achieve “formal operational” thinking—or at least that some of us do—by age twelve or so and that there isn't anywhere to go after that. What's more, according to Piaget, many people never become capable of this kind of thinking, no matter how old they are. But aren't some teens shoddy thinkers? Of course, but so are many adults, and by infantilizing teens, we probably retard intellectual development in some individuals. More on this later, especially in Chapter Seven.

## A CHORUS OF CRITICS

I'm not the first person to have noticed and been disturbed about the ways in which our perspective on young people has changed over the last century. I've already mentioned John Gatto's dismay, but he turns out to be one of many.

## Holt, Farson, and Liedloff

The late John Holt, an accomplished teacher as well as a pioneer in the modern home schooling movement, condemned the “sentimental prison” we’ve built around children in his 1974 book *Escape from Childhood*.<sup>39</sup> Holt had been inspired in part by the radical social thinker Ivan Illich. In a polemical book called *Deschooling Society*, published in 1973, Illich strongly condemned organized schooling as harmful to children.<sup>40</sup> In *Escape from Childhood*, Holt went much further than Illich, arguing that children “of whatever age” should be granted a number of “rights,” including:

- The right to vote
- The right to work
- The right to own property
- The right to travel
- The right to choose one’s guardian
- The right to a guaranteed income
- The right to legal and financial responsibility
- The right to control one’s learning
- The right to use drugs
- The right to drive
- The right to control one’s sex life.

Also in 1974, psychologist Richard Farson published a book that was quite similar to Holt’s called *Birthrights: A Bill of Rights for Children*, in which he listed ten rights that children should be given, including the right to “freedom from physical punishment” and the right to “responsive environmental design” (meaning chairs, tools, and such, should be manufactured in small sizes).<sup>41</sup>

Holt, now a cult figure in the home schooling movement, complained of a “Great Divide” that had been created in recent times to separate children from adults. “What is both new and bad about modern childhood,” said Holt, “is that children are so cut off from the adult world.”<sup>42</sup>

A similar theme is developed in yet another 1970s book, *The Continuum Concept*, by Jean Liedloff—also a cult figure today.<sup>43</sup> After living with a primitive South American tribe for an extended period, Liedloff concluded that our own children need to be integrated into adult society from an early age and that it’s a mistake for us to isolate and shelter them.

## Historians and Social Scientists

Many historians of childhood—Philippe Ariès, J. H. Plumb, Hugh Cunningham, Marc Kleijwegt, and others—have also pointed out that young people today are sheltered far more than they were before the industrial age. And various anthropologists, sociologists, and other scholars, such as Pierre Dasen of the Université de Genève, the French psychiatrist Patrice Huerre, and the Indian scholar T. S. Saraswathi, have long suggested that adolescence as we know it in the West doesn't exist in most preindustrial nations, where young people are typically integrated into adult society soon after puberty.

Huerre, a therapist and expert on teen violence, is especially passionate about these issues. In France in the 1990s, with colleagues Martine Pagan-Reymond and Jean-Michel Reymond, Huerre argued forcefully that adolescence in France was a recent and very dangerous cultural invention.\*

A 2004 book published in the United Kingdom by English psychiatrist Philip Graham raises similar concerns.<sup>44</sup> Drawing on his more than twenty-five years of experience as a clinician working with teens in a children's hospital setting, Graham cites the “disastrous consequences” that result when we “infantilize and disempower” teens.<sup>45</sup> When teens are miserable, says Graham, “it is the powerless predicament in which they find themselves that is often responsible.” His recommendation? “[We] should stop infantilizing young people and allow them to reclaim the independence to which their competence entitles them.”<sup>46</sup>

## WHY THIS BOOK?

If a parade of distinguished scholars has already noticed and sometimes even expressed concern about the artificial extension of childhood, why hasn't anyone paid attention, and why, if anything, has the turmoil of adolescence increased? Why, for goodness sake, are there people out there trying to extend childhood even further? And why have I bothered to write this book?

I've asked myself questions of this sort many times over the nine years I've been investigating this matter. Here are the answers I have so far.

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\*In a volume first published in 1990 and then issued in a new edition in 1997, Huerre and colleagues insisted that adolescence was a “heavy burden” that has been “socially constructed and then managed by people other than adolescents—and too often for the benefit of others.” The book is called *l'Adolescence n'existe pas* (“Adolescence Doesn't Exist”), which presumably reflects what the authors wish were true, not what really is. It begins with an intriguing quote from novelist Marcel Proust which suggests that it's really adulthood that doesn't exist—that adulthood is just extended adolescence: “C'est avec des adolescents qui durent un assez grand nombre d'années que la vie fait ses vieillards” (“It is with adolescents who last for a rather long time that life produces its old people”).

First, societal thinking sometimes gets stuck. When, for several generations, people have looked at an issue a certain way, it's almost impossible for them to see things differently. We now take it for granted, for example, that child labor laws and laws requiring mandatory education are both good and necessary, even though today's world is radically different than the one that gave rise to these laws. Maybe the case against the artificial extension of childhood needs to be made repeatedly—and more forcefully—for the message to sink in. I'll examine this issue head-on toward the end of the book.

Second, some previous writers—Holt and Farson, especially—had political agendas that may have undermined their ability to promote real change. The problems created by the artificial extension of childhood should be of concern to a broad spectrum of people—left-wing, moderate, and conservative, religious and nonreligious—not just to those on the fringes. My presentation will, I hope, stimulate the thinking of a wide range of serious people—including some serious teens.

Third, some writers, like Gatto, talk about the artificial extension of childhood without taking on the burden of convincing readers that it really exists, or mention the infantilization of teens in a narrow context (Liedloff, Kliejwegt, Cunningham, and others). This volume presents the case comprehensively.

And finally, until now no one has, to my knowledge, (a) quantified the extent to which our young people are infantilized, (b) demonstrated a link between infantilization and the turmoil we see in our young people, or (c) directly compared the competencies of young people with those of adults. This volume presents original and compelling data in all three of these areas (Chapters One, Five, and Six).

Recently Tom Smith, a polling expert at the University of Chicago, published the results of a poll of fourteen hundred adults who were asked, among other things, when adulthood now begins in the United States. At eighteen, perhaps, when teens can vote and own property and enroll in the military without parental permission? How about at twenty-one, when young people can buy alcohol? The answer was *twenty-six*, signifying, said Smith, that the public has come to accept an “extended adolescence.”<sup>47</sup> The artificial extension of childhood, it seems, is getting worse.

**Q:** *Childhood is a wonderful time of life—a time for fun and exploration, when all of our needs are met and nothing is expected from us in return. Aren't we doing our teens a favor by extending childhood?*

**A:** Driven by evolutionary imperatives established thousands of years ago, the main need a teenager has is to become productive and independent. After puberty, if we pretend our teens are still children, we will be unable to meet their most fundamental needs, and we will cause some teens great distress. When a young person says “I am not a child,” we need to listen carefully.



## Chapter 2

# The Creation of Adolescence

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*How many roads must a man walk down,  
Before they call him a man?  
—Bob Dylan, Blowin' in the Wind*

**Overview.** *Adolescence is the creation of modern industrialization, which got into high gear in the United States between 1880 and 1920. For most of human history before the Industrial Era, young people worked side by side with adults as soon as they were able, and it was not uncommon for young people, and especially young females, to marry and establish independent households soon after puberty. It wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that adolescence was identified as a separate stage of life characterized by "storm and stress." In what appears to be a vicious cycle of cause and effect, teen turmoil since the late 1800s has generated a large number of unique laws that restrict teen behavior in ways that adult behavior has never been restricted, and these laws in turn appear to have stimulated more extreme forms of "misbehavior" in teens. The rate at which such laws have been passed has increased substantially since the 1960s, with an increasingly wide range of new crimes being invented just for young people. The social reforms that created such laws were set in motion by some formidable individuals, not all of whom had benevolent motives. The extension of childhood past puberty has benefited a large number of new businesses and industries offering a wide range of products and services to the growing teen markets.*

In *Ancient Youth: The Ambiguity and the Absence of Adolescence in Greco-Roman Society*, Dutch historian Marc Kleijwegt notes that councillors in ancient Greco-Roman municipalities were sometimes as young as four, or perhaps even younger.<sup>1</sup> As the proud father of a precocious six-year-old, I'd love to be able to testify that any bright child could hold such a position, but the picture that comes to mind is

just too preposterous. How could a toddler have served as a councillor in one of the great ancient city states?

The answer, says Kleijwegt, is that the many high positions occupied in ancient Rome and Greece by young children were probably ceremonial. In some cases, prominent families probably bought these positions in order to increase family prestige. In other cases, the young person was groomed over a period of years, becoming active in significant ways by age seventeen or eighteen and eventually securing real political power.

More important for our purposes, Kleijwegt also points out that young people holding political office “were no longer regarded as children but as apprentice-adults.”<sup>2</sup> Kleijwegt also insists throughout his book that adolescence as we know it today simply didn’t exist in the ancient world—that “youth in [preindustrial society] was in character and behaviour essentially different from that of modern adolescents.”<sup>3</sup>

Adolescence as we characterize it today—as a distinct and separate period of life filled with angst and rebelliousness—is, quite simply, a fairly recent phenomenon in human history.

## HISTORY LESSONS

Consider the following passages from various works on the history of childhood and adolescence:

*[The] teenager is a recent idea that may not deserve to be an eternal one [Thomas Hine, The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager].<sup>4</sup>*

*In the Bad Old Days people learned who they were, and what their place in the eternal order of things was to be, by looking at the progression of generations that stretched behind them.... Today other roads than that of family lineage lead to immortality.... Adolescents now soon realize that they are not links in a familial chain stretching across the ages. Who they are, and what they become is independent, (at least so they believe) of who their parents are.... Other agencies now socialize and control the young. The continuity between the generations falls [Edward Shorter, The Making of the Modern Family].<sup>5</sup>*

*Although the architects of adolescence often announced their intention to understand and to sympathize with the problems of adolescents, a major effect of the psychological interest in adolescence after 1890 was the creation of new ways to regulate youthful behavior [Joseph F. Kett, Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present].<sup>6</sup>*

...our society has passed from a period which was ignorant of adolescence to a period in which adolescence is the favourite age. We now want to come to it early and linger in it as long as possible [Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*].<sup>7</sup>

As you can see, a number of people have written about the invention of adolescence in modern times, as well as about the ways in which the modern world has isolated young people from adults. Not all historians view young people the same way, however.

## Two Historical Viewpoints

It's convenient to separate modern historians of childhood and adolescence into two groups: "sentimentalists" and "continuists."

**Sentimentalists.** The sentimentalists include historians like Dutch scholar Marc Kleijwegt, the Frenchman Philippe Ariès, Hugh Cunningham of the University of Kent (United Kingdom), Edward Shorter of the University of Toronto, Lawrence Stone of Princeton University, and the British historian J. H. Plumb, among others. Sentimentalists believe, generally speaking, that perspectives on children and teens have changed dramatically in recent centuries.

Prior to the Industrial Era (beginning, roughly, in the mid-1700s), young people were seen as small adults, or at least they weren't distinguished from adults in many respects. They worked alongside adults, especially in rural areas, and they were integrated partially or fully into adult society at a young age—sometimes well before puberty, but certainly shortly thereafter. Jean Liedloff's picture of life among the Yequana Indians in South America fits this model.

According to the sentimentalist historians, at some point—at least in the United States and some countries in Europe—young people began to be isolated from adults, and the prevailing attitudes about young people changed, as well. They were no longer seen as reasonably capable members of society; rather, they became "sentimentalized." Children were increasingly seen as helpless and incompetent beings requiring adult protection, and the age at which young people were defined as children steadily increased over the decades. As I noted in Chapter One, in England in 1788 children under eight were said to require protection from various labor practices; by 1833 protection was deemed necessary for young people age thirteen and under. Modern laws have extended the protection to age eighteen, or, for some purposes, to age twenty-one.

**Continuists.** Other historians, such as Princeton's Natalie Zemon Davis, Emiel Eyben of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), Linda Pollock of Tulane University, Harvard's Steven Ozment, and Barbara Hanawalt of Ohio State Uni-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Jimmy Carter on Guns:

*“By the time I was five or six years old, I had been carefully instructed in the proper use of firearms, beginning with a BB gun, then a Remington .22 semiautomatic rifle, and finally a bolt-action .410-gauge shotgun.”<sup>8</sup>*

versity, can be termed “continuists” in the sense that they claim, based on their examination of records in certain countries during certain eras, that perspectives on childhood and adolescence have been at least somewhat continuous over time or that children and teens haven’t changed much.

I believe we can largely set aside the continuist perspective for a number of reasons, the main one being that when you look closely at what these historians have written about teens (but not necessarily what they’ve written about young children), their writings tend to be consistent with my position. Without exception, they certainly find far more differences between historical and modern teens than they find similarities.

For example, in the 1993 volume *Growing Up in Medieval London*, Barbara Hanawalt asserts that “[the] Middle Ages did recognize stages of life that corresponded to childhood and adolescence.” But she also notes that “proponents of the nonexistence of childhood and adolescence in the Middle Ages” have “widespread support among professional historians,”<sup>9</sup> and that “the medieval world did not have names for these stages of life.”<sup>10</sup>

Hanawalt also describes a teen world that is as different from the modern one as, say, Joan of Arc is from contemporary pop diva Britney Spears. For example, although she takes issue with other historians about the age at which children entered various work professions (putting little emphasis on how much work they did at home), she still has them starting apprenticeships as young as age seven. She also notes repeatedly that there was a tendency for the “age of entry” into various professions to “creep up” over the centuries—for adults to “[postpone] both the symbols and the reality of adult life to later ages.”<sup>11</sup>

Most important, she acknowledges just how radically different the medieval teen world was from the modern one:

*It is perhaps the question of influence that most distinguishes between adolescence then and now. No full-fledged youth subculture in which peers were the chief influence on an adolescent’s life existed in the Middle Ages.... There was no “youth culture,” as*

opposed to a broader society culture; nor were there “juvenile delinquency” and “juvenile sentencing,” as opposed to adult criminal behaviour and punishment. Mature and married adults, the “sad and wise,” did not aspire to become “wild and wanton” in imitation of carefree youth.<sup>12</sup>

Hanawalt also notes that young medieval Londoners often married young and set up independent households, but let’s stop here: no youth subculture, apprenticeships with adults at young ages, no juvenile delinquency, and no term for adolescence. Bear in mind that this is coming from a continuist historian focusing on one of the best places in the world—London—to expect historical continuity.

### Was Childhood an Invention?

The first major work on the history of childhood was published in French by Philippe Ariès in 1960 (subsequently published in English in 1962).<sup>13</sup> Based on his examination of historical records, largely in France, Ariès propounded a fairly radical idea, namely that the concept of “childhood” was an invention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, making its way to France around 1900. It didn’t become a “general phenomenon,” said Ariès—he means mainly in France—until “after the end of World War I.”<sup>14</sup> “Adolescence” came even later, said Ariès. During the twentieth century, “adolescence expanded: it encroached upon childhood in one direction, maturity in the other.”<sup>15</sup> Eventually, he said, adolescence came to dominate modern society.

Ariès based his ideas on a wide variety of records—among them, letters, works of fiction, paintings, and school registers—which led him to draw the following conclusions, among others:

***Inconsistent Language.*** Various words, such as “child,” “baby,” “youth,” “schoolboy,” “scholar,” and “student” (*enfant*, *puer*, *adolescens*, etc.) were used inconsistently and sometimes interchangeably until recent centuries. The terms could refer to people of a wide range of ages—even to people we now call adults. A term such as “child” typically designated a family relationship or a state of dependence, not an age.<sup>16</sup>

***Odd Portrayals of Children in Art.*** According to Ariès, “Medieval art until about the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it. It is hard to believe that this neglect was due to incompetence or incapacity; it seems more probable that there was no place for childhood in the medieval world.”<sup>17</sup> When images of children did begin to turn up, he says, it was common for children to be dressed in adult clothes, or, in many cases, the child was represented by a shrunken image of an adult “without any of the characteristics of childhood.”<sup>18</sup>

In some forms of art, children appeared naked, but they never appeared in children's clothes, and they were sometimes portrayed with adult musculature. What's more, said Ariès, children's toys didn't turn up in paintings until at least the eighteenth century. Paintings of children on their own were also late in coming, presumably because adults and young people were so intermingled until recent times. Ariès mentions exceptions—the realistic portrayal of children in ancient Greek art, realistic depictions of the baby Jesus, and so on—but he insists that realistic, sentimental portrayals of children were largely absent from European art until recent times.

***Lack of Caring.*** Perhaps the most controversial of Ariès' claims is that until recent times, parents simply didn't care very much about their children.

I remember being appalled when I read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* a few years ago (in overzealous preparation to see the musical) by the apparent indifference that French parents of the early nineteenth century had toward their children. Eponine, Gavroche, and other prominent characters in the book were children and teens abandoned and forgotten by their parents, fending for themselves on the streets of Paris; in that world, it seemed as natural as daylight for a savvy ten year old to be in charge of a gaggle of toddlers, all stealing and begging for their food.

The indifference, Ariès claimed, was a result of many factors, among them the extremely high mortality rate among infants and children in medieval Europe—perhaps 20 to 40 percent. “The general feeling was, and for a long time remained, that one had several children in order to keep a few,” he wrote.

The sixteenth-century philosopher Montaigne once wrote, “I have lost two or three children in their infancy, not without regret, but without great sorrow.”<sup>19</sup> Such an attitude may “shock our present-day sensibility,” writes Ariès—especially the fact that Montaigne didn't even know exactly how many children he had lost!—but that attitude prevailed until recent times.

***Intermingling of Children and Adults.*** Ariès' most persuasive arguments grow from records he produces from various schools which show, unequivocally, that people of very different ages studied together routinely until very recent times.

We're all familiar with the movie images of the prairie schoolhouse of the Old West, where young children and teens somehow learned together in the same room. Records from medieval schools in Europe show that this kind of arrangement was standard. At the Jesuit college of Caen in the 1600s, for example, class registers show a mixing of students from ages nine to twenty in various classes; at a school in Châlons, they run from eight to twenty-four.<sup>20</sup> Many of these ages were presumably estimated; Ariès shows that in many families—even prominent ones—parents didn't keep track of the exact ages of their children.

It was also not uncommon for people to complete their studies by their early teens; people we would now call “prodigies” emerged fairly frequently under this system—a rarity today. For hundreds of years in medieval Europe, age seemed to mean little or nothing in the dispensing of education. Young people and adults were also amply mixed in a wide range of professions: in agriculture, crafts, law, and so on. Ability, need, and opportunity were the forces that determined where young people turned up; age seemed to be completely irrelevant.

### Ariès in Perspective

In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, staff writer Joan Acocella reviews a new volume of historical essays about the family structure in Europe, posing and trying to answer an important question: “When did we start treating children like children?”<sup>21</sup>

She surveys much of the relevant literature, including recent essays and books that challenge Ariès’ views. But the more she digs, the more frustrated she becomes, eventually rejecting the tendency of modern historians to excuse and rationalize the cruelest behaviors imaginable in order to convince us that people have always loved and cared for their children the same way that we do today. The apologetic views of one such historian, Linda Pollock, leave Acocella “gasping for air.”

Ariès may have gone too far, but his revisionists appear to be guilty of a great deal of wishful thinking. Did some parents love and cherish their children as we do today? Of course. Even in *Les Misérables*, one of the main story lines is about such devotion. But in other respects, children were often treated with indifference or cruelty.

Attorney and legal scholar Donald T. Kramer, author of the definitive three-volume *Legal Rights of Children*, sums things up starkly:

*In ancient times, children were considered to be chattels owned by their parents, who had the right to do more or less what they wanted to do with them. They could educate them or not, as they so chose; they could inflict heinous corporal punishment on them or not, as they so chose; they could afford them medical treatment when needed or not, as they so chose. In short, children in early times all too frequently bore the same relationship to their parents as slaves did to their masters.*<sup>22</sup>

Historians, as is their tradition, will continue to debate Ariès’ thesis for many years.<sup>23</sup> But at least some of the basic facts are clear, and I don’t see how even the most zealous continuist historian<sup>24</sup> could deny them:

- For most of human history until the time of the Industrial Revolu-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Young Leaders

- *David G. Farragut entered the United States Navy in 1810 at age nine, commanded his first ship at age twelve, and eventually became Commander-in-Chief of the United States Navy during the Civil War.*
- *King Philippe I of France ascended the throne in 1060 at age seven.*
- *Amina Sarauniya Zazzua (1533-1610), became Queen of Zazzua, a province of Nigeria, when she was sixteen. Although she didn't assume full power for several years, she was given immediate responsibility for governing a ward in her city.*
- *The legendary Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt came into power at age seventeen.*
- *According to the Bible, King Josiah began his successful thirty-one year reign in Jerusalem at age eight.*

tion, the vast majority of children worked alongside adults as soon as they were able, and they transitioned to partial or full adulthood by their early, mid, or late teens. Even today, many and perhaps even most of the world's children (primarily in developing nations) follow this course (Chapter Three). In contrast, in most industrialized countries today teens are almost completely isolated from adults; they're immersed in "teen culture," required or urged to attend school until their late teens or early twenties, largely prohibited from or discouraged from working, and largely restricted, when they do work, to demeaning, poorly-paid jobs.

- Through most of human history and in most locales on earth, young people—females especially—married soon after puberty and often set up independent households after marriage.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, today in the United States the median age of first marriage is 26.9 for males and 25.3 for females.<sup>26</sup>
- It wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that the teen years came to be seen as dark and tumultuous and that adolescence was recognized as a separate stage of life that coincided with those years.

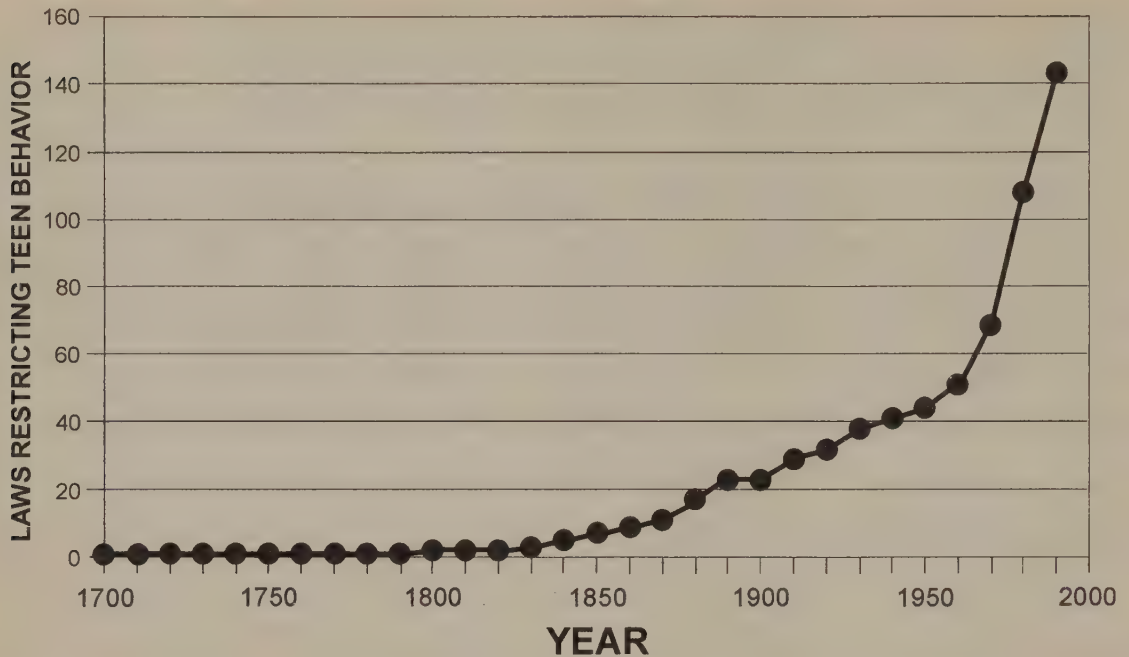
## THE INFANTILIZATION OF TEENS

In Chapter One I summarized the results of a survey I conducted with average teens, average adults, United States Marines, and incarcerated felons. The survey suggested that teens are subjected to far more restrictions than are any of the other groups—to roughly twice as many restrictions as incarcerated felons and active-duty Marines and to more than ten times as many as everyday adults. I also posed questions about the history of such restrictions: Were teens always limited in these ways? Could teens of times past drink, smoke, or make medical decisions for themselves?

Because this book is mainly about teens in the United States, I approached the issue by tracking down as many relevant laws as I could find in the United States over the last three hundred years. When I began this pursuit, I was worried that older laws would be harder to find than newer ones, which could easily produce a distorted picture: one might mistakenly conclude that the rate at which such laws are being enacted is increasing, not because it actually is increasing but simply because the older laws are inaccessible. As I looked into this further, my worries decreased, mainly because in many cases I was able to determine that newly enacted laws were the first of their kind: laws restricting drinking or skateboarding, for example, or laws requiring helmets for bicycle riding.

My search yielded a dramatic picture. (See Figure 2.1.) Before 1700 I could find only a few relevant laws, such as a 1641 Massachusetts law prohibiting anyone sixteen and over from “cursing” or “smiting” their parents and a related Massachusetts law punishing “a stubborn or rebellious son”; both were accompanied by references to Biblical verses.<sup>27</sup> The penalty for each offense was death, but I wasn’t able to find evidence of any actual executions. During the entire eighteenth century I found only a few new laws of unique character and then a few more during the early 1800s. But from the mid-1800s onward I found a steady and substantial accumulation of restrictive laws—about fifty distinctive laws between 1850 and 1960. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the sudden increase in rate that began in the 1960s; I found about *ninety* unique laws over the last four decades of the twentieth century. (See Appendix 5 for a timeline summarizing these laws.)

Just what is it that teens aren’t allowed to do, and why the burst of new restrictions in the late twentieth century?



**Figure 2.1. Infantilization of Teens Over Time.** Cumulative number of newly enacted local, state, and federal laws of unique character that restricted the behavior of young people (under eighteen) in the United States. They’re grouped by decade, from 1700 to 1999. Laws that are identical in nature are generally excluded from the graph. There are only a few pertinent laws before 1700, most notably two laws created by the “Generall Court” of (Colonial) Massachusetts in the 1640s condemning young people to death for “smiting” their parents or being “stubborn or rebellious.” The steeper the curve, the faster the laws are being enacted. Note the dramatic increase in rate after 1960.

### Widespread Restrictions

As we saw in Chapter One, there are many ways in which teens are restricted. Only a fraction are specifically encoded in laws. For example, one must be eighteen to deliver major newspapers in California, but that’s not strictly a matter of law. Rather, many papers now require the carriers to drive, to carry liability insurance, or to be able to sign contracts as independent contractors.<sup>28</sup> You can’t fulfill any of these requirements these days when you’re twelve—my age when I got my first paper route. There also aren’t specific laws, as far as I can tell, that say that teens can’t pick their own friends, make their own religious decisions, and so on. But the broad powers a parent has as a teen’s custodian—shared, to some extent by teachers, school administrators, and other authority figures—leave teens tightly under the control of adults.

Many restrictions are created by laws that don’t seem particularly broad on their face but that have sweeping effects. For example, because young people can’t sign contracts until they’re eighteen, they can’t, on their own, do a wide range of things that require contracts: They can’t get their own credit cards or telephones or cell phones or bank loans or cars. They can’t start businesses. They can’t buy property. They can’t get insurance. They can’t rent cars or boats or equipment or furni-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Bad News for Teens

*Bob, the middle-aged man sitting next to me on an airplane, didn't believe me when I told him that you have to be eighteen to deliver newspapers in California. He was eleven, he says, when he got his first route. In fact, the matter isn't simple: Under California Labor Code §1298, people as young as twelve can deliver papers under some circumstances. But most publishers, concerned about liability, stopped handing newspapers to minors years ago. They want their carriers to be independent adults who can sign contracts absolving the publisher from liability for any damages they might incur during deliveries. Although a 1993 appeals court decision in Pennsylvania says that even minors who deliver papers are independent contractors, California publishers aren't buying it. When, in some cases, adult carriers hand papers to minors to deliver, concerned citizens complain, as the prestigious Sacramento Bee found out recently. Bee circulation manager Connie Coan insists that they give papers to adults only: after that, "you're done with it."<sup>29</sup>*

ture or apartments or houses. They can't become actors or writers or artists—at least not for pay. They can't become professional athletes. They can't get married.

There are hundreds of activities in our society which require contracts, and young people can't engage in any of them unless Mom or Dad signs on—which gives parents derivative powers. Let's not mince words: because of the contract restriction alone, parents are in an excellent position to control young people through coercion. "If you don't finish washing those dishes, you're not getting the car tonight." Sound familiar?

Putting such issues aside for the moment, let's take a look at how some specific laws evolved in the United States. The recent era—from the 1960s on—deserves special treatment. For now, let's focus on the period from the mid 1800s to about 1960.

### Restricting the Labor of Young People

Many of the early laws restricting the behavior of young people were related to work. At first, the laws focused on work that put young people at risk; later, they began to focus on all work, no matter how benign. Some were promoted by concerned thinkers and leaders—many of them dynamic women, insisting that young people needed to be protected—and some by groups or individuals protecting their economic interests—labor unions and wealthy industrialists, for example. Courts frequently struck down such laws on various grounds.

As we've seen, one of the first laws in the world intended to limit labor by young people—largely ineffective—was enacted in England in 1788. England continued, in small increments, to restrict child labor through legislation passed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but by 1891 the minimum age for child labor had still only increased to age eleven.<sup>30</sup>

In the United States, the child labor movement also moved ponderously—at least at first. Pennsylvania passed the first relevant law in 1848, prohibiting young people under twelve from working in certain kinds of mills. A few other states had already passed weak laws restricting the work hours of young workers—usually to ten per day—but a 2000 study of the era by economists at Vanderbilt University concludes that “early child labor laws—and closely related compulsory schooling laws—were... ineffective.”<sup>31</sup> A comprehensive 1937 study of child labor in the United States by Katherine DuPre Lumpkin and Dorothy Wolff Douglas explains why: early child labor laws were often short-lived and almost always came with gaping loopholes. A law passed in 1849 in Maine, for example, was repealed the next year, and an early New Hampshire law could be circumvented with “written consent of parent or guardian.”<sup>32</sup>

By 1879 only seven states had child labor laws in place, and all were being ignored or circumvented to some extent. But in 1903, Illinois, the state that had recently opened the world's first juvenile court, passed a strong child labor law that also required young people to attend school, and by 1918 all states had joined the bandwagon with relevant laws of varying sorts.<sup>33</sup>

Nineteen hundred was a turning point for child labor in the United States, mainly because of that year's census results. The census revealed that more than 18 percent of America's young people between ages ten and fifteen—about two million individuals—were working long hours in factories, mines, mills, fields, and stores. It wasn't at all uncommon for young children to be working thirteen hours a day for two or three dollars a week. The census figures helped stimulate a national movement to prohibit most labor by young people. The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), founded by Felix Adler in 1904, spearheaded legislative efforts nationally, equating labor by young people with slavery. According to Adler, the labor practices of his day led to “the physical, mental and moral degeneration of hundreds of thousands of future fathers and mothers” and prevented “that future growth, that development of American civilization, that new type of manhood which we must give to the world in order to contribute to the world's riches.”<sup>34</sup>

Although Adler's passionate concerns about the new exploitation of young people in factories were legitimate, he appeared to overlook the fact that young

people had proudly worked alongside adults throughout human history. Should young people be *entirely* cut off from the working world—and from *adults*—because of the exploitative practices of the new factories? We'll revisit this question several times in this volume.

The NCLC was only partially effective in lobbying for comprehensive labor laws. In 1906, the United States Senate considered a proposal by Senator Albert J. Beveridge to limit child labor, but his colleagues argued that the federal government lacked the authority to do so, and the proposal died. In 1908 Adler hired photographer Lewis W. Hine to travel the country documenting the harsh use of young people in factories, and his moving photos—of soot-covered children leaving mine shafts, of dirty children standing near ominous-looking machines, and so on—were widely circulated.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, in 1916 Congress passed the ambitious Keating-Owen Child Labor Act that, among other things, prohibited young people under fourteen from working in nonagricultural industries that produced goods intended for export to other countries or for transport across state lines. Note that this was *indirect* legislation; Congress couldn't regulate child labor directly, but it could control interstate commerce. Just two years later in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, the United States Supreme Court struck down the law on the grounds that Congress had no business interfering with local labor matters through such indirect means. The case had been brought by the father of two young men (“one under the age of fourteen years and the other between the ages of fourteen and sixteen years”) in Charlotte, North Carolina, who argued that his offspring had a “constitutional right to work.”<sup>36</sup> Just a few months after the Supreme Court's decision Congress passed a similar law—this one based on the federal government's ability to levy taxes. Once again, however, the Supreme Court nullified the law.<sup>37</sup>

Undaunted, the NCLC and other organizations lobbied hard for Congress to pass a constitutional amendment empowering Congress to limit labor by people under age eighteen, and the amendment passed both houses in 1924. For the amendment to be binding, however, thirty-six state legislatures had to ratify it within a few years, but only a handful did so—another major blow for the movement to end labor by young people.

The 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression gave a boost to the movement, mainly because jobs were suddenly so scarce that leaders were desperate to exclude as many people as they could from the job market. With perhaps 27 percent of the population out of work, the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act established a minimum of age sixteen for workers in most industries

(this is where the magical age of sixteen—still with us today—was first born on the national level). Young people were also excluded from working in hazardous industries up to age eighteen. But the Supreme Court struck down the law in 1935, again on constitutional grounds.<sup>38</sup>

The exigencies of the Depression ultimately won out over the Supreme Court's constitutional concerns. The Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act, passed in 1936, prevented firms handling federal money from employing females under eighteen or males under sixteen. If you wanted a federal contract, you had to fire your young employees, pure and simple. Congress still uses this strategy today: the federal government can't meaningfully require people to wear seat belts, for example, because it doesn't control the roads, but it can (and does) force states to enact their own seat-belt laws by withholding federal highway construction funds from states that won't pass such laws. The Walsh-Healey Act stuck (more or less), and so did the comprehensive 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.\*

These laws laid the foundation for the labor system we have today, specifying, among other things: (a) that young people are prohibited from working in interstate commerce, (b) that you must be sixteen to work full-time, (c) that you must be eighteen to work in certain hazardous professions, (d) that you can't work while school is in session (in other words, school is more important than work), (e) that young people can't work without permits, and (f) that people from age fourteen to sixteen can work a very limited number of hours in some professions.<sup>39</sup>

### The Role of Labor Unions

None of these changes would have been possible without the strong support of organized labor, which had compelling economic motives for opposing labor by young people. Industrialization created a new affluent middle class and an extremely wealthy upper class, but it did so at the expense of millions of exploited laborers. It also pushed aside the centuries-old apprentice system that had allowed generations of young people to transition smoothly from childhood to adulthood.

In many of the new factories, with machines doing much of the work, almost any kind of laborer would do, and the cheaper the labor the better. The availability of youth workers, immigrants, and women drove the wages of skilled workers ever downward and left many adult males unemployed. As labor union pioneer Samuel Gompers put it, "the introduction of machinery, the subdivision of labor, the use of women's and children's labor and the lack of an apprentice system" drove the skilled trades

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\*The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, which is still in force today, was also challenged in court, but this time it held. In 1941, in *U.S. v. Darby*, the Supreme Court reversed its opinion in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*.

“to the level of pauper labor.”<sup>40</sup> In some cases young people—working for very low wages—were given jobs in factories where their own fathers had been laid off.<sup>41</sup>

It was inevitable that as workers organized themselves into unions in order to protect their jobs and improve their wages and working conditions, they vehemently fought all forms of youth labor. Organized labor was, according to historians, both “the head as well as the body” of the movement to prohibit young people from working.<sup>42</sup> As early as the 1830s groups such as the New England Workingmen’s Association and the General Trades Union were agitating to put appropriate laws in place. In its very first platform in 1881 the newly-formed Federation of Trade and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada—forerunner of Samuel Gompers’ American Federation of Labor (eventually the AFL-CIO)—made the youth labor issue a high priority: “We are in favor of the passage of laws in the several states forbidding the employment of children under fourteen in any capacity, under penalty of fine and imprisonment.”<sup>43</sup>

Between 1881 and 1905 there were thirty-seven thousand strikes in the United States involving over seven million workers; many were violent.<sup>44</sup> Workers were, understandably, determined to get a fair share of the obscene wealth of the new industrialists, and the youth issue remained central.

With child labor laws facing strong opposition (mainly from manufacturers, but also from young people and families who needed the income), in 1897 the AFL became the first organization in the United States to push for a constitutional amendment prohibiting all forms of youth labor, a concept, as I mentioned earlier, that finally got the support of Congress in 1924.<sup>45</sup> In the early years of the new century the AFL was also a major force behind new laws raising the minimum working age to sixteen or higher.

### The First Child Labor Laws

Curiously, some of the first child labor laws ever enacted weren’t meant to *limit* child but rather to *encourage* it. In the 1690s the eminent British philosopher John Locke advised English authorities to set up “working schools” in every parish that would prepare children age three and over to work in the largely home-based spinning and weaving industries.<sup>46</sup> Leaders of this era were intent on keeping young people busy—especially the children of the poor. According to Hugh Cunningham, “Potentially industrialisation offered a solution to a problem which had long irked the elite of Europe: the idleness of children”—and idle hands, as the saying goes, are the Devil’s tools.<sup>47</sup> Combine such thinking with the intense Puritan work ethic, and it shouldn’t surprise you that some of America’s first child labor laws were polar opposites of twentieth-century laws.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Reigning King at Sixteen

*Sometimes when young rulers are crowned, older stand-ins do the real decision making. But according to the “Book of Chronicles”, Uzziah, the tenth king of Judah, actually began to rule at age sixteen, and his leadership in Jerusalem was successful for fifty-two years. He built and fortified towers, fought off the Philistines, raised bountiful crops, and prepared great weapons for war.*

In a 1908 essay on child labor, reformer Edith Abbott said that early American policy makers were obsessed with the issue of “idleness among children” throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>48</sup> In 1640, for example, the “Great and Generall Court” of Massachusetts “required the magistrates of the several towns to see ‘what course may be taken for teaching the boys and girles in all towns the spinning of the yarne.’” The following year the same authority directed “all masters of families [to] see that their children and servants should be industriously implied so as the mornings and evenings and other seasons may not bee lost as formerly they have been.”<sup>49</sup>

In 1672 the Town of Boston directed a list of people to “dispose of their severall children... abroad for servants”; if not, “the selectman will take their said children from them and place them with such masters as they shall provide accordinage as the law directs.” The children, said Abbott, were as young as eight. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and other American colonies had similar laws. Children who were idle or who loitered were routinely “bound out”—indentured outside their homes.<sup>50</sup>

Policy makers in Colonial America would have been appalled by the revised definition of “child labor laws” that emerged in the late 1800s. In Colonial America, child labor was a *good* thing. (This would presumably be a problem for continuist historians.)

### Forcing School Attendance

The trend in labor laws is shadowed by a similar trend in education laws; as I mentioned earlier, sometimes the same law even covered both areas. The idea is simple enough: we don’t want young people to work, even if they want to work and have opportunities to work without being exploited; we want them to attend school, even if they don’t want to attend school and aren’t ready to learn.

The first education laws in the United States were enacted in Massachusetts, which stayed well ahead of the curve for more than two centuries. Colonial Massachusetts established the first public school in America, the Boston Latin School, in

1635, barely fifteen years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. In 1642 the Massachusetts Bay School Law was enacted, requiring parents to provide a modest education for children and servants (but not necessarily in school).

By 1827 Massachusetts had established the nation's first state-wide, tax-supported public school system, but the big shift came in 1852 when Massachusetts made school attendance compulsory for all children—requiring young people between eight and fourteen to attend school at least three months a year—unless, that is, the individual could demonstrate that he or she had already learned the relevant material. In other words, this law was *competency based*: you were exempt if you could demonstrate competence.

The rest of the nation was unimpressed; not a single state followed Massachusetts' lead for another fifteen years. Beginning in 1867, compulsory education laws began to spread, but it wasn't until 1918–56 years after Massachusetts took the lead—that all states finally had such laws.<sup>51</sup> The impact of the early laws was minimal, perhaps increasing actual school attendance by only 5 percent.<sup>52</sup>

It's no coincidence that the compulsory education laws emerged more-or-less in parallel with the laws restricting labor by young people. (See Figure 2.2.) As we'll see, some of the same people were driving both efforts, and both efforts were propelled in part by the underlying belief—new in human history—that young people are helpless and incompetent.

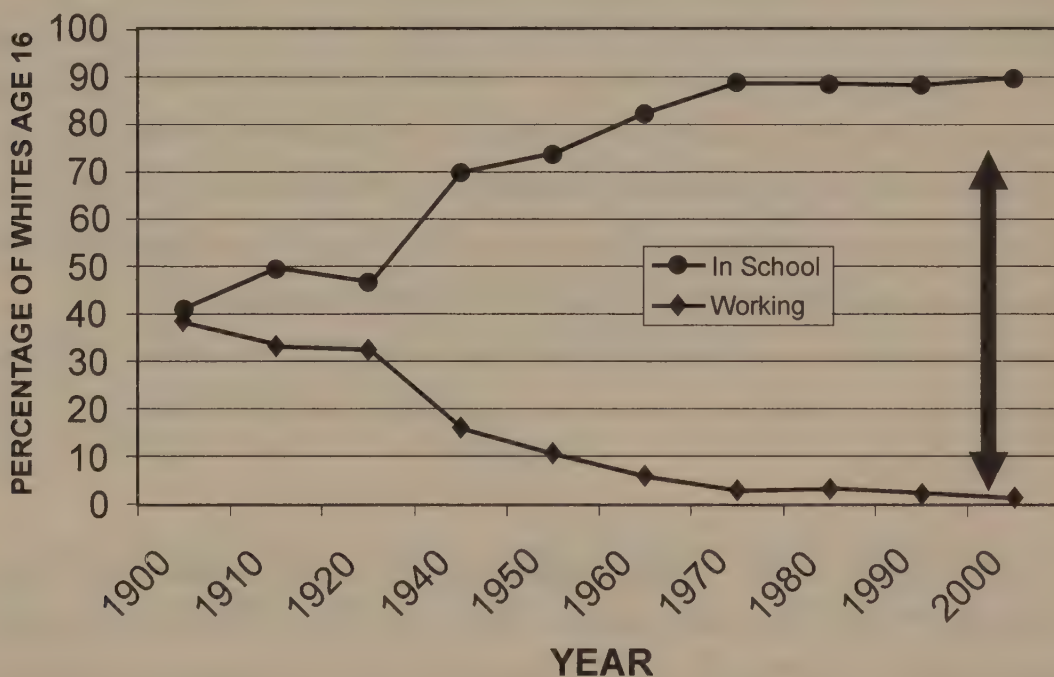


Figure 2.2. School vs. Work. U.S. Census data show the dramatic shift from school to work that occurred for teens during the twentieth century. The problem with the all-school-no-work gap (right side of graph) is that it isolates teens completely from adults, trapping them in a peer culture that has very little in common with the real world they are about to enter. Source: Data adapted from Fussell and Furstenberg, 2005.

The compulsory education movement was also driven by other concerns of the day: with America's immigrant population swelling daily (there were almost nine million immigrants during the first decade of the twentieth century alone), some felt that compulsory education was the best way to "Americanize" the rapidly changing population. Other reformers felt that compulsory education was the best way to try to reduce the widening gap between the new industrial rich and the hoards of poor who were toiling in the factories. As we'll see, the industrialists themselves sometimes supported compulsory education as a way of producing skilled workers—and as a way of keeping the masses in check.

Finally, with Germany's expansionist policies driving the world toward its first world war, American policy makers took serious note of the fact that Germany (or at least Prussia, a part of modern Germany) had had a compulsory education system in place since 1717.<sup>53</sup> (In contrast, England didn't require every community to have a school until 1870 and didn't make attendance mandatory until 1880.<sup>54</sup>) To compete with the Germans, many felt that we needed to emulate their educational practices, which could explain why the last states to make education compulsory did so in 1918—the last year of World War I. We saw a similar shift in education policy in the 1950s, when America was galvanized by a new threat: the Soviets' launch of the Sputnik satellite.

### The End of the Debate

Not everyone was on the compulsory education bandwagon, however. Some felt that government interference in education was a violation of individual rights and the sovereignty of the family. In the 1890s Pennsylvania's governor, expressing such concerns, vetoed two compulsory education bills that had been sent to him by the state legislature. Even more significant, in 1892 the Democratic Party stated as part of its national platform: "We are opposed to state interference with parental rights and rights of conscience in the education of children."<sup>55</sup>

Early compulsory education laws required relatively little class time, but the requirements have grown over the years. According to the Home School Legal Defense Association:

*By the early 1920s... all meaningful debate over the virtue of compulsory attendance had ceased. The discussions that continued centered on how compulsory attendance should be enforced, and for how long. The minimum age for compulsory attendance was forced steadily lower. Early compulsory attendance laws generally did not require attendance until a child turned eight, and in Ohio and South Dakota, attendance was not required until age ten.... [The] number of states requiring six-year-olds to attend school has risen dramatically, and today, twenty-eight states require attendance of six-*

year-olds.... During the same period [the late 1800s until today], the number of states requiring attendance until age eighteen grew steadily. In 1887, only Washington state required attendance to age eighteen. Today, fourteen states do. The average length of the school term was also growing. From 1887 until today, the average school term swelled from 130 to 180 days.<sup>56</sup>

As you may recall from Chapter One, some educators today are talking seriously about expanding the school day, expanding the school year, or even adding two more years to high school.

## The Age of Majority

We all know that people under eighteen are “minors,” and we tend to accept this designation as if it existed through all eternity. Not so. The age of majority was actually lowered in the United States not long ago, and young people have many rights long before they reach this magical and entirely arbitrary age.

What does majority actually mean? Basically, it’s the age at which a young person is granted the balance of civil rights which he or she doesn’t already have; majority marks “full” adulthood in the sense that there may be no right left for a culture to confer (although there are exceptions to this rule). In our culture, the civil rights that are usually withheld until the age of majority are:

- The right to enlist in the military without the consent of a parent
- The right to inherit property
- The right to vote
- The right to refuse or consent to medical treatment
- The right to sign contracts
- The right to buy and sell property (including stock)
- The right to marry without parental consent
- The right to file law suits
- The right to make or revoke a will

Minors already have a great many rights, but they can do nothing on the above list, generally speaking. What’s more, almost any right can be conferred at ages other than the age of majority. Many states issue drivers licenses to sixteen-year-olds, for example, or prohibit people from buying alcohol until age twenty-one. Most of the specific rights of majority are determined state by state.

Majority is an old concept, with precursors in the Bible, according to which twenty (not thirteen or eighteen or twenty-one) was the magical age at which a few

final rights were granted (see Chapter Twelve). In ancient Rome *pubertas*—generally reached at fourteen for males and twelve for females—marked the age at which most majority rights were achieved, including the right to make contracts, own property, make wills, and enter into marriage.<sup>57</sup>

Even though until recent times young people were integrated into adult society soon after puberty, a few rights were typically withheld until an arbitrary age or until young people got married, whichever came first. Until the Industrial Era the list of rights that were withheld was typically fairly short. For example, in the 1640s the Massachusetts Generall Court specified “twenty and one years” as the age for “passing away of lands” (bequeathing property in a will) and for “giving of votes, verdicts or sentences in any civil courts or causes.”<sup>58</sup> Since no other rights were mentioned, it’s likely that few other rights had previously been withheld.\*

Presumably, restrictions of this sort were imposed because the ruling elders of the time believed that certain actions—making out a will, for example—couldn’t be performed properly until one had accumulated a great deal of knowledge and experience. In some cases majority rules also helped to protect property rights and the political status quo. It’s only in recent times, however, that we’ve imposed significant and wide-ranging minority restrictions.

### New Crimes by the Dozen

Compulsory education laws and laws restricting labor by young people were new, but the Industrial Era also gave rise to dozens of laws of truly unique character: They singled out behavior that had never been subject to laws or regulations before, sometimes driven by new technologies (like the automobile) and sometimes driven by moral concerns. Here is a sampling of the kinds of laws that were emerging in the late 1800s and beyond:

*Singing, Smoking and More.* In Indiana in 1889 people under eighteen were prohibited from singing, playing a musical instrument, or begging on the streets; those eighteen and over could engage in these activities freely. Females under twelve were prohibited from working as prostitutes, and young people under twelve were prohibited from walking on ropes or wires or performing as acrobats. Although the United States Surgeon General didn’t condemn cigarette smoking until 1964, reformers in the late 1800s, increasingly concerned about the “fragility” of youth, lobbied hard to ban the sale of cigarettes to young people. (Women, after all—also considered frail—were strongly discouraged from smoking in public until well into the 1900s.) By 1890 twenty-one states and territories had such bans

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\*The same passage grants the right of “chusing of Guardians” to fourteen-year-olds.

in place, usually for people under sixteen.<sup>59</sup> Laws were also passed to discourage teen sexuality.

***Drinking Alcohol.*** On December 18, 1917, under pressure from the Anti-Saloon League and other temperance groups, Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting “the manufacture, sale, or transportation” of alcoholic beverages throughout the United States. It was ratified by the states in just over a year, on January 16, 1919. The resulting laws didn’t stop people from drinking, of course, just as today’s marijuana laws don’t stop people from smoking marijuana.<sup>60</sup> The main effect of Prohibition was to drive alcohol manufacture, sales, and consumption underground, putting much of the industry into the hands of organized crime.<sup>61</sup>

The curious thing is that before Prohibition, young people were often free to drink—or at least as free as adults were. In many states, young children equipped merely with a note from a parent could even purchase alcohol.<sup>62</sup> Widespread bans on teen drinking only began when Prohibition ended. When the eighteenth amendment was repealed in 1933, most states retained bans on drinking by young people, often setting the minimum drinking age at twenty-one.<sup>63</sup> In other words, we shifted from being a society where *everyone* could drink (except in states that had already banned alcohol in the years just prior to Prohibition), to one where *no one* could drink, to one where *everyone but young people* could drink. By 1933, with all young people forced to attend school and many forced out of the job market, the idea that all young people were incompetent was firmly embedded in American consciousness.

***Driving.*** The first restrictions on driving in California were enacted in 1913. (“Horseless buggies” had been around for more than twenty years at this point, and more than six thousand motor vehicles were registered in California in 1905 alone.) Under the new law, drivers were supposed to be at least sixteen, but no license or examination was required for people to drive.<sup>64</sup> It wasn’t until about 1940 that most states had laws in place similar to those in effect today, requiring drivers to be at least sixteen and to take some sort of driving test.<sup>65</sup>

***“Incorrigible” Behavior.*** Many of the new laws were especially intrusive, focusing on youthful activities that had either been long ignored or handled quietly or informally, usually within extended families. Illinois was especially aggressive. In 1879, for example, the legislature passed the Industrial School for Girls Bill, which allowed authorities to commit minor females to state “industrial schools” (a variation on the reformatory) until eighteen if they “frequented any street,” lacked “proper parental care,” “consort[ed] with reputed thieves or other vicious persons,” or were found in

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Jimmy Carter on Driving:

*“Drivers licenses were not required in Georgia until 1940, and many of us young farm boys were competent truck drivers, because our fathers needed us to deliver fertilizer and seed to the fields and to run other errands.... [My] father began to let me use his pickup on special occasions when I was twelve years old, as long as I went directly to the prom party and then straight back. Later, at the ripe old age of fifteen or so, I would just get his comment, ‘Drive safe’.”<sup>66</sup>*

a “house of ill-fame.”<sup>67</sup> A similar bill was passed for young males in 1883, allowing the state to commit them to industrial schools until they turned twenty-one.<sup>68</sup> Illinois also passed laws prohibiting young people from going to movies or dance halls, fighting, staying out past a certain hour, and behaving “incorrigibly.”<sup>69</sup>

Note that virtually all of these newly defined crimes had no victims. They were, if anything, “crimes against oneself”—at least from the perspective of the authorities. What’s more, most of these indiscretions were typical of the working class and poor, which raises questions about the motives of the some of the leaders who fought for such laws.

### The Turbulent Sixties

As for the acceleration of restrictions that began in the 1960s, I’m old enough to remember what happened. The times, as Bob Dylan put it, they were a’changin’.

In the 1950s, young Americans were fairly docile, but over the course of the 1960s, many went wild. Marijuana, LSD, and other drugs became commonplace in high schools and colleges; the advent of the birth control pill spawned the “free love” movement; the rising death toll in Vietnam (ultimately, over 50,000) led to a massive protest movement; court decisions and legislation regarding civil rights led to race riots, often spearheaded by teens; the national crime rate jumped 110 percent during the 1960s and an additional 48 percent during the 1970s.<sup>70</sup> The United States was, in some respects, a battlefield, and young people almost always seemed to be on the front lines.

To those in power it appeared that young people were out of control. It’s also possible, of course, that instability in society was simply allowing young people to reestablish themselves as young adults—as thoughtful, potentially valuable members of society. But by the 1960s few adults in America could conceive of teens as anything but incompetent, troublesome children. The natural, sadly predictable response

was to put stronger controls in place. After all, if your toddler keeps opening your front gate and running into the street, you build a tougher gate and put a lock on it.

Laws passed in recent decades which restrict young people include, among many others:

- ***New curfew laws.*** In what an ACLU lawyer dubbed a “curfew fever” in a 1994 article,<sup>71</sup> cities around the country have passed a variety of strict curfew laws in recent years, ostensibly to reduce crime, although no evidence exists to support the claim that curfews have that effect.<sup>72</sup> For example, an appeals court recently upheld a Dallas ordinance prohibiting minors from being in public areas from midnight to 6 A.M. on weekends and from 11 P.M. to 6 A.M. on weekdays.<sup>73</sup> In Massachusetts it’s illegal for anyone under eighteen to be driving on public roads late at night unless accompanied by a parent or guardian.<sup>74</sup>
- ***Tougher driving laws.*** Until a few years ago, most states issued unrestricted drivers licenses to teens who could pass a test at age sixteen. Now many states have established “graduated” systems for issuing licenses. At first, a teen may be able to drive only with a supervising adult family member; at some point, the teen may be able to drive only with certain passengers in the car; at a higher stage, the teen may be able to drive alone but only during certain hours. In New York, for example, full driving privileges aren’t attained until age eighteen, no matter what one’s level of competence.<sup>75</sup>
- ***Laws restricting teen wages.*** Although minors are protected by the 1963 federal Equal Pay Act, which requires that males and females get equal pay for equal work, under amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act working minors are often exempt from the minimum wage requirement. Depending on the job, minors have to make do with between 75 and 85 percent of the minimum wage, and even eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds may be subject to a reduced minimum wage “during their first ninety consecutive calendar days of employment.”<sup>76</sup> These minimum wage exemptions are yet another result of union efforts to keep young people out of the job market.
- ***Laws preventing young people from entering “places of amusement.”*** In 1983, for example, a court upheld a Dacono, Colorado law that prohibited people under sixteen from entering arcades during school hours unless accompanied by an adult.<sup>77</sup> In 1981 a court

upheld a far more restrictive law in Des Plaines, Illinois, that required that video games can be placed only in “licensed liquor establishments” and that people had to be at least twenty-one to play them unless accompanied by an adult.<sup>78</sup> Similar laws in some states prohibit minors from entering pool halls, dance halls, and other places of iniquity; in 1989 in the case of *City of Dallas v. Stanglin*, the Supreme Court upheld the validity of such laws, asserting that authorities have a legitimate right to protect teens from the “corrupting influence of older teenagers and young adults.”<sup>79</sup>

- ***New laws curtailing potentially erotic activities.*** In 1989, for example, an appeals court upheld the validity of a new rule prohibiting dances in all schools in a school district in Missouri.<sup>80</sup> In 1968 in the case of *Ginsberg v. New York* the Supreme Court upheld a New York statute prohibiting the sale of obscene material to people under seventeen based on the “appeal” of such materials to minors; in other words, the statute encompassed material that would not necessarily be considered obscene to adults and thus established a *new and separate obscenity standard* for minors. Justice Stewart justified the ruling by suggesting that “a child is not possessed of that full capacity for individual choice which is the presumption of first amendment guarantees.”<sup>81</sup>
- ***Restrictions on free speech at school.*** In 1988 the Supreme Court ruled that the freedom of the press guaranteed by the First Amendment does *not* apply to school newspapers.<sup>82</sup> Presumably, eminent writers such as Edgar Allan Poe (“The Pit and the Pendulum”), Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*), and S. E. Hinton (*The Outsiders*)—all of whom wrote disturbing works in their teens—would have been prohibited under current laws from sharing their work with their peers. At this writing the California Supreme Court is about to hear the case of “George T.,” who, at fifteen, was expelled from the Santa Teresa High School in San Jose in 2001 for writing a poem that contained the lines, “For I can be the next kid to bring guns to kill students at school... / For I am Dark, Destructive & Dangerous.” George wasn’t just expelled; he was sentenced to one hundred days in a state reformatory.<sup>83</sup> The latest trend: prohibiting students from bringing cell phones to school, because they’re used “to cheat, take inappropriate photos in bathrooms and organize gang rendezvous.” Students are still sneaking the phones into school,

however—in some cases to mollify parents who insist on calling them frequently to check up on them.<sup>84</sup>

- ***Laws restricting access to the Internet, movies, and more.*** The movie rating system, first established in 1968 and revised substantially in 1990, prevents people under seventeen from seeing R-rated films unless accompanied by a parent or guardian. Minors can't see NC-17 (formerly "X") movies at all<sup>85</sup>—unless, of course, they know even the minimum about how to use the Internet. Libraries and schools nationwide now block access to Internet material that authorities believe might be harmful to minors. Internet usage on school computers is strictly regulated, and some teens have been suspended, expelled, or prosecuted for setting up websites on their home computers that school officials find objectionable.<sup>86</sup> Efforts in the 1980s by Tipper Gore, wife of former vice president Al Gore, to get legislators to prevent teens from purchasing violent or profane audio tapes or CDs were not successful, but they did lead to a rating system. Music that contains profanities, for example, now bears the mark "Parental Advisory—Explicit Content."<sup>87</sup>
- ***New laws curtailing sexual activity.*** Numerous court decisions over the past few decades have upheld new state laws prohibiting sexual activity by minors or sexual activity between minors and adults. In some states, like California, there is no "age of consent," which means that no one eighteen or over can have sex legally with anyone under eighteen. In other words, an eighteen-year-old high school senior can be prosecuted for having sex with his or her seventeen-year-old boyfriend or girlfriend. On the other hand, it's also *legal* in California for two thirteen-year-olds to have sex with each other. The details are complicated, surprising, and ever-changing (see Chapter Eight).
- ***New laws curtailing a young woman's right to an abortion.*** Various states have passed tough laws in recent decades requiring young pregnant women to get the consent of one or both parents before getting an abortion. In several rulings beginning in the late 1970s the U. S. Supreme Court has generally upheld these laws, as long as they allow for a court to bypass the required parental consent.<sup>88</sup> See Chapter Seven for further details.
- ***Censorship of educational materials.*** Propelled by concerns about political correctness, school districts nationwide have censored reading

materials, sometimes taking the knife to timeless masterpieces. In 1989 an appeals court upheld a Florida high school's decision to delete portions of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*.<sup>89</sup>

- ***Dress codes.*** Public schools nationwide have exercised tighter control over the way students dress—sometimes requiring uniforms, sometimes prohibiting earrings or gang emblems, and so on. The courts have generally upheld the right of schools to restrict school dress, because school officials are often considered to be substitute parents.<sup>90</sup>
- ***New laws governing changes in appearance.*** Most states have now enacted laws restricting a young person's right to get a piercing or tattoo, or even to enter a tanning salon.<sup>91</sup> Such laws sometimes lead teens to get their piercings done by their peers (greatly increasing the risk of infection), to get tattooed illegally, or to slather on the tanning oil (much riskier than getting tanned at a salon).
- ***Laws restricting participation in lottery.*** In 1986 an appeals court upheld the validity of a new Massachusetts law that made it illegal for minors to purchase state lottery tickets.<sup>92</sup>
- ***Tougher smoking laws.*** In Chapter One I mentioned proposed legislation in California that would ban cigarette sales to people under twenty-one. Many cities nationwide have now banned cigarette sales to minors through vending machines, and the 1992 Public Health Service Act (the Synar Amendment) makes it illegal to sell or distribute tobacco products to people under eighteen,<sup>93</sup> with a subsequent federal law requiring retailers to verify the age of anyone who appears to be twenty-six or under. But according to the Department of Health and Human Services, "Despite laws in all fifty states that prohibit sales to minors, numerous studies show that adolescents have little difficulty purchasing tobacco products."<sup>94</sup>
- ***Tougher, more uniform drinking laws.*** In the early 1970s many states lowered the minimum age for alcohol consumption to eighteen, but the trend was short-lived.<sup>96</sup> In 1984, through the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, the federal government threatened to withhold highway construction funds from states that failed to raise the minimum drinking age to twenty-one. The minimum age had previously varied from state to state (with about thirty states setting the minimum at eighteen), but by 1998 all states complied with the new mandate.<sup>97</sup> In the late 1980s Wisconsin made it illegal for one minor to furnish alcoholic beverages to

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Hero or Drug Dealer?

On April 22, 1998, thirteen-year-old Brandy Dyer had an asthma attack on her school bus. Responding to pleas for help from the bus driver, sixth-grader Christine Rhodes, age twelve, came to the rescue with her prescription inhaler. To Brandy's parents, Christine was a hero, but to school authorities at the Mount Airy Middle School in Mount Airy, Maryland, Christine was illegally distributing drugs—a serious matter that would remain on school records for three years.<sup>95</sup>

another minor.<sup>98</sup> In 1991 in North Carolina, it became illegal to serve liquor to a minor in one's home.<sup>99</sup> A new law in Naperville, Illinois has even made it illegal for minors to attend parties at which minors are drinking illegally—even if they themselves aren't drinking.<sup>100</sup>

- ***Involuntary commitment by parents or the courts.*** This is a complicated area, but because minors generally can't make their own decisions about medical or psychiatric care, the courts have generally found that parents or physicians (or the courts themselves) can commit teens to psychiatric or other types of institutions against their will. With teens getting harder to handle, parents are resorting to this option with increasing frequency; according to one source, the rate of commitment of minors in the United States “tripled or even quadrupled” between 1980 and 1998.<sup>101</sup> A 1998 book by Gary B. Melton, Phillip M. Lyons, and Willis J. Spaulding documents another disturbing trend in the institutionalization of minors: the recent interlocking of the juvenile justice, child welfare, and mental health systems, which has resulted in the “unplanned” incarceration of minors for long periods. The systems, say the authors, are “substantially interchangeable,” and individuals often “bounce from one system to another for treatment.”<sup>102</sup> The logic is that if one system isn't working, perhaps another one will—or at least that it will relieve the current system of the burden of care. Some of the “transinstitutionalization” that is now taking place has been made possible by the 1974 federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act. Although one goal of the act was to remove some minors from the juvenile justice system, in fact offenders are often simply “re-labeled as emotionally disturbed and placed in mental hospitals.”<sup>103</sup> Once an individual is placed in such a

facility—especially a “private, third-party” institution being supported with public funds—administrators have no incentive to release him or her. If you let the client go, the money stops flowing.

- *Hospitalization initiated by schools.* Another well-intentioned law, the 1997 federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has also led to the involuntary institutionalization of teens. The act guarantees a “free public education” to people with “unique needs.” This sounds good, but according to Melton, Lyons, and Spaulding, the IDEA has become “a funding mechanism for psychiatric hospitalization.”<sup>104</sup> Some courts, they say, have held that because the act is so broad, it requires schools to pay for “hospitalization or other therapeutic residential placement” when the schools themselves can’t provide appropriate education for students with special needs.<sup>105</sup> Though the costs are burdensome and sometimes prohibitive, some schools are only too willing to get such students out of their hallways.
- *Involuntary electroshock therapy.* Electroshock therapy, also known as ECT (“electro-convulsive therapy”) was invented in 1939, and since that time its use with minors has become more common. According to a recent book by psychologist Steve Baldwin and ECT researcher Melissa Oxlad, “with minors, use of ECT escalated during the 1970s.”<sup>106</sup> Because minors can’t make decisions about their own medical treatment, “explicit consent has rarely been obtained” from them.<sup>107</sup> Baldwin and Oxlad complain of a “chronic under reporting of this form of treatment with minors,” but they believe that between 500 and 3,500 minors are treated with ECT each year in the United States—in many cases for “delinquency,” “aggressiveness,” or other tendencies that wouldn’t normally be considered signs of mental illness.<sup>108</sup> But the real tragedy here is that, according to the authors, “there is no scientific evidence to support the use of shock with minors.”<sup>109</sup> They argue—persuasively, I believe—that the objections psychiatrists raise to the abandonment of ECT with minors are based on their desire to maintain their “clinical freedoms,” as well as “economic concerns about ‘restraint of trade.’”<sup>110</sup>
- *Heightened security levels at schools.* The school shootings of the late 1990s added those larger locks I talked about earlier: metal detectors, locker inspections, drug testing, video monitoring, and armed guards at schools around the country. The federal Gun-Free Schools

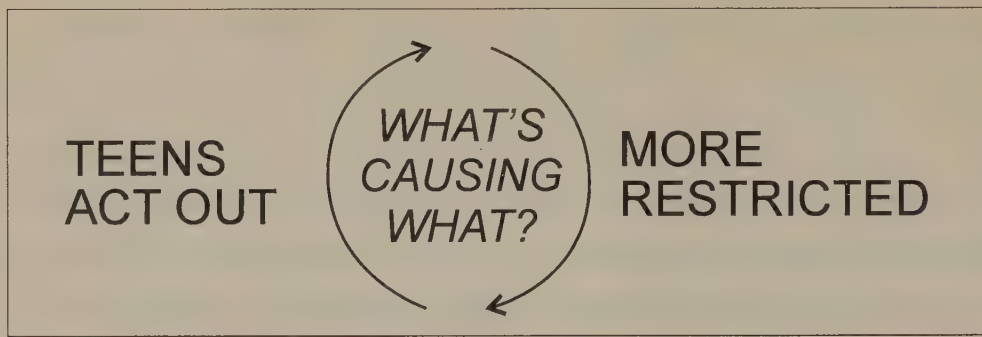
Act of 1994 set in motion “zero-tolerance” policies at schools nationwide and gave administrators broad powers to suspend or expel students over virtually any infraction that was even remotely weapons related. An Oakland, California high school now monitors student behavior continuously with more than fifty video cameras; at last report, eight advanced “Pelco Spectra II” cameras (with a 360-degree field of view) were on order.<sup>111</sup> In 2001, in central Florida, National Merit Scholar Lindsay Brown was arrested, suspended, and denied the opportunity to graduate with her high school class because an astute security guard noticed a “kitchen knife” in the back seat of her car while it was parked on school property.<sup>112</sup> In 2002, in Martinez, California, thirteen-year-old Jeffrey Figueroa was sentenced to juvenile hall for hitting another student in the eye with a spitball, and both he and his parents were ordered to attend anger management classes.<sup>113</sup> And in 2001 in Jonesboro, Arkansas (where four students and a teacher had been killed by students in 1998)—and, yes, this really happened—a first-grader was suspended from school for pointing a breaded chicken finger at a teacher and saying “Pow, pow, pow.”<sup>114</sup> The heightened security at our schools has made many of them more prison-like than ever before—reminiscent of the industrial schools established in Illinois in the late 1800s.

- ***Tougher criminal justice laws.*** Reacting (and sometimes overreacting) to headlines about teen crime and school shootings, some states have made it easier to shift cases from the juvenile court system to the adult criminal justice system. Proposition 21, for example, passed in California in March 2000, allows prosecutors to bypass judges in deciding to prosecute minors as adults.

## A Vicious Cycle

Sometimes new laws and other restrictions don’t work, in the sense that young people or authorities simply ignore them. But of greater concern is the possibility that the restrictions help perpetuate a vicious cycle of action and reaction: Our teens act out in some way (by showing disrespect, breaking an existing law, or wandering into some new area of danger, such as the Internet or the video arcade), and we respond with new or tougher laws, which in turn cause teens to act out even more. (See Figure 2.3.)

As you’ll see throughout this book (and especially in Chapter Five)—and as you can see quite easily simply by looking around you—teens often react negatively when



**Figure 2.3. The Proverbial Vicious Cycle.** As teens become more unmanageable, society further restricts their behavior, which in turn causes some teens to act out in more extreme ways.

they're treated like children—sometimes with strong words and sometimes in more extreme ways. Unfortunately, as blacks and women can attest, authorities don't listen very carefully to people they consider to be incompetent or "incurable."

### Restrictions Coming Soon

Many new laws are in the offing, and you can guess the direction. As I was writing this section, I glimpsed the following headline in the morning paper: "Bill Would Bar Teenagers From Tanning Salons." California assemblyman Joe Nation doesn't want teens entering tanning parlors without a physician's prescription.<sup>115</sup> Nation's bill was prompted by his own struggle with skin cancer, even though his cancer wasn't produced by tanning salons.<sup>116</sup>

Also in the news: the California State Senate has just passed legislation that will make it illegal for people under eighteen to use cell phones while driving, even with a headset.<sup>117</sup> The logic—based on no actual data—is that teens are more easily distractible than adults. In reality, our perceptual powers and reaction times are at their peak in our early and mid teens (see Chapter Seven). And the United States Senate is now considering legislation that would prohibit anyone from transporting a minor over state lines for the purpose of having an abortion without her parents' knowledge or consent.<sup>118</sup>

On the youth labor front, some lawmakers are now trying to implement the recommendations of a report by the Board on Children, Youth, and Families (an advisory group established by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council), which expressed concern about the poor education our high school students are getting. The report recommended prohibiting sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students from working more than 20 hours per week because "low-intensity employment may support post-secondary outcomes while higher-intensity employment may hinder them."<sup>119</sup> In other words, even if they'd rather work than learn, young people might learn more if we prevent them from working. *Maybe*. But perhaps they'll just get angrier and more frustrated because they have fewer options and less money. (See Appendix 5 for other restrictions.)

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Worm Business Buried

*During the summers when he was eleven and twelve, Joey Cadieux of Cromwell, Connecticut, made a few extra dollars each month selling nightcrawlers to fishermen. He'd prowl around his yard on rainy nights with a flashlight, find the worms, then store his inventory in his basement in a wooden box full of dirt.*

*But thirteen proved to be an unlucky age for Joey. When a member of the town's Planning and Zoning commission saw the hand-lettered "NITE CRAWLERS" sign in front of Joey's house, he brought the matter before the commission, which ordered Joey's dad to remove the sign and stop the sales. To plead his case before the commission, Joey or his dad would have to pay a \$130 filing fee—far more than Joey earns on the business in a summer.*

*Complaints to the board have elicited some regrets—but not to a lifting of the ban. Town Planner Craig Minor promises to argue on Joey's behalf if the matter is appealed. Minor likens the business to a "farm stand," which is unregulated.*

*Meanwhile, at this writing, the summer is over, and the inventory is still wriggling in the basement.<sup>120</sup>*

We're also attempting to spread the restrictions we have on youth labor to countries around the world, in part by providing financial support (\$45 million in 2003) to ILO-IPEC—the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor, sponsored by the International Labor Organization.<sup>121</sup> As you'll see in Chapter Three, the outcomes of such interventions are sometimes disastrous.

## ORIGINS OF THE CHILD-CENTERED FAMILY

As a child I often heard the Yiddish expression "*Alles für die kinder*" ("Everything for the children")—mainly from one of my grandfathers, who probably learned it when he was growing up around the turn of the twentieth century. He always said it with a tired sigh, as if the very idea were exhausting.

American radio guru Laura Schlessinger chides listeners with similar advice over the airwaves daily. She identifies herself as "my child's mom" and routinely advises working moms to quit their jobs and stay home with the children. The message is the same one I heard from my grandfather: children should be the center of the family. Their needs come first. Everything for the kids.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Goethe on Parenting

*“Too many parents make life hard for their children by trying, too zealously, to make it easy for them.”*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

My own mother believes in this idea, but I’ve always detected my grandfather’s sigh in her attitude; for one thing, since I was young she’s had a sign on her refrigerator reading, “Insanity is inherited; you get it from your children.” There’s a price to be paid, it seems, for putting children on pedestals.

Child-centered thinking is now firmly entrenched in American culture, however exhausting it might be. Where did it come from?

### The Child as Animal

Which do you think came first: laws against cruelty to children or laws against cruelty to animals? Given today’s thinking, the logical answer would be “children,” but that isn’t so. Parental authority was considered so absolute during most of human history that no state authority would dare to interfere with it; children were indeed little more than family “chattel,” as Donald T. Kramer told us.

Government reached out to help defenseless animals long before it worried about children. The first law to protect animals was passed by the British Parliament in 1822, and two years later the (British) Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was formed. The American version—the “ASPCA”—didn’t appear until 1866, and the first legislation protecting animals in the United States was passed that same year. The New York branch of the ASPCA—the NYSPCA—run by its founder Henry Bergh, proved to be the catalyst that finally put children on the legal map.<sup>122</sup>

“Mary Ellen” was a twelve-year-old girl who was beaten daily by her foster parents. In 1874 Mrs. Charles Wheeler, a church employee, took it upon herself to rescue poor Mary Ellen, but the authorities were uncooperative. There were simply no laws on the books that prevented such abuse. As a last resort, Wheeler approached the NYSPCA for help. Bergh took the case, ultimately arguing before the United States Supreme Court that Mary Ellen deserved protection as a “human animal.” Remarkably, in an 1875 decision the court ruled in his favor, and Mary Ellen was saved.<sup>123</sup>

This landmark ruling laid the foundation for the modern child protection movement. That same year saw the founding of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—the first society of its kind in the world. Two simi-

lar organizations were founded in Massachusetts in 1877 and 1878, respectively. England finally caught up in 1884 with the founding of its National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.<sup>124</sup>

The United States Supreme Court had, in effect, decided that government has an interest in protecting *all* of its citizens—even little ones—and that this interest supersedes the interest that a parent has in raising his or her children. The state now had the right to remove children forcibly from abusive or neglectful parents, and that right has since been clarified and expanded in scores of laws and court decisions. Children not only need protection, they need the *state's* protection. This simple idea, which most people in the industrialized world take for granted today, barely existed in the human psyche until 1875, and it followed and was inspired by the state's interest in protecting animals.

Again, it's clear that the sentimental view of children is a fairly recent phenomenon in human history. Philippe Ariès may have been wrong in his assertion that childhood was “invented” in the 1800s, but it's undeniable that the status of children changed dramatically on the timetable Ariès specified.

### Jane Addams, Mother of the World

When Jane Addams was barely three years old—sickly, homely, and very vulnerable—her mother died. Perhaps the loss of mother-love at a critical time in her young life led her to experience exaggerated feelings of motherhood—a sense that all of humankind needed to benefit from her nurturing instincts. She was also born with a spine so deformed that she was never able to have children. Whatever her motivations, she was an extraordinary individual, known during the early twentieth century as the “Mother of the World.” When it comes to teens, however, I think her good intentions went awry.

Laura Jane Addams was born in Illinois in 1860, the daughter of a wealthy mill owner and state senator. She completed her undergraduate education at age twenty-one at the Rockford Female Seminary (in Illinois), a school with a strong missionary tradition. Her fifty-nine-year-old father died unexpectedly the same year, and soon after his death she had an emotional breakdown. She was subsequently diagnosed with “neurasthenia”—a condition we would probably label “major depression” today—from which she suffered for at least the next eight years. She spent most of those years traveling through Europe, where she was shaken by the suffering of the poor and homeless who crowded Europe's newly industrialized cities.<sup>125</sup> She later recalled her distress upon witnessing poor people bidding on rotten vegetables one night in London:

*Their pale faces were dominated by that most unlovely of human expressions, the cunning and shrewdness of the bargain-hunter who starves if he cannot make a successful trade, and yet the final impression was not of ragged, tawdry clothing nor of pinched and sallow faces, but of myriads of hands, empty, pathetic, nerveless, and workworn, showing white in the uncertain light of the street, and clutching forward for food which was already unfit to eat.*<sup>126</sup>

On a subsequent trip to Europe she also visited London's Toynbee Hall, a "social settlement house" devoted to helping the poor and oppressed, and she was inspired by the kindness she witnessed there.<sup>127</sup> Her Quaker upbringing, seminary training, and travels on the Continent set her on a righteous path: to relieve the suffering of the poor, to bring education to the masses, to improve the lot of women and children and immigrants, and to bring peace to humankind. Perhaps it sounds like she bit off more than she could chew, but over her long and illustrious career Addams actually accomplished most of her goals.

### **Hull-House**

In September 1889, Jane Addams and her friend Ellen Gates Starr opened Hull-House, a settlement house in Chicago's downtrodden Nineteenth Ward—the first of many such institutions in the United States. Its initial purpose was to improve the lot and the lives of its poor immigrant neighbors, but within four or five years the house's mission expanded enormously. Addams, the settlement's zealous and indefatigable director, soon realized that the many good deeds the house did for those in desperate need "could not but seem futile and superficial."<sup>128</sup> To have a significant impact on social welfare, one must, she concluded, move into the political realm.

Addams soon made Hull-House a center for clubs, classes, organizations, and political initiatives serving many causes and populations and bringing together some of the most capable and formidable women of her day. Bear in mind that the late 1800s produced some of America's first female college graduates and professionally trained women; the very cream of the crop ended up at Hull-House at one time or another. The impact of Hull-House on both American thinking and government policy was nothing short of amazing. Unless you are a history buff you may never have heard of Hull-House before, but it's likely that people or programs connected with it have affected you throughout your life.

### **Multiple Movements, One Building**

The emergence of adolescence coincided with three other major upheavals

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

## Wayward Women

Ruth Alexander, a history professor at Colorado State University and author of the book *The "Girl Problem,"* has taken a careful look at some of the young women who were committed to New York state reformatories in the early 1900s. Ella Waldstein was typical. At sixteen, she was "going around with a bad crowd of girls," and her conservative, working-class parents suspected her of getting involved with an older married man. After repeatedly ignoring her parents' directives to stay home in the evenings, they took her to juvenile court, where she was convicted of "willful disobedience" and committed to the New York State Reformatory for Women at Bedford Hills for the "standard" three-year sentence. The women in such facilities, says Alexander, were poor or working class, and most were seeking independence from their families or caretakers, sometimes because of abuse. "The only thing I wanted," said one of the young women she studied, "was freedom."<sup>129</sup>

in American history: the Industrial Revolution (which ultimately spawned the child labor laws, the first significant one having been passed in 1848, as I noted earlier); the beginning of widespread compulsory education (the first compulsory attendance law was passed in 1852); and the women's rights movement (the first convention to promote women's rights was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848). Three major movements were all set in motion in the blink of an eye.

This is no coincidence. With women finally beginning to get a voice in public policy making, it's no surprise that one of their traditional concerns—the protection of children—would find new outlets.<sup>130</sup> It's a bonus to find that all of these movements ended up under one roof for several decades. Consider this remarkable statement from the 1926 Congressional Record Report on Hull-House:

*...practically all the radicalism started among women in the United States center about Hull House, Chicago, and the Children's Bureau, at Washington, with a dynasty of Hull House graduates in charge of it since its creation.*<sup>131</sup>

Also consider a comment by University of Chicago scholar Jean Bethke Elshtain in the introduction to *The Jane Addams Reader*:

*Nearly every piece of major reform in the years 1895-1930 came with Jane Addams' name attached in one way or another, including labor and housing regulations,*

*employment regulations for women and children, the eight-hour workday, old-age and unemployment insurance, as well as measures against prostitution, corrupt politicking, and vice for public officials, public playgrounds, and the creation of juvenile and domestic court systems.*<sup>132</sup>

### The Hull-House Legacy

Addams' reach was extraordinary. She either founded, helped to found, or was a major player in the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Juvenile Protective Association, the Immigrant's Protective League, the Campfire Girls, the National Child Labor Committee, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Consumer's League, the National Peace Congress, the Women's Peace Party, and at least a dozen other major organizations.<sup>133</sup> She and her colleagues were also behind major new legislation requiring school attendance and restricting youth labor, including the 1903 Illinois law I mentioned earlier. Addams also set in motion the world's first juvenile justice system (in Cook County, Illinois in 1899—more about this soon), was a major player in the women's suffrage movement (which finally secured the vote for American women in 1920), was influential in the creation of at least four labor unions (all founded on the premises of Hull-House), and was one of the world's most active and influential advocates for world peace. For her peace-making efforts Addams was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931, making her the first woman ever to have won this mother of all prizes.<sup>134</sup>

Hull-House also spawned the first Boy Scout troop in Chicago, the first public swimming pool in Chicago, the first public playground in Chicago, the first free art exhibits in Chicago, the first college extension courses in Chicago, the first public kitchen in Chicago, the nation's first model tenement code, and the nation's first citizen preparation classes—among many other innovative social programs.<sup>135</sup>

Addams gave formidable women from around the country a powerful platform from which to launch reforms. Influential Hull-House residents included, among many others:

- Alzina Stevens, who became the first probation officer in the world's first juvenile court and who also helped to create legislation in Illinois that shortened the work day for women and children.
- Julia Lathrop, who eventually became the first director of the federal Children's Bureau.
- Florence Kelley, who helped to create legislation to establish a minimum wage.

- Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge, who were active in women's suffrage and who helped to create the nation's first university-based school of social work (at the University of Chicago).
- Grace Abbott (Edith's sister), the force behind the 1921 federal Sheppard-Towner Act, which became a model for later legislation providing welfare assistance for women and children.<sup>136</sup>

Not everyone was a fan, however. Industrialists branded Addams a socialist, the American Legion denounced her repeatedly, and the Daughters of the American Revolution called her “a factor in a movement to destroy civilization and Christianity.”<sup>137</sup> She was, after all, a major threat to the status quo, and her staunch opposition to United States involvement in World War I appeared unpatriotic. But millions of others knew her as “Saint Jane,” and she was indeed a sort of mother to the world.

Hull-House continued to function after Addams' death, but in a much lower key and with much shakier funding. Finally, in 1963, most of the Hull-House buildings were torn down to make room for a new campus of the University of Illinois. The original mansion has been retained as a museum.

I've taken us on this foray into Jane Addams' universe in order to try to personalize the artificial extension of childhood. Addams and others like her had strong convictions and powerful voices and connections. They had many agendas, and one was to protect children and teens. But not all of their motives were benign, and some of the programs they set in motion have had negative consequences. More important, some of Addams' allies in the movement to “save” young people had very different agendas than did Addams herself.

## NEW FORMS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

In 1969 Anthony M. Platt, a long-time professor of social work at California State University Sacramento, published a provocative little book—*The Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency*—which questioned the motives of Addams and some of her associates.\* Were the efforts of the child savers—Felix Adler, Henry Bergh, and the legions of determined women at Hull-House—entirely benevolent? Definitely not, says Platt.

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\*The book was published, to its credit, by The University of Chicago Press. The University of Chicago was founded just a few years after Hull-House and became the faculty home of many of Hull-House's most distinguished residents. A second edition of Platt's book appeared in 1977, also under the imprint of The University of Chicago.

Virtually all of the leaders in this movement were members of the new middle class, or, in the case of Addams, Breckinridge, Kelley, and many others at Hull-House, the wealthy upper class. Addams' father, says Platt, "was one of the richest men in northern Illinois and her brother, Harry Haldeman, was a socialite from Baltimore who later amassed a large fortune in Kansas City."<sup>138</sup> Addams never received a salary from Hull-House because she didn't *need* one. Platt argues that many of these reformers weren't really protecting young people but rather were "devising new forms of social control to protect their power and prestige."<sup>139</sup> They were protecting *themselves*, he says, not the people they appeared to serve.

Platt is especially skeptical about the new juvenile justice system and, to some extent, the promotion of compulsory education and the child labor laws. Here are three of the major ideas he developed in his book:

### Platt on the Child Labor Laws

Progressivism—the political movement that encompassed many of the social reforms of the day—was "predominantly a businessman's movement," says Platt. Child labor legislation was often propelled by big business, because "upper-class industrialists... did not depend on cheap child labor for their manufacturing operations." He cites historian Jeremy Felt's history of child labor reform in New York, which shows that "the abolition of child labor could be viewed as a means of driving out marginal manufacturer and tenement operators."<sup>140</sup>

Prohibit child labor, said Felt, and you destroy the weak competition. The same strategy is being used today in the struggle between corporate giants like Wal-Mart and Kmart: show that your competitor is employing young children in sweat shops overseas, and you can drive the consumer away and force higher labor costs on the competitor.

### Platt on Compulsory Education

Compulsory education, says Platt, was viewed by leading industrialists as a means of controlling the poor and working classes and, specifically, of preparing them for work in new Industrial America. Platt quotes passages from an 1880 work by Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York*, which insisted that young people must be prepared for "industrial discipline." "In the interests of public order, of liberty, of property, for the sake of our own safety and the endurance of free institutions here," wrote Brace, the state needs "a strict and careful law, which shall compel every minor to learn to read and write, under severe penalties in the case of disobedience."<sup>141</sup>

Not long after, says Platt, "the working class had imposed upon them a sterile

and authoritarian educational system which mirrored the ethos of the corporate workplace” and was designed to serve as a “selection mechanism” for the work force. This is one of the ways in which the agendas of people like Jane Addams overlapped with the agendas of the industrialists. Says Platt:

*While urban reformers struggled from a moral perspective to pass legislation against child labor and for compulsory education, corporate reformers supported such reforms out of economic necessity.... Thus, the child-saving movement, in its efforts to augment the family with compulsory education and other measures of state intervention, played an important role in helping to reproduce a specialized and disciplined labor force.<sup>142</sup>*

### Platt on Juvenile Justice

Here Platt is effusive. The child savers, he said, had a strong and explicit moral agenda, directed mainly at the lower classes. Addams was appalled by temptations available to young people on the streets surrounding Hull-House:

*Never before have such numbers of young boys earned money... and felt themselves free to spend it as they choose in the midst of vice deliberately disguised as pleasure.... Let us know the modern city in its weakness and wickedness, and then seek to rectify and purify it until it shall be free at least from the grosser temptations which now beset the young people who are living in its tenement houses and working in its factories.<sup>143</sup>*

Perhaps the main reason we now treat teens like children is because of the determined efforts of Addams and others to “save” teens from the sinful culture of the city streets. In a book published in 1880, prison reformer Enoch C. Wines, at one point an administrator with the Prison Association of New York, wrote of the “depraved habits” and “filthy condition” of young people on the streets of Chicago, where the “seeds of crime” were being planted daily. “*They must be saved,*” he proclaimed.<sup>144</sup>

But in focusing on “depraved” behavior that was repugnant to the upper classes—behavior that was usually victimless and non-criminal—the reformers, says Platt, “brought attention to—and, in so doing, *invented*—new categories of youthful misbehavior.” The creation of the juvenile court (which by 1928 had spread to all but two states) brought such behaviors under government control; in other words, it gave authorities excuses to round up and put away virtually any young people—and especially those of the lower classes. Young people could now be rounded up in large numbers for behaviors like “drinking, begging, roaming the streets, frequenting dance-halls and movies, fighting, sexuality, [and] staying out late.”

During the early years of the new Chicago juvenile court, says Platt, more

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### The Missing Stage

*If people in the 1500s were aware of the tumultuous stage of life we call "adolescence," William Shakespeare seems to have been in the dark. Here are his seven stages of life:*

*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time  
plays many parts, His acts being seven ages.  
At first the infant, Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms....  
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel....  
And then the lover, Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad....  
Then a soldier, Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard....  
And then the justice, In fair round belly with good capon lin'd....  
The sixth age shifts Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, With  
spectacles on nose and pouch on side....  
Last scene of all, That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness  
and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1598)

than half of the delinquency cases were based on charges such as "immorality," "vagrancy," "truancy," "disorderly behavior," and "incurability." Worse still, in many cases the court acted "where no offense had actually been committed but where, for example, a child was posing problems for some person in authority, such as a parent or social worker."<sup>145</sup> Platt cites a 1910 report by Harvey Baker, an official of the Boston Juvenile Court, which explains that a young person might be picked up for an offense as small as "playing ball on the street" and then "committed to a reform school" when he was subsequently found to have a history of troublesome "habits."<sup>146</sup>

### The Dark Side of Juvenile Justice

On the outside, the juvenile justice system served noble purposes: to prevent young people from turning into hardened criminals, to isolate them from adult prisons where they might be corrupted or harmed, to keep their records private so that they could start a new life when finally released by the system, and to educate them and nurture them so that they might become good citizens.

But the system had a dark side, as well: delinquency laws gave public officials absolute authority to sweep the streets of undesirable young people for virtually any reason. And because juvenile proceedings were "informal," the offenders were

denied due process rights guaranteed to all Americans under the Constitution. With the creation of the juvenile justice system, the Fifth Amendment guarantee that “no person” shall be “deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” and the Sixth Amendment guarantees that “the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury” with “the Assistance of Counsel for his defence,” were taken away from young people.<sup>147</sup>

Juvenile “delinquency” had been recognized long before Addams was on the scene. The first home for delinquents had been established, in fact, in 1825 (in New York).<sup>148</sup> But before the juvenile justice system was invented at the end of the century, teens still retained their fundamental rights, and, more important, their minor infractions were largely ignored or dealt with by family and church. Major crimes by young people were handled by the criminal courts. Punishments could be severe; in a handful of cases, young people were even hanged.<sup>149</sup> But serious crimes were dealt with in the criminal trial setting, where acquittals and appeals were common, just as with adults. The juvenile justice system, however, left young people completely defenseless.

Even as of the early 1960s, in many states less than 5 percent of juvenile offenders were represented by counsel, no juries were allowed, and most hearings were held in secret.<sup>150</sup> Yet the system could instantly lock someone up *for years*. No representation, no due process, no jury, no appeals, and, in many states, private hearings and secret records—a sort of Gulag Archipelago for troublesome young people. This is, according to Platt, exactly what some of the early reformers had in mind: the quick and sure containment of the children of the poor and working class. Since the reformers’ own children generally lived privileged lives, they were safe from the system.

To make matters worse, the benevolent system Addams and her associates had in mind quickly metamorphosed into a harsh world of extreme military-style regimentation, manacled, whippings, and solitary confinement.

Addams considered young people to be fragile and incompetent (creatures of “innocence” and “tender beauty”), desperately needing adult protection and a mother’s love. Juvenile facilities, she believed, should be supportive and comforting, not punishing, and they should be supervised or staffed by nurturing women, given that women are “natural caretakers.”<sup>151</sup>

But teens aren’t children, and administrators soon turned to draconian methods to try to keep their reluctant wards under control. They realized, said Platt, that “sentimental humanitarianism had no place in their work”; by the 1920s, the sentimentalist hopes of the child savers had been largely dashed.

On a 1925 visit to one of the new Illinois reformatories, Louise de Koven Bowen, one of Hull-House's wealthiest and most devoted patrons, reported sadly that the facility had "every appearance of being a jail, with its barred windows and locked doors.... The children have fewer comforts than do criminals confined in the county jail. They are not kept sufficiently occupied and have very little fresh air."<sup>152</sup>

Even more disturbing, there is considerable evidence that the juvenile justice system set in motion by Hull-House residents a century ago simply hasn't worked. There's little evidence that the system lowers crime; recidivism rates are typically as high as 60 percent; reformatories have generally become more punitive and increasingly overcrowded; and a number of studies indicate that teens who become inmates at juvenile facilities are harmed by the experience, not helped. An extensive study of the system published by the National Research Council in 2001 concludes:

*Increasing numbers of young people are placed in secure detention, which disrupts young people's lives and has negative effects on behavior and future developmental trajectories. Incarcerated juveniles have higher rates of physical injury and mental health problems, and they have poorer educational outcomes, than do their counterparts who are treated [emphasis added] in the community. Incarceration also causes severe and long-term problems with future employment, leaving ex-offenders with few economic alternatives to crime.... From the few available data, it appears that the rate of juveniles placed in custodial institutions has increased substantially in the past two decades, leading to widespread overcrowding in detention and other correctional facilities.<sup>153</sup>*

## How the Child Savers Viewed Youth

The child savers, concludes Platt, defined youth as a troublesome period of life based on their own class-based, moralistic biases and then created an infrastructure that mass-produced young people in the image they themselves had invented: dependent, angry, and incompetent. They robbed the young of their independence, imprisoned them over trifles, and denied them their most fundamental rights.

And once the new law enforcement system was in place, said Platt, young people were trapped in a Cuckoo's-Nest-like system where residents were powerless and resistance was considered to be yet another sign of pathology:

*The consolidation of the dependent status of "problematic" youth was complete. Young people were denied the option of withdrawing from or changing the institutions which governed their lives. Their opposition to or disenchantment with the school of reformatory or recreation center was treated as a problem of personal maladjustment which evoked "therapeutic" programs from the child savers.<sup>154</sup>*

Whatever the motives of Addams and her various contemporaries, we need to consider the very real possibility that the Hull-House agenda was detrimental in some ways to both our young people and our society: it isolated many teens from the working world; it forced teens to attend school, whether or not they were ready to learn; it isolated teens from adults, laying the seeds for the creation of “teen culture”; it deprived teens of basic constitutional rights, such as the right of due process; it imposed harsh moral standards on teen behavior, bringing “crimes against oneself” under governmental control; it reified the teen years, creating a new and dark developmental stage; it made many teens angry, depressed, and defiant; it created a juvenile *injustice* system that has probably done more harm than good; and it extended childhood well past puberty, into the late teens or even well into the twenties.

## THE RISE OF YOUTH-ORIENTED INDUSTRIES

In 1918 when Walt Disney was sixteen, he wanted to enlist in the U. S. Army to join the fight against the Kaiser, but he was too young. He tried joining the Canadian army but failed there, too. Finally, he forged his parents’ signatures on an application to join the American Ambulance Corps, a division of the Red Cross. Added to the forgery was a lie about his age: he recorded his birth year as 1900 instead of 1901. He soon found himself driving ambulances in France, arriving just after the war ended.<sup>155</sup>

Later in life Disney said of his adventure overseas: “The things I did those eleven months I was overseas added up to a lifetime of experience in one package.” Notably for our purposes Disney also commented, “It was such a valuable experience that I feel that if we have to send our boys into the Army we should send them even younger than we do. I know being on my own at an early age has made me more self-reliant and less of a the-world-owes-me-a-living type than I otherwise would have been.”<sup>156</sup> How ironic that he was eventually to create an empire that has helped hold young people back.

### The Early Industries: Manufactured Toys and Games

Before the American Civil War (1861-1865) industries that served children or teens barely existed, but there is no doubt that young people have always engaged in various kinds of play, just as all young mammals do (especially males). Presumably this is nature’s way of preparing its young to hunt, fight, and court after puberty. According to Bernard Mergen, an expert on play in early America,

pre-Civil War children entertained themselves with balls, jump ropes, rag and paper dolls (and far more rare wax ones), boats made from bark, marbles, hoops, tops, pocket knives, and homemade sleds and kites, among other things; with few exceptions, these were created from items found outdoors or around the house. Young people also created their own minstrel shows, circuses, and theatrical plays, and a common practice, it seems, was to “[turn] over chairs and [make] believe they were horses and coaches.”<sup>157</sup>

Philippe Ariès was fascinated by the fact that European paintings before about 1770 never depicted children’s toys; to him, this was another indication that, in some sense, childhood didn’t exist before modern times. It’s likely, though, that young children have always played—when they weren’t working or dying, anyway. It’s equally clear, however, that industries that support play, as well as industries that support young people in general, are a very new phenomenon in human history. There is also no question that such industries have helped to extend childhood past puberty, just as unions and, at times, influential industrialists, have done. In fact, industry—always in the process of seeking new markets—has played an important role in *defining* modern adolescence. At least in its superficial aspects, modern “teen culture” is entirely a *creation* of modern industry.

It’s no coincidence that youth-oriented industries got their start around the same time as some of the other important movements we’ve discussed. Industrialization created new affluence, new poverty, new cultural practices, a new middle class, and increasingly protective attitudes toward young people. Combine just two of these changes—affluence and protectiveness, each emerging in a world of expanding markets and factories—and virtually any entrepreneur with the capability of mass-producing a new plaything, book, or item of clothing could find buyers ready to beat a path to his or her door. As Mergen writes, “Men and women in the toy industry did not try to change children’s toy play; rather, they exploited what they saw as fundamental to a child’s life.”<sup>158</sup> Let’s look at how and when this trend played out.

The Milton Bradley company, of board game fame (“The Game of Life,” “Candy Land,” “Sorry,” “Twister,” “Yahtzee,” etc.), was one of the first American companies to devote itself to the newly-created youth market, although its first product, introduced in 1860, was actually a pocket-size set of games sold primarily to Union soldiers. The 1869 “Checkered Game of Life” (precursor to the modern “Life” game), was sold to a younger audience, as were dozens of other games released over the next few decades.

Parker Brothers, another board game company (“Monopoly,” “Clue,” “Risk,” “Trivial Pursuit,” etc.) was founded by *sixteen-year-old* George Parker in 1884. The

previous year, when he invented his first game, he was unable to get any bank loans to publish the game (which, ironically, was called “Banking”). He raised the money on his own, printed five hundred copies of the game, and turned a profit on his investors’ money within a year. By the end of the 1880s, his company was selling twenty-nine different games.

Hardcore toy manufacturing got its serious start in the 1870s with “creeping dolls, bears that perform, horsemen that drive furiously, boatmen that row, [and] steam cars that go,” many imported from Europe. There were also child-size musical instruments, manufactured baseball bats (baseball had been invented in 1845), dumbbells, toy soldiers and guns, and factory-made sleds, among other things. In marketing efforts, says Mergen, “The subtext for parents was the importance of toys for their children’s development and happiness.”<sup>159</sup> If you’ve recently been playing Mozart symphonies for your infant child (or perhaps even for your fetus), you’ve fallen prey to the same subtext.

The youth markets grew enormously in the 1880s and 90s, driven by increasing manufacturing capacities, a fast-growing population, and, of course, the rapid expansion of the definition of childhood. Before the Civil War, there were only a handful of books for children; by the mid-1860s, as many as three hundred children’s books were being published each year.<sup>160</sup> The toy and game industries were growing so fast that an 1890 book called *The Young Folks’ Cyclopedia of Games and Sports* needed more than four thousand entries to cover the subject. By the early 1900s, realistic play guns came into wide use and violent forms of play became more common, perhaps, says Mergen, because of the new “urban concentrations of children” and “enforced attendance at school.”<sup>161</sup> Bicycles, which assumed their modern form in the 1880s, also became common.

American toy manufacturers got organized early on; 1903 saw the launching of *Playthings*, a journal that monitors and analyzes trends in the industry. Having been in print now for over a century, the magazine is considerably thicker and glossier than it used to be. Early *Playthings* articles are as illuminating as they are disturbing—for example, a 1920 piece proposing that immigrant children should be “Americanized” by having them assemble toys in settlement houses, or a 1940 article listing hundreds of toys by season, showing how a young person’s day can be taken up with toys year-round. The article, comments Mergen, “shows how rapidly the toy industry permeated every moment of childhood.”<sup>162</sup>

Miriam Formanek-Brunell’s history of dolls in America—*Made to Play House: Dolls and Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*—is especially revealing, and it even gives us a new word that is highly pertinent to the theme of the book

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### The Extension of “Dollhood”

*What company produces more tires than any other in the world? No, it's not Michelin or Firestone or Goodrich. It's Mattel! It takes more than four hundred million tires to supply the more than one hundred million Matchbox cars produced by Mattel each year—many times more than the paltry number of tires needed for real cars. Youth-oriented industries now bring in staggering sums and produce mind-boggling amounts of merchandise. Consider:*

- *The He-Man action figure (Mattel) generated \$450 million in sales in 1985.<sup>163</sup>*
- *In 1971, the hundred-millionth visitor crossed the threshold into the original Disneyland in California. By 1986, five hundred million people had visited Disney theme parks, and the current total is well over a billion.<sup>164</sup>*
- *Mattel now produces nearly a hundred million Barbie dolls per year and has produced more than a billion of the dolls all-told.<sup>165</sup>*
- *American toy companies sold \$21 billion worth of toys in 2005.<sup>166</sup>*
- *The main competition for toy sales in recent years is the burgeoning video game industry, which had \$10.5 billion in sales in 2005.<sup>167</sup>*

you're now reading. Post-Civil War businesses, said Formanek-Brunell, were trying to extend “dollhood.” They were trying to expand their markets by encouraging young females to play with dolls for as many years as possible.<sup>168</sup> They didn't care about “childhood” per se; they just wanted “dollhood” lengthened.

In meticulous fashion, Formanek-Brunell shows how dolls changed in industrial America, and how their caretakers changed, as well. Before the Civil War, most dolls were homemade and simple, and their main function was “usefulness.” Girls learned to dress and care for them to practice for their future domestic roles. But soon after the Civil War, dolls became commercialized. Girls were encouraged to own and prettify as many dolls as possible. Dolls became fashion-plates, endlessly mimicking the fashions worn by the upper class and coveted by the new middle class.

Women became preoccupied with shopping, says Formanek-Brunell, and the new department stores became “palaces of consumption.” With family size shrinking, income increasing, and more opportunities for women to be outside the home,

“shopping for self, friends, and family was becoming a central activity,” she says. Women were becoming “increasingly isolated” from production—that is, from the tedious tasks of making clothing, dolls, or anything else that could be manufactured—and “also from their children.” Mothers encouraged their daughters to depend on the “companionship of dolls, thereby lengthening their childhood.”<sup>169</sup>

New distribution channels help to propel these many changes. In 1874 Macy’s became the first department store to have a toy department, and other major stores quickly followed suit. In 1893 the seven-year-old Sears and Roebuck catalog added dolls to its inventory.<sup>170</sup>

### Rise of the Youth-Oriented Corporate Empires

Youth-oriented corporate empires still with us today got their start during this period. With partner Ubbe Iwerks, Walt Disney started the precursor to Walt Disney Productions in 1919; he bought out Iwerks’ share of the company in 1930 for a modest \$2,920. Hasbro (G.I. Joe, Play-Doh, My Little Pony, Furby, Pokémon) was founded in Providence, Rhode Island by brothers Henry and Helal Hassenfield in 1923. Playskool (Mr. Potato Head, Weebles, Gloworm) was founded by two teachers in Milwaukee in 1928. Fisher-Price (Power Wheels, Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer) opened its doors in 1930. Mattel (Barbie, Hot Wheels, He-Man, Cabbage Patch Kids, Harry Potter toys) was started in a garage in Southern California by Ruth and Elliot Handler and Harold Matson in 1945.<sup>171</sup>

These and many businesses like them mushroomed into mega-corporations over the course of the twentieth century, and many have become part of larger, adult-oriented, corporate America. Parker Brothers, for example, was bought by General Mills in 1968, then sold to Kenner products in 1985, and then sold to the Tonka Corporation in 1987, which became part of Hasbro, Inc. in 1991. Hasbro, a Fortune 1000 company with 6,900 employees, has annual revenues of over \$3 billion and a market value of almost \$4 billion. In addition to Parker Brothers, Hasbro also now owns Milton Bradley, Tonka, Kenner, and Playskool. Toy outlets have also grown: Toys “R” Us, for example, which was founded in 1948, is now an \$11 billion business with more than sixteen hundred stores; even so, Wal-Mart now outsells all of the United States “toy supermarkets.”<sup>172</sup>

Disney, of course, is now one of the largest corporate empires in the world. The original Disneyland, which opened in Anaheim, California in 1954, had over a million visitors during its first six months of operation and is now one of four nearly-identical Disneylands owned by its sprawling corporate parent, which now owns a total of fifteen theme parks and resorts.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### American Girls

*For a mere \$100, you, too, can have one of the precious dolls—without the pricey accessories, of course. And for a mere \$23 a plate, you can even get a seat at the American Girl Café in New York City—if you’re willing, that is, to reserve your seat six months in advance. (The café had already taken 30,000 reservations before it opened in November 2003.) The American Girl line of dolls and books—first conceived of by Pleasant T. Rowland in 1986—caters primarily to girls twelve and under. Although the dolls and the patrons are small, the money isn’t. In 1998, Mattel, maker of the Barbie line, paid Rowland about \$700 million for rights to the eight dolls.<sup>174</sup>*

Disney also controls fifteen magazines (including *Discover*), three book publishers (including Hyperion), eight movie production companies (including Buena Vista Films and racy Miramax Films), the Disney Stores, the ABC television network, fourteen Internet ventures (including ABC.com and Toysmart.com), ten television stations (including WABC in New York), sixty-six radio stations, twelve cable television channels (including ESPN, the History Channel, the Disney Channel, and Lifetime), twenty foreign television ventures, Epcot Center, the Anaheim Angels (a professional baseball team), five music production companies, the Mighty Ducks (a professional hockey team), and TiVo, among other entities. At this writing Disney has revenues of over \$25 billion and a net worth of about \$35 billion.<sup>173</sup>

But this is only the beginning. When I was a child, toys came on the market in more-or-less random fashion. One year, someone invented the hula hoop, and we all spun it 'til we dropped. As any parent today knows, however, there's nothing random about the toy industry anymore.

In 2001 we all bought Harry Potter and Monsters, Inc. toys, videos, clothes, towels, and backpacks; in 2002 it was Yu-Gi-Oh, Dora the Explorer, and the Lord of the Rings; in 2003 it was Beyblade, the Incredible Hulk, and Spiderman. Why? Because extensive, almost overwhelming lines of toys and other products now accompany the release of major movies or the debut of new television shows. This occurs, at least in part, because of a 1988 alliance formed between Mattel and Disney (such alliances had occurred before, but this one was gigantic).<sup>175</sup>

Before a film even goes to the drawing-board (or its modern digital equivalent), merchandising and other “tie-in” plans are made. Cartoon shows are connected to films, which are connected to theme park rides, which are connected to breakfast cereals, which

are connected to clothing lines, which are connected to fast-food restaurant promotions, and so on. And all of this is targeted at various well-defined and highly studied youth markets. Multiple industries are at work here, highly coordinated almost in Japanese *keiretsu* style, all locking in the spending of tens of millions of consumers for set periods of time—hundreds of millions of consumers when the foreign markets are included.

But even this is only a fraction of the larger picture. I've chosen to talk mainly about toys, but today large segments of the music, fashion, and publishing industries have also helped to create, define, and maintain the modern troubled adolescent. I'll say more about such industries in Chapter Fourteen when I offer an "Enemies List"—a Nixon-style catalog of the many businesses, organizations, and government entities that keep teens imprisoned in a world of pain and trivia.

As almost every parent is aware, there is yet another "industry" that deliberately and very effectively holds teens back: the illegal drug industry. It may not use Madison Avenue advertising firms to spread its message, but it's a large-scale business, every bit as sophisticated as a Fortune 500 company, complete with territories, distribution networks, wholesalers, inventories, managers, executives, and so on. I'll say more about drug issues in Chapter Five.

If teen culture disappeared, many of these multi-billion-dollar industries would instantly collapse. If, instead, these industries disappeared, teens would probably enter the adult world much faster.

## Big Business and Teen Culture

Whatever the original wishes and motives of the child savers, the artificial extension of childhood was soon accelerated by the Industrial Revolution's most impressive product: Big Business.

The tens of thousands of images we've all seen of infantile teens (*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Dude*, *Where's My Car?*, *Bio-Dome*, *Suburbia*), of reckless and incompetent teens (*Animal House*, *PCU*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*), of defiant and uncontrollable teens (*Breakfast Club*, *SLC Punk*, *Crazy Beautiful*), of drugged and inebriated and oversexed teens (*American Pie*, *Kids*, *Thirteen*, *She's All That*, *Rules of Attraction*, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *The Girl Next Door*, *Welcome to the Doll House*, *Less Than Zero*), of depressed and suicidal teens (*Virgin Suicides*, *Heathers*, *Donnie Darko*), and of teens obsessed by fashion and rock'n'roll (*Clueless*, *Detroit Rock City*, *Legally Blonde*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *New York Minute*, *Mean Girls*, *What a Girl Wants*), have been fed to us by a complex system of interrelated businesses that thrive off the maintenance of the teen-as-child myth.

To put this another way, large businesses make billions of dollars a year both by fueling teen culture and by trying to convince both adults and teens that teen culture is timeless and inevitable, even though it is neither. As you'll see in Chapter Three, in recent decades American businesses have been expanding their markets by recreating our own teen culture, with all of its negatives, around the globe.\*

## THE HISTORICAL FORCES BEHIND ADOLESCENCE

These, then, as I see them, are the major historical forces that have been driving the artificial extension of childhood in America since the mid-1800s:

- Nurturing tendencies by women (and some men) to protect the millions of young people toiling long hours in the new factories or getting into trouble on the streets
- The elevated status of women, which gave them a powerful new voice in policy making
- The widespread adoption of the new view that young people are tender, helpless, and incompetent
- Determined efforts by the new labor unions to protect the jobs and wages of older workers by pushing young people out of the work force
- The desire of leading industrialists to sweep the streets free of troublesome youths and to prepare new generations of skilled laborers through mass education
- The desire of leaders in the upper and middle classes to impose their moral standards on poor and working-class youths
- The emergence of new businesses and industries that catered to the young and helped to create a "youth culture."

Before these forces emerged, the troubled teen was a rarity in human history. With these forces in play, teens rapidly became isolated from adults and increas-

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\*A personal note: You may have begun to suspect that I'm one of those left-wing liberal professors you've heard about. I'm not. The reason I've made some negative statements about corporate America is not because I have anything against big business but because it has played a significant role in the artificial extension of childhood. At this point the icons, clothing, shoes, music, athletic gear, makeup, soap, magazines, styles, tastes, heroes, hopes, and dreams of every American teen are in the hands of a handful of corporate executives. Unlike some of the reformers of the late 1800s, these individuals have no inherent interest in the welfare of young people. Their goal is to make money, and to do that they need to preserve and expand their markets. This is bad news for teens. I'll revisit this issue in Chapter Fourteen.

ingly unhappy about their peculiar place in society: adults in body and mind, toddlers in status.

Industrial America of the late 1800s, swelling with immigrants and new wealth, was an ambitious social experiment where almost anything could happen—and where some of the grand plans people set in motion had unintended negative consequences. I have no doubt that Jane Addams, Grace Abbott, Julia Lathrop, and their colleagues would be dismayed in some respects by the kind of world they helped to create—especially by the kind of teen that now exists.

I've deliberately skipped an important part of teen history that we won't be able to ignore for long: the official labeling and characterization of adolescence by pioneering psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904. Hall didn't create the policies and programs that set modern adolescence in motion, but he identified the result: a time of "storm and stress" that coincides with the teen years. He didn't create adolescence, but he certainly reified it, claiming that the teen turmoil he saw at the turn of the twentieth century was a *necessary* feature of the teen years. We'll examine Hall's views in Chapter Five.

Much of the world has so far avoided heavy industrialization and Western ways. Does the troubled teen exist in countries that maintain their traditional cultures? I've already argued that the historical record shows that adolescence (as a time of turmoil) is a creation of modern Western culture. If I'm wrong and adolescence is truly a timeless, universal phenomenon, we should see it all over the world. Do we?

**Q:** *If teens are so capable, why is my sixteen-year-old son such a mindless, disrespectful jerk?*

**A:** First of all, it's possible that your son doesn't appear to be so mindless or jerky to his friends. He might appear to be especially "cool" or bold or even competent in various ways. His behavior is probably effective in some contexts, and your home may not be where he's trying to be effective. Second, his strange or adversarial behavior is almost certainly his way of declaring independence, growing up, and asserting control over his life. That's an important possibility—well worth thinking about. Your son probably has very few legitimate ways to assert control: he can't own property, marry, move out, drink, sign contracts, enter certain movie theaters, or even urinate (during the school day, anyway) without adult permission. He asserts control the few ways he can—often in bizarre or pathetic ways, to be sure. If I'm right, there's a good chance that your son's jerkiness would disappear overnight if he were allowed to have real control over his life. Third, and finally, he might get angry or depressed sometimes about being treated like a child—if not by you, then by society in general.

## Chapter 3

# Adolescence Abroad

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*We are children of the world, watching every day go by  
Like a bird in the wind, like a tree in the storm  
Like the breath of a child from the moment he's born.  
—Bee Gees, "Children of the World"*

**Overview.** *American-style adolescence is an anomaly. In preindustrial nations, where young people are rapidly integrated into adult society at an early age, teen turmoil is largely absent. A recent study of 186 preindustrial societies indicates that 60 percent of such societies don't even have a word for adolescence and that antisocial behavior by young males is completely absent in more than half of them. Where teen problems are beginning to emerge in various countries around the world, they can be traced to the increasing isolation of teens from adults brought about by Western educational practices, labor restrictions, and media.*

Born in the city of Iguala in Guerrero, Mexico in 1971, Pedro Gancedo was one of ten children raised in a single-parent home. While his mom and aunt worked in a clothing shop, beginning at about age five Pedro sold bubble gum on the streets to help support the family; his nephew, who was the same age as Pedro (such things happen in large families) sold popsicles. When the nephew moved away, Pedro took over both businesses. He didn't know how to count change for quite a long time. He simply held out his hand, full of coins, and said to customers, "Take your change."

By age seven he was in school most of the day and also milking cows and tending livestock with a local farmer. He lived with the farmer most of the time and earned three hundred pesos—about \$35—a month. The farmer deducted about two hundred pesos to pay for Pedro's clothing, school, and textbooks, leaving Pedro

about one hundred pesos, *all* of which he gave to his mother to help support the many siblings. At eight, Pedro and his family moved to St. Martin Morrelos. He sold fresh milk in the markets, sometimes by order, but mostly by yelling “Leche, leche!” in the streets. When he wasn’t in school, he also washed or guarded cars, helped people load groceries, and helped out his brother in construction work. At some point he was allowed to keep a small portion of his earnings for himself, to “take my girlfriend out for a Coke” and to accumulate some savings.

At thirty-two he now works as a cook in San Diego. How does he feel about having grown up in what modern Americans would consider to be a society that abuses its children? Quite simply, he talks about his past with fondness and pride. He liked bringing pesos home to his family. It “made me feel like Santa Claus,” he said. “To make only ten pesos, but then to take it home to help feed my family—it made me feel good.” There is no trace of resentment in Pedro when he talks about his busy childhood. On the contrary, I got the impression that he thinks modern American children are lazy and spoiled (although he was kind enough not to use those exact words). Most important for our purposes, there also seems to be no trace of “adolescence” in Pedro’s past. He seems to have shifted, gradually and smoothly, from childhood to adulthood, with no sign of the turmoil that characterizes modern adolescence.

Was Pedro harmed in some way by his childhood labors? If so, it’s not clear how. In fact, Pedro, like President Jimmy Carter and millions of other Americans raised in rural America, probably benefited from the many ways in which work, family, and school were intertwined in his life. He learned a strong work ethic; he learned self-discipline; he learned the value of money; he acquired practical skills that one isn’t taught in school. But the most important benefits for Pedro were more subtle. Pedro’s life had “meaning.” He *knew* why he got up in the morning and why he sold bubble gum on the streets and why he milked cows. He worked to help his mom and siblings, to help put food on the table. He worked because he was a member of a family and a community. He worked because doing so was *important*. When you spend your day doing things you believe are important, your life has meaning. Conversely, when you spend your day doing things that make no sense to you, you feel empty, frustrated, and angry.

Is it possible that many teens today feel empty, frustrated, and angry because their lives lack real meaning? How do teens fare today in cultures around the world which integrate young people into adult society fairly early in their lives? Are teens damaged by such integration?

## LESSONS FROM PREINDUSTRIAL CULTURES

In Chapter One, I mentioned a modern cult book called *The Continuum Concept* by writer Jean Liedloff.<sup>1</sup> Tens of thousands of parents have used this remarkable little book as a parenting guide since it was first published in 1975. It has remained in print for over thirty years and has been translated into seventeen languages—amazing accomplishments in the publishing world. A sort of world-wide fan club—the Liedloff Continuum Network—has developed around the book: “an international support organization comprised of parents, families and individuals... whose understanding of human nature has been transformed (or validated)” by her book.<sup>2</sup>

### The Children of the Yequana

When Liedloff was barely out of her teens, she ran off with two Italian men—one a quite handsome count, apparently—on a quest for diamonds in the remote jungles of Venezuela. While there she became increasingly intrigued by the inordinately happy lives and lifestyles of several primitive tribes. She ultimately spent about two-and-a-half years living with the Yequana Indians—*sans* count, by the way. On one level, her book is about her experiences with the Yequana; on another, it’s about an idea—“the continuum concept”—that she derived from her experiences. Liedloff came to believe that the unhappiness we feel in most “civilized” countries results from the various ways in which we’re raised to be disconnected from the adult community.

The Yequana, Liedloff wrote, appeared to have no word for “work,” although they worked very hard. They also seemed to enjoy the work they did; work was often an opportunity for camaraderie and good cheer. There was little sign of conflict in Yequana society, either among adults or children, and there was no sign at all of the turbulent period of life we call “adolescence.” Liedloff attributed these and other positive characteristics of the Yequana to the distinctive way they raised their children.

A Yequana infant roams freely, “testing everything” and “measuring his own strength and agility.”<sup>3</sup> “[The] attitude of the mother or caretaker of a baby is relaxed, usually attentive to some other occupation than baby-minding, but receptive at all times to a visit from the crawling or creeping adventurer.... *She does not initiate the contacts nor contribute to them except in a passive way.* It is the baby who seeks her out and shows her by his behavior what he wants.... He is the active, she the passive agent in all their dealings; he comes to her to sleep when he is tired, to be fed when he is hungry.”<sup>4</sup>

The integration of the Yequana children into adult society begins almost at birth:

*I was present at the first moments of one little girl's working life. She was about two years old. I had seen her with the women and girls, playing as they grated manioc into a trough. Now she was taking a piece of manioc from the pile and rubbing it against the grater of a girl near her. The chunk was too big; she dropped it several times trying to draw it across the rough board. An affectionate smile and a smaller piece of manioc came from her neighbor, and her mother ready for the inevitable impulse to show itself, handed her a tiny grating board of her own. The little girl had seen the women grating as long as she could remember and immediately rubbed the nubbin up and down her board like the others....<sup>5</sup>*

*I saw little Yequana girls from the age of three or four (sometimes they looked even younger) taking full charge of infants. It was clearly their favorite occupation but did not prevent their doing other things at the same time, tending fires, fetching water, and so on. They did not tire of their charges as they would have dolls....<sup>6</sup>*

*The boys, from the age of about 18 months, practiced archery with sharp arrows, some enthusiasts carrying their bow and arrows about most of their waking hours. Shooting was not confined to designated places, nor were any "safety rules" in effect. In my two and a half years there I saw only one arrow wound.<sup>7</sup>*

Liedloff's book is filled with examples like this. There is no distinct separation between childhood and adulthood in the tribe; instead, there is a *continuum* of activities, behaviors, and expectations. Expectations are modest when children are young and increase gradually and smoothly over the years, but the goals are always clear: the development of self-reliance and the full integration of the child into the world of responsible adulthood. Responsibility and authority are never forced on anyone, but they're given freely as soon as a child shows an interest in taking them on. Independent decision making is encouraged, because "leaving the choice to the child from the earliest age keeps his judgment at peak efficiency,"<sup>8</sup> and the child's "self protecting ability" is trusted to keep him or her from serious harm.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, she says, we weaken and damage our children by overprotecting them; we even impair their ability to make reasonable decisions and to protect themselves. She tells of a small boy in the United States, for example, whose parents fenced in the family pool to protect him. The first time they left the gate open, he made his way inside and drowned. He was following natural tendencies to be independent, to overcome obstacles, and to escape from controlling influences, but natural tendencies he might have had to protect himself had never been developed because adults had always been protecting him.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### On the Farm in New Zealand

*James Griffith, born in 1948, was raised on a ten-thousand-acre New Zealand sheep farm in the Waikato region of the North Island. By age ten, he was engaged daily in the regular activities of the farm: mustering the sheep, sheering, and repairing fences and water troughs. His dad died when he was fifteen, and he decided to become a mechanic rather than continuing the farm work. At nineteen he moved to London where he worked on the pit crew for a British racing team. His early work experience made him feel proud and competent and propelled him forward, he says. He feels no resentment about his past.*

Liedloff considers the modern “child-centered” approach to parenting an abomination: “A parent whose day centers on child care is not only likely to be bored, and boring to others, but also likely to be giving an unwholesome kind of care.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, she says, we need to encourage the natural tendency of the child to focus on adults, “witnessing the kinds of experiences he will have later in life.”<sup>11</sup> The “main business” of the child, she says, is

*...to absorb the actions, interactions, and surroundings of his caretaker, adult or child. This information prepares him to take his place among his people by helping him to understand what they do. To thwart this powerful urge—by looking inquiringly, so to speak, at a baby who is looking inquiringly at you—creates profound confusion; it manacles the mind.<sup>12</sup>*

Toward the end of her book, Liedloff even speculates about the possible connection between infantilization and psychopathology (see Chapter Five of this volume), suggesting that young people who have not been continuously integrated into adult society will become “antisocial” and experience “distortions in their personalities,” with enormous pressures “being brought to bear upon [them] to present a façade of conformity.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, they will become unruly, unconventional teens who are constantly being pressured to conform.<sup>14</sup>

### The Teens of Samoa

Liedloff’s observations bring to mind one of the great classics of the last century, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which appeared in 1928.<sup>15</sup> Based on interviews with sixty-eight young women from the west part of Ta’u Island in

the South Pacific, Mead concluded that adolescence as we know it didn't exist in Samoa—at least among females.

As far as she could tell, there was no violence and virtually no turmoil among Samoan youth. She attributed this to the homogeneity and lack of stress in the culture. As it happens, she also noted that children were integrated into adult society fairly early in life—that they are “not permitted a period of lack of responsibility such as our children are allowed.”<sup>16</sup> “From the time they are four or five years old,” said Mead, “they perform definite tasks, graded to their strength and intelligence, but still tasks which have a meaning in the structure of the whole society.”<sup>17</sup> Whereas American children are often bored or spend their time in meaningless or objectionable activities, “[the] Samoan girl who tends babies, carries water, sweeps the floor, or the little boy who digs for bait, or collects coconuts, has no such difficulty. The necessary nature of their tasks is obvious.”<sup>18</sup>

Like Liedloff, Mead also observed that young females—six or seven years old—routinely and expertly cared for babies, but Mead didn't make as much of this observation as she might have. When it came to explaining why adolescence was absent, she cited broad characteristics of Samoan culture, such as the “general casualness.”<sup>19</sup> As far as I've been able to determine, she also never spoke specifically, in *Samoa* or elsewhere, about the unique characteristics of Western industrialization that gave rise to an extension of childhood.

Mead's work was roundly criticized a few years after her death by Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman in a book called *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*.<sup>20</sup> Freeman claimed, among other things, that two of Mead's interviewees (out of sixty-eight) had lied to her about violence among the young. He also suggested that her picture of the Samoans was distorted because she only stayed there a few months, during which she actually lived in the household of the United States Navy's chief pharmacist rather than among the Samoans. In contrast, Jean Liedloff lived among the Yequana for years.

Freeman's work, too, has been criticized,<sup>21</sup> and there's no easy way to settle the matter. No one has suggested that Mead was a liar, just that she might not have seen the whole picture. The story of the Yequana seems clearer, and so do images of other adolescent-free cultures around the world.

## TEENS IN THE PREINDUSTRIAL WORLD

In 1991, Alice Schlegel of the University of Arizona and Herbert Barry III of the University of Pittsburgh published a landmark volume called *Adolescence: An*

*Anthropological Inquiry*, which reviewed research on teens that had been conducted in 186 preindustrial societies.<sup>22</sup> For our purposes Schlegel and Barry's most important findings were these:

1. *About 60 percent of these cultures had no word for adolescence, and the cultures that had relevant terms were usually referring to an innocuous, relatively brief period between puberty and marriage, not to a period of turmoil.*
2. *Most young people in these cultures spent most of their time with same-sex adults. Teens spent almost no time with same-sex peers.*
3. *Antisocial behavior in young males was extremely mild (by United States standards) in most of the cultures surveyed and completely absent in more than half of them.*
4. *There was very little aggression or violence in teens in these cultures and almost no sign of pathology.*

Points 2 through 4 clearly distinguish the teens in preindustrial societies from the teens in the United States and other industrialized countries. Because teens in preindustrial countries spend most of their time with adults—both family members and co-workers—adults become their role models, not peers. What's more, their primary task is not to break free of adults but rather to become productive members of their families and their communities as soon as they are able. And though some forms of mild antisocial behaviors were observed in some cultures, teens in preindustrial nations show virtually none of the pathologically significant “storm and stress” that characterizes the modern American teen.

The Schlegel and Barry study shows unequivocally that adolescence as we know it in the modern West barely exists in the preindustrial world. In some countries it appears to be absent completely—except in areas that are becoming Westernized.

## EXPORTING TEEN TURMOIL

Pierre R. Dasen of the Université de Genève, a former assistant to renowned psychologist Jean Piaget, recently reviewed the Schlegel and Barry book and other multicultural studies of adolescence by sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists.<sup>23</sup> He concluded not only that adolescence is largely absent in preindustrial nations but, even more significant, that *one can track the emergence of full-blown, pathological, Western-style adolescence in countries undergoing Westernization.* In other words, he

demonstrated that adolescence is indeed a “cultural invention,” a claim stated clearly by L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church in their 1957 book, *Childhood and Adolescence*:

*In primitive societies, there is no equivalent for our concept of adolescence. In some primitive societies, the transition from childhood to adulthood is so smooth that it goes unrecognized. More frequently, we find that the young person on the threshold of maturity goes through a ceremonial adolescence. Such ceremonial observances are called puberty rites, since they are usually timed to the onset of sexual maturity. They may range in complexity from a simple haircut or a change of clothes to being tattooed or having one's teeth filed, to periods of fasting or isolation or a search for a vision. Such initiation periods seldom last more than a few weeks, and even the longest of them are negligible compared with the five to eight years of adolescence common in our society. At the conclusion of the puberty rite, the young person is granted full adult status and assumes it without any sense of strain or conflict. Not only is he officially grown up, but he knows and other people know that he is actually ready for adult activities, including marriage. Except for the ceremonial punctuation of the puberty rite, childhood status tends to be continuous with adult status.... [The] psychological events of adolescence in our society are not a necessary counterpart of the physical changes of puberty, but a cultural invention—not a deliberate one, of course, but a product of an increased delay in the assumption of adult responsibilities [emphasis added].<sup>24</sup>*

### The Harvard Studies

In the 1980s Beatrice and John Whiting of the Harvard School of Education set in motion a project called “Adolescents in a Changing World,” specifically to look at the effect of modernization on adolescents in preindustrial cultures.<sup>25</sup> Seven teams of anthropologists agreed to cooperate on the project, each looking at different cultures. In his 2000 essay Dasen summarized the reports of investigations that had been published as of that time, along with similar studies by other researchers. Here are five cases described by Dasen, each showing how modernization gives rise to Western-style adolescence.

**Kenya.** A 1987 study of eighty-four Kikuyu teens in Kenya by John Whiting and C. M. Worthman suggested that “social change can produce ambivalence and stress in adolescence in relation to sexual behaviour, in particular due to the introduction of a double standard through Christian influence and schooling.”<sup>26</sup> In traditional Kikuyu culture when young males became “senior warriors” they were given access to young females in a special hut called the *thingira*, where they

engaged in what Westerners would call “heavy petting” (without intercourse)—a kind of “controlled lovemaking” which eventually led to negotiations between two sets of parents, instruction in sexual practices, and marriage.<sup>27</sup> With the introduction of Western-style schooling, say Whiting and Worthman, “young people are not trained in the traditional mode of limited intercourse nor in the appropriate, defined partners and contexts in which it is acceptable... and peer surveillance for proper sexual behavior has diminished.”<sup>28</sup> The rate of unwed motherhood has increased and the *thingira* tradition has disappeared. Christian moral views, according to which young females are supposed to be chaste while young males have no constraints, are now prevalent, and “an unmarried young woman is officially denied access to modern contraception unless she has already had a child.”<sup>29</sup>

**Morocco.** Similar changes were reported in a 1980s study of Zawiya, a small town in Morocco, by D. A. and S. S. Davis.<sup>31</sup> Brides were virtually always virgins here before Western schooling was introduced, and wedding ceremonies culminated in the proud display of a blood-stained sheet. Now required schooling has given young people more alone time, and Western radio, television, and films have promoted both promiscuity and a double standard, leading to significant inter- and intragenerational conflicts. Blood on the sheet is now often faked with animal blood, and among the growing middle class, the ceremony is gradually being abandoned. Premarital sex is becoming more common, the rate of out-of-wedlock pregnancy is increasing, and abortion is now “widely available.”

**Australia.** In a series of reports appearing in the 1980s and 1990s, Victoria Burbank described the dramatic effects that Westernization was having on Australian Aborigines.<sup>32</sup> “Australian legislation, schooling, and movies and television, Western representations of romantic love,” and the influence of Christian missionaries, have replaced long-established practices and norms with Western ways. Traditionally, families arranged marriages between young females and older males, so that “problems of premarital sex... could simply not occur.” Now same-age peers are mating the Western way, leading to premarital sex, unwed motherhood, and “overt conflict between the generations”—the Aborigines’ first “generation gap.”

**Canada.** Reports in the 1980s and 1990s by R. G. Condon described profound changes in adolescents among the Inuit of Victoria Island, Canada, in the late 1970s and 1980s.<sup>33</sup> It’s notable that television wasn’t introduced to the Inuit until 1980. There was little sign of adolescence in traditional Inuit culture. Females were committed to marriage when they were very young. Actual cohabitation came later, because males couldn’t marry until they had killed their first large game, typically at seventeen or eighteen. Curiously, “the first two years of marriage

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Youth Saving Youth

*When he was twelve years old, Toronto seventh-grader Craig Kielburger was deeply moved when he saw a report about a young Pakistani who had apparently been murdered for bringing attention to the exploitation of young workers by carpet barons in his country. With several of his friends, Kielburger soon founded a dynamic organization called Free the Children, dedicated to ending abusive child labor around the world. He even convinced his parents to let him travel through poor communities in South Asia so that he could see the abuses firsthand. His moving 1998 book (written with author Kevin Major) recounts his travels and the growth of Free the Children, which is now the largest charitable organization in the world run by young people for young people.<sup>30</sup>*

were considered as a trial period,” which was almost always successful. The modern system is quite different. Social security payments now assure survival, and all children are required to attend school, although many drop out at thirteen or fourteen. Young peoples’ lives now seem completely chaotic. They often “stay up all night [and] remain active for 24 hours or more.” Teen pregnancy is now common, the rate of teen unemployment is high, and the rate of teen suicide has increased substantially. But perhaps the most disturbing changes have to do with Western-style teen aggression:

*The open expression of hostility and competitiveness has become commonplace among the younger generation. There had been no juvenile delinquency until TV was introduced. There was no police station, and most problems were either not reported or solved on a community basis, but in 1988 the community asked to have a permanent police.<sup>34</sup>*

The rapid and dramatic shift in Inuit culture is especially unsettling because it cannot be blamed on either urbanization or industrialization, because Victoria Island has experienced neither one. Television, forced schooling, and “social security” were enough to decimate the traditional culture—and to create the new developmental stage we call “adolescence.”

*Côte d’Ivoire.* Researchers in this West African nation found increasing deterioration among teens in an extensive eleven-year study beginning in 1980.<sup>35</sup> Starting in 1983, they noted a “pathology of ill feeling” among teens, along with increases in both drug abuse and suicide attempts. From 1985 to 1989, “there was a steady in-

crease of criminal cases, including substance abuse, armed aggressions, and female and male prostitution,” especially in Abidjan, a relatively large city. The researchers attributed the deterioration to “the conflict between the continuing demands of the traditional part of the society and those of Westernization”; young people were clearly “‘torn’ between conflicting demands.” According to other reports, Western-style marriage laws in Côte d’Ivoire have weakened the family structure and increased the divorce rate, which has further contributed to problems among young people.

Toward the end of their *Anthropological Inquiry*, Schlegel and Barry express concern about the negative impact of modernization on teens around the world. They note, for example, that whereas teens in many preindustrial nations often initiated their own recreational activities (composing songs, organizing village festivities, and so on), the imported youth culture “is largely one manipulated by adults who provide what they believe adolescents will buy.” Hence “modern adolescents seldom act as autonomous groups in constructive, socially meaningful ways.” Ironically, they say, Westernized teens “are losing incentives to plan and act at the same time that they are becoming increasingly emancipated from the control of parents and other authorities.” Moreover, as we’ve seen, Westernized education “removes adolescent children [sic] from home and kin and places them in peer settings for much of the day,” leading to conflict between teens and parents and a reduction in parental authority. Parental authority is further eroded by the delay of marriage which, they say, produces a host of new problems, such as an increase in the number of premarital pregnancies.<sup>36</sup>

Dasen concludes from the substantial body of research he reviews that “the problems of adolescence are certainly not inevitable.”<sup>37</sup> The problems are largely created by culture, just as Margaret Mead’s imperfect study of the Samoans suggested nearly a century ago.

***The Underlying Mechanism.*** Although Dasen and others have shown the powerful effect that culture can have on the creation of adolescence, they have sometimes failed to point to the basic mechanism that underlies many of the problems that emerge: the artificial extension of childhood.

What is it that preindustrial teens are *seeing* in those films and on those television programs? Answer: Teens being treated like, and behaving like, irresponsible children.

When teens in preindustrial societies are forced to attend Western-style schools, how are they affected? Answer: They’re cut off from adults and from the centrality of adult culture; they’re prevented from working, or at least from making work the center of their lives; they become controlled by adults rather than part of adult life; teens, rather than adults, become their role models.

When Western mechanisms delay marriage, what is the outcome? Answer: Because marriage is the hallmark of adulthood in virtually all cultures, the delay of marriage also means the delay of adulthood. It's no coincidence that Tom Smith's recent survey (discussed in Chapter One) showed that Americans now think that adulthood starts at age twenty-six; the median age for first marriages in the United States is now about 26.1.

## THE SPREADING STORM

We've seen examples of how teens live and fare in several preindustrial societies. Here is a quick overview of how teens are doing in the rest of the world.

### Japan and China

According to *The World's Youth*, a recent volume edited by B. Bradford Brown of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Reed W. Larson of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and T. S. Saraswathi of the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda (India),<sup>38</sup> modern China and Japan "have several terms that can be used to refer to individuals during the adolescent period, but no general term to designate this life stage as a whole.... These terms refer to the state of puberty, one's generational status within the family, or the legal rights and responsibilities a person has. Most often, however, people are likely to refer to a young person by her or his school status.... Because this is the central role for adolescents in Japanese or Chinese society, it is no surprise that it is the preferred reference point for understanding and organizing adolescence in these societies."<sup>39</sup> But the rowdy, unruly, unkempt teen barely exists in these large, highly industrialized countries—although there are signs that this is changing.

According to Harold W. Stevenson and Akane Zusho of the University of Michigan, "growing interactions with the West," added to the turmoil of the modern worldwide economic system, are beginning to erode the famed stability of the Asian youth. Ten percent of Japanese high school students are now believed to have had experience with drugs (compared with perhaps 60 percent in the United States), and 70 percent have had experience with alcohol (compared with perhaps 90 percent in the United States).<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, Japanese and Chinese teens are still a fairly calm and respectful lot. Eighty to 90 percent of Japanese teens say their home life is "fun" or "pleasant," and most teens there report having good relationships with their parents, with communication occurring on a "fairly regular basis."<sup>41</sup> Even more significant, "there

is little evidence of maladjustment” among Japanese youth, and the suicide rate, although increasing, is still only 4.4 per 100,000 for individuals ages fifteen-to-twenty—considerably lower than the rate among Japanese in their twenties and about half the rate for American teens.<sup>42</sup> In China the rate of “serious mental disorders” among ten-to-fourteen-year-olds is only 0.5 per 1,000, rising to 2.7 per 1,000 for individuals between fifteen and nineteen—both very low figures.<sup>43</sup>

How can this be? Why didn’t heavy industrialization—well underway for decades in both China and Japan (the second largest economy in the world)—lead to the corruption of teens as it did in the United States and much of Europe?

Industrialization is more recent in both of these countries, for one thing, and much of China is still nonindustrial. What’s more, neither country faced the unusual conditions present in newly industrial America which severed the child-adult continuum: massive exploitation of workers, hordes of young people on the street, and overwhelming immigration. And, perhaps of greatest significance, in neither country have women yet been released from their traditional roles.

I’ve lectured in Japan every year for more than a dozen years now—as it happens, to more than a thousand teens every year. I’ve always been amazed by the decorum of the Japanese classrooms and the almost eerie respect Japan teens show me and other adults. I’ve given many ninety-minute lectures to audiences of four hundred or more; not a single student has ever, to my knowledge, left during one of my lectures (what incredible bladders they must have!).

My experience in the United States—even at prestigious universities—has been radically different. Students don’t think twice about arriving to lectures late, leaving early, or even munching on potato chips during the lecture. Traditional Asian cultures are based on strong reverence for ancestors and elders; even industrialization and a variety of Western influences haven’t yet obliterated many of the basic values that form the bedrock of societies like Japan and China. How long these values can continue to resist our marketing moguls is a matter for speculation. Meanwhile, Western-style adolescence is still surprisingly rare in the dominant nations of Asia.

## The Arab World

Arab countries also experience little Western-style adolescence. According to Marilyn Booth of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, although there’s a term for adolescence in modern Arabic—*murahaqa*—it’s used in textbooks only, not in everyday speech. It suggests a time of sexual temptation but not a time of turmoil. Other terms used for teens describe marital status or various levels of responsibility; the teen years are seen primarily as a time of growing “responsibility and obligation toward others.” Teenage sexuality is highly regulated: “Sexual con-

tact outside of legally sanctioned marriage is strictly forbidden, and cohabitation before marriage is absolutely unacceptable.”

The out-of-control, disrespectful, drug-abusing teen still seems to be a rarity in Arab countries, in part because life in many Arab countries is highly constrained and also because “blind adherence to Westernization has never been acceptable and is increasingly criticized.”<sup>44</sup>

That having been said, the Western influence is still being felt, as we’ve seen from the Davis and Davis study in Morocco. Some textbooks, for example, are now teaching Arab teens about a stage of life called “adolescence.” Booth cites a study in which a Bedouin girl in Egypt is talking about this strange concept: “Kamla now quoted from a book she had read at school [which said] it was natural as one entered adolescence to begin thinking about members of the opposite sex. She admitted that such things had never entered her mind before.”<sup>45</sup> In Morocco, according to Davis and Davis, “school has ‘created’ the concept [of adolescence] as well as the expectation of behaviors associated with it.”<sup>46</sup> In Bahrain, increases in juvenile delinquency led in the 1990s to the establishment of the country’s first residential juvenile home, and Kuwait’s first juvenile court was established in 1982.<sup>47</sup>

## Russia

With the collapse of the USSR in 1991 and Russia’s subsequent painful shift from a state-controlled to a market economy, it’s difficult to make any safe generalizations about Russian teens, other than the obvious: for more than a dozen years now, they’ve been bombarded by Hollywood images and ideals more than ever before in Russian history. There are signs that this bombardment, along with growing prosperity, is beginning to create a true, troubled, American-style teenager.

According to one Russian scholar a “vast Russian middle class” is now emerging in the country, and industrial output in Russia grew by a hefty 9 percent in 2000. Russia’s gross domestic product is now the tenth largest in the world. Prosperity plus industrialization plus Western ideals spell trouble, and the trouble is already measurable. For example, in 1990 about 15 percent of Russian children were born out of wedlock; only six years later the figure had grown to 23 percent.<sup>48</sup>

Because of the country’s high divorce rate (second only to the rate in the United States), about 15 percent of Russian teens now spend at least part of their lives outside of the traditional two-parent home (compared with about 47 percent in the United States).<sup>49</sup> Physical abuse of young people—typically related to alcohol consumption by fathers—appears to be increasing. Whereas there was some degree

of gender equality in the old USSR (at least in principal), it is rapidly disappearing in democratic Russia, leaving female teens out of the growing economy.<sup>50</sup>

The average age at which young Russians start to smoke has been decreasing in recent years—now down to 13.5 for females and 11.3 for males. Drug abuse among teens was virtually unheard of under the Soviets; the rate of abuse has increased “dramatically” in Russia in recent years. Anti-social behavior among teens was minimal under the collectivist culture of the Soviets, but at least one new study suggests that individualism is rapidly increasing among Russian teens—yet another sign of trouble brewing.<sup>51</sup>

## Latin America

In Latin America, where Western television and movies are distributed widely, Western-style adolescence is increasing dramatically, fueled in part by economic problems that have created widespread unemployment among young people. In cultures where young people used to work side by side with adults from a young age, many are now idle or forced to attend poorly equipped and poorly staffed schools, increasing teen-to-teen contact and isolating teens from adult role models.

Western sexual ideals have also taken hold, which have contributed to an abandonment of traditional religious practices. On the other hand, an acute housing shortage still forces most young people to remain living at home with their parents until they can afford to marry—a recipe for intergenerational conflict.

Of greatest concern is a dramatic increase in youth violence. According to Carlos Welti of Mexico’s National Autonomous University, “a new type of violence has made its debut in Latin America: violence in the schools, where armed adolescents have killed classmates or teachers,” driven by “glorification in the media of violent behaviors and the media coverage of school shootings in the United States.”

In some Latin American countries, adolescence is sometimes “suspended” and adulthood imposed when young people are recruited into the military (more about that in Chapter Nine).<sup>52</sup> When people are shooting at you, you grow up quickly.

## India

Indian scholar T. S. Saraswathi, co-editor of *The World’s Youth*, insists that “adolescence is the invention of a technological, industrial society marked by a discontinuity between childhood and adulthood.”<sup>53</sup> Like Liedloff, Saraswathi believes that “the greater the continuity between childhood and adulthood..., the greater the possibility that a distinct phase or life stage called adolescence will be absent.”

Surveying a “wide range of alternative patterns” in India, Saraswathi con-

cludes that in all classes other than India's relatively small upper class, "the transition from childhood to adulthood is marked more by continuity than by discontinuity, leaving little scope for the emergence of an adolescent culture." Continuity is also greater for females, whose social roles tend to be limited and well defined, than for males, "whose exposure to higher education and preparation for career roles prolongs the period of dependency upon their parents, delays marriage and the establishment of sustained heterosexual relationships, and exposes them to possible alternative life choices."<sup>54</sup>

Both tradition and great poverty keep young people working in India, which has the largest population of working youth in the world. It's believed that about ten million Indians under age fifteen work in India and that young people constitute between 10 and 33 percent of the workforce in various industries. According to UNICEF, as many as eleven million young people live on the streets in India, primarily in large cities and townships; these are mainly young people without jobs or stable family situations. Many develop "resiliency" and "self-preservation skills," but sometimes this means resorting to activities such as pimping, prostitution, theft, drug peddling, and begging.<sup>55</sup> I'll return to India in Chapter Eight (on love), but suffice it to say at this point that adolescence is still largely absent in most of this vast country.

### **Sub-Saharan Africa**

A. Bame Nsamenang of the University of Yaounde in Cameroon, Africa, has an especially interesting take on adolescence. According to him, Western psychologists have defined and shaped the term based on their limited knowledge of teens in the rest of the world, sometimes even asserting that adolescence as they've defined it is universal. In that sense the concept of adolescence is, according to Nsamenang, both "Eurocentric" and "ethnocentric."

In sub-Saharan Africa, which includes virtually all of Africa south of Libya and Egypt and which subsumes more than five hundred million people—half of whom are under age fifteen—Western adolescence doesn't yet exist. Instead, as we've seen in Latin America, India, and elsewhere, the teen years are a time when teens are trained and groomed to take their place in adult society. Puberty rites, which mark initial entry into adulthood, are especially important and distinctive in many sub-Saharan African cultures. Full adulthood isn't achieved, however, until one is "married with children."<sup>56</sup>

Nsamenang's perspective is based largely on studies of youth in Cameroon, Kenya, and South Africa. As noted previously, studies in both Kenya and Côte

d'Ivoire (which is also sub-Saharan) have found significant signs of Western-style adolescence in areas touched by Western culture. Like it or not, adolescence might someday become typical in much of Africa.

### Southeast Asia

In an overview of adolescence mainly in the Philippines and Malaysia, and, to some extent, Thailand and Indonesia, Madelene Santa Maria of De La Salle University in Manila presents a picture we've seen several times: "the introduction of 'Western' ways of life and values, as propagated in media especially in urban areas," leading to "increases in premarital sexuality and pregnancies," delinquency, crime, drug use, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

But every culture has its unique characteristics, as well as its unique ways of trying to keep adolescence at bay. Filipino teens, for example, believe that "close, warm ties among family members must be maintained, and that sacrifices should be made for the good of the family." But Santa Maria cites a recent study showing that Filipino teens are now "spending less time with their parents" and becoming "dissatisfied with family life."

One curious aspect of teen obligations in the Philippines and Indonesia is worthy of note. Daughters are more obligated than sons to work abroad to support the family during tough times. According to Santa Maria, "Sons are expected to stay close to home to better fulfill their obligation of 'protecting' the family."<sup>58</sup>

Worldwide, then, teen turmoil still seems fairly minimal compared with what we experience in the United States, but Western-style adolescence seems to be creeping slowly across many borders like hot lava from a persistent volcano. The stronger the influence of Western culture, the faster the flow; the stronger the endemic traditions, the greater the resistance.<sup>59</sup>

## THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY, INDEED

The San people of the Kalahari Desert in Africa, immortalized in the 1981 film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, as well as in a heartwarming 1984 sequel, have lately been under pressure to leave their ancestral land in Botswana because of a massive joint mining venture between the Botswana government and the De Beers diamond company. In 2002, to make its point, the government cut off water supplies to the San.<sup>60</sup>

The influence of industrialized nations can be both heavy-handed and deadly,

but even subtle interventions can have devastating and far-reaching effects. In *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, members of a primitive (but happy and self-sufficient) tribe are puzzled and disturbed when a Coke bottle, thrown out of a passing airplane, lands in their midst. They've never seen anything like this strange object. They decide that to appease their gods, a member of the tribe must find the edge of the world and throw the Coke bottle off. Thus begins a hilarious adventure in which a diminutive but resourceful San tribesman makes first contact with a series of inept Westerners. Unfortunately, one gets the uneasy feeling at the end of the film that real Coke bottles are about to have less amusing consequences for the real San, and indeed that turns out to be the case.

### What We're Exporting

When it comes to teens around the world, just what kinds of practices and problems are we exporting? The answer, it seems, is crime, ennui, anger, premarital sex, pregnancy, abortion, drug abuse, family conflict, and more. Consider just one of our more subtle exports: according to a recent book by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Barbara Schneider, *American teens are almost completely isolated from adults*.<sup>61</sup> Teens typically spend more than thirty-five hours per week surrounded by their peers in school and *an additional* thirty-five hours per week with peers outside of school. *That's two-thirds of their waking hours*. This is, according to these researchers, twelve more hours per week than teens in other industrialized nations like Italy or South Korea spend together, and it's probably sixty hours a week more than teens spend together in many preindustrial societies.

Many American teens—perhaps half or more—also grow up with little access to their father, and “for those lucky enough to have a father, the average teenager now spends less than half an hour a week alone with his or her father.” Half of this time is spent watching television, “a situation that does not readily lend itself to quality parent-child interactions.” Father-teen interactions in the United States are certainly “not enough to transmit the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills that adult males should pass on to their children.”<sup>62</sup> The child-adult continuum about which Jean Liedloff wrote is almost completely absent in the modern United States, and we're sending our broken model of family and community life to each and every village on earth, no matter how remote.

Through our films, television programs, laws, religious beliefs, and schooling and marriage practices, we're exporting a wide range of mechanisms that extend childhood well past puberty and that isolate teens from adults. We're creating prolonged, turbulent, Western-style adolescence, with all of its inherent problems.

We're creating generation gaps and family conflicts where none existed before. And because we ourselves have no idea how to deal with these problems, we're offering no solutions to the cultures we're corrupting.

**Q:** *Are you suggesting that teens should be able to smoke and drink, just like adults do? Shouldn't there be restrictions on their behavior?*

**A:** Many countries around the world have no age requirements for smoking and drinking, and, in some of those, at least, young people function fairly well without the restrictions. In addition, teens in our own country drink and smoke at high rates in spite of the laws; they not only imbibe and inhale, they also learn to disrespect adults and break the law while doing so. But I'm not suggesting that we abolish the laws that restrict drinking and smoking but rather that we replace age-based laws with competency-based laws. We do this, more or less, when it comes to driving. In rural areas, it's still common for young people to drive farm vehicles as soon as they're physically able—sometimes as young as nine or ten. In the big city, we allow most teens to drive in limited ways when they're fifteen and to get minimally-restrictive drivers licenses when they're sixteen—as long as they can pass appropriate competency tests, both written tests and road tests. Some teens pass, and some fail; some drive, and some don't, at least not until they can demonstrate appropriate competency. That's the key here. As long as the competency can be demonstrated, we should extend the privilege. Isn't it possible that some young teens might be able to drink or smoke responsibly—that is, exercising appropriate caution and with full knowledge of the risks?



## Chapter 4

# Instant Adulthood

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*I've been in these chains for so long  
I'll break free and I'll stand tall  
And I swear this time I won't fall.  
—Boyz II Men, "I Will Get There"*

**Overview.** Programs like the George Junior Republic, founded over a century ago, as well as modern programs like Outward Bound, show the enormous power that responsibility has in helping young people to mature. When allowed to function like adults, young people quickly rise to the challenge. On the other hand, correctional boot camps and harsh military schools merely infantilize young people even more than usual; in general, they do more harm than good.

Micky, with no e, was a gang leader in one of the toughest neighborhoods in New York in the 1890s. He was as tough as they came in those days—which, admittedly, may not have been all that tough by today's standards. It's hard to say; the crimes were certainly violent at times, but they lacked the AK-47s of today's gang world. That aside, Micky, who I'm guessing was fifteen or sixteen at the time, finally got caught for an "unusually serious offense." After his conviction a judge offered him a choice between a reformatory and a place called "George Junior Republic" in a town in upstate New York called Freeville, near Ithaca. He had no idea what the Junior Republic was, but a friend had coached him to pick it, and he was soon on his way.

Micky's story is told in a book called *Citizens Made and Remade: An Interpretation of the Significance and Influence of George Junior Republics* by William R. George and Lyman Beecher Stowe (Harriet Beecher Stowe's grandson).<sup>1</sup> Published in 1912, the book was a sequel to George's *The Junior Republic*, published two years earlier.<sup>2</sup>

Both books document the founding and proliferation of communities that gave troubled youth a new lease on life. The concept was straightforward: take tough people off the streets and put them onto a productive track, not through medication or therapy or treatments or “interventions” but by giving them a wagon load of responsibility.

Micky was quite bewildered when he arrived at the Freeport community, and the first thing he did was steal a watch from another young resident and then run for the railroad station. On his way out of town he was apprehended, not by the conventional police, but by yet another resident of the Republic, and he soon found himself tried and convicted by a true jury of his peers. Even the judge, district attorney, and lawyers were teens. After being locked up for a few weeks, Micky took a job working for a young contractor who used to be a member of his old gang in New York, and, according to the authors, Micky gradually became “industrious, clean, orderly, and law-abiding.”<sup>3</sup>

## WILLIAM GEORGE AND THE POWER OF RESPONSIBILITY

Micky’s story may sound too good to be true, but William George was the real thing, and what eventually became a small network of miracle-working communities was real too. As a young man living with his parents in New York, George was hellbent on saving and reforming every downtrodden young man in the city, and he had plenty from which to choose. This was the 1890s, when industrialization kept millions of people working thirteen-hour days in gritty factories that were proliferating rapidly—and that also kept tens of thousands of people, both young and old, homeless on the streets.

George convinced his parents to take in three or four homeless boys, and then he tried to create a small dairy business to help them earn their keep. When that idea failed, he decided to infiltrate and reform the street gangs. He founded a boxing club, gaining the respect of many gang members by literally pounding them into submission, and then, quite deliberately, pulled a fast one: as the new gang leader, he transformed his gang “from a law-defying into a law-enforcing group” called the Law-and-Order Gang. He offered the services of his gang to the local police sergeant to help fight crime, and he didn’t stop there:

*...as commander-in-chief, [George] was to advance from district to district, leaving his trusted lieutenants in command of the conquered locality, and taking with him each time a picked company of faithful followers to help capture the new territory.<sup>4</sup>*

One member of his gang was asked whether his gang had “really” been so bad before George reformed it. He replied, “I don’t know what you’d call it. We’d smash a fellow’s skull in for a nickel.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, George had made a difference. Just how many people he saved is not clear, and the gang project eventually got off track, but George had learned something critical: *giving troubled young people real responsibility turns them instantly into responsible citizens.*

### The George Junior Republics

In 1895, with land made available by friends and family, he applied this lesson to a much more ambitious project. He created a miniature—or “Junior”—version of the “Big Republic”: an entire community where troubled youth would, he conjectured, instantly shed their errant ways by governing that community, and, of course, themselves. By all accounts, George’s project worked well, and similar Republics were established in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and California. The original Republic in Freeville even still exists, but although this should be the ultimate testimony to the soundness of George’s vision, the contemporary George Junior Republic is radically different from the original. More about that shortly.

The new communities were truly republics. Believing that self-government was “one of the highest forms of responsibility,”<sup>6</sup> George designed them to be run entirely by their residents. The age of majority was set at fifteen, and people under fifteen were mentored by full citizens, all between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. A commission established in 1913 to evaluate the effectiveness of the Republics found that of twelve hundred young people who had left the Republics, “not more than 5 percent may at present be regarded as failures” and “fully two-thirds have achieved positive success, in that they are supporting themselves and those dependent on them and also in many instances do some definite work in the aid of other individuals.”

The *New York Times* article that reported the findings of the commission also noted that “among the more successful ex-citizens we have lawyers, civil engineers, contractors, teachers, physicians, and professional nurses, newspaper men, public office holders, mechanics, farmers, gardeners, plumbers, carpenters, [and] printers.”<sup>7</sup>

George himself found—as I have also observed in my teaching, by the way—that the toughest characters sometimes became the highest achievers:

*As time went on, Mr. George noticed that those citizens who caused the most trouble when they first came usually became the best and strongest leaders before they left. Finally this became so marked that he announced that general badness, so far as the boys were concerned, would be regarded as a special qualification for citizenship in the Junior Republic.<sup>8</sup>*

Unfortunately, Mr. George was soon ejected from his own organization by the board of trustees he had formed to help oversee its rapid growth. At least three young female residents claimed that George had been sexually aggressive with them, and one claimed to have had his child. A committee investigating the various allegations concluded that “his presence in the institution is clearly undesirable.”<sup>9</sup>

### Abandoning the Vision

In spite of his sudden exit, several of the Republics continued to flourish and to follow his original model until perhaps the 1970s. Actor Steve McQueen was one of the more conspicuous (and grateful) graduates of the California “Boys Republic” in the 1940s.<sup>10</sup> But George’s ideals—and decades of success—were no match for the ever-advancing artificial extension of childhood. As society in general came to believe that older and older people needed the protection of adults, the Republics shifted from the responsibility model to the modern treatment model: troubled youth need to be medicated, “treated” by “professionals,” and so on. At some point, males and females were segregated, and in 1991 the original republic became strictly male. The current literature of the Republic proudly advertises a staff-to-resident ratio of 1 to 4<sup>11</sup>; so much for responsibility.

Is the modern program successful? According to the Freeville program’s recent literature, “Since 1983, over 1,200 families have been served in the George Junior Republic Family Therapy Unit. The youths in placement *who gained a recommended discharge and had active participation with their family* have a 72-percent success rate, which is defined as *not recidivating through the first year after discharge* [all italics added].”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the runaways and the dropouts—and we don’t know how many of those there were—didn’t fare so well, and neither did the graduates who didn’t have family support. We don’t know how many of those there were either. For the ones who met the criteria, we also don’t know much beyond the first year—how many turned out to be doctors, lawyers, plumbers, career criminals, or murderers. As far as I can tell, modern teen “therapy” or “treatment” programs are far less effective than the old responsibility-driven programs, but it’s difficult to make direct comparisons.

Here’s a disturbing footnote on the modernization of the Junior Republics. Just as I was completing this chapter I spotted a small Associated Press story entitled “Teens killed counselor, took truck,” which reported the strangling of a forty-three-year-old counselor by two teens at “a private residential school and treatment center” north of Pittsburgh.<sup>13</sup> It turns out that this is one of the remaining George Junior Republics. Note that it’s now a “treatment center,” not a republic.

## A Modern Law-and-Order Gang

William George's vision—the uncorrupted version—is remarkably similar to that of a more contemporary crusader, Curtis Sliwa. In 1968 at age fourteen Sliwa founded one of the country's first neighborhood recycling centers in his parents' basement. He used the monthly income from selling sorted drums full of cans, glass, and newspapers to help neighborhood children. At fifteen he was named “newspaper boy of the year” by the *New York Daily News* for rescuing a family of six from a burning building. At sixteen he was summoned to the White House to meet President Nixon in recognition of his effective community activism.<sup>14</sup>

But Sliwa is best known for founding the Guardian Angels, a group of young people trained in martial arts and sporting red berets who made it their business to protect the innocent on New York subways. This was back in 1979, when Sliwa was a night manager at a McDonald's, frustrated over the growing crime problem in New York. Just as George had done a century before with his Law and Order Gang, Sliwa took tough young people and transformed them into productive citizens, mainly by giving them meaningful adult responsibilities and a positive mission. Angels chapters now exist in cities throughout North America, as well as on three other continents. Sliwa's philosophy should now be familiar: “Empower people to help themselves, build self-esteem and confidence, arm them with responsibility, and you tap into the greatest source of lasting good possible.”<sup>15</sup>

## BOYS-TO-MEN TOWN

Better known than the Junior Republics is a similar endeavor called Boys Town, founded near Omaha, Nebraska, by Father Edward Joseph Flanagan in 1921. In 1912 Flanagan, a young immigrant priest from Ireland, was assigned to a small parish in O'Neill, Nebraska, where he became interested in the plight of unemployed men and, eventually, of troubled youth. In 1917, with a small donation from his friend, Henry Monsky, Flanagan rented an old Victorian mansion and, with the blessing of his church (but no money), dubbed it the Home for Homeless Boys. Starting with a handful of residents, he soon outgrew the mansion and, just four years later, founded an extraordinary community called Boys Town ten miles west of Omaha, initially with about two hundred young residents.<sup>16</sup>

By now, even if you've never heard of Boys Town, you probably can guess what made this community remarkable: like the Republics, it was run almost entirely by the troubled young men who came there. It eventually had its own schools, chapel,

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### *Boys Town: The Movie*

Starring Spencer Tracy as reformer Father Flanagan and Mickey Rooney as tough young Whitey Marsh, this 1938 fictional film made the real Boys Town famous. The film dramatizes the founding of Boys Town, then shifts to a complex plot focusing on young Whitey. His big brother Joe, a career criminal, has begged Flanagan to try to save Whitey from his own sad fate, but Whitey is so incorrigible that the task seems impossible. When Whitey runs away from Boys Town, Pee Wee, his young companion, is struck by a car. Then Whitey is shot in the leg by his own brother during a robbery. At the end, Whitey, with help from both Joe and Flanagan, saves the day and is elected Mayor of Boys Town. Unfortunately, the film made Boys Town seem so successful that contributions to the real town fell after the film's release.<sup>20</sup>

post office, gymnasium, cottages, police force, commissioners, city council, and mayor. The latter were all young men, and many of the structures in the community were built by the residents. The community was incorporated as its own town in 1936.<sup>17</sup>

Flanagan's philosophy was a variant of one with which you're already familiar, captured well by the old saw, "The Devil makes work for idle hands." Said Flanagan:

*I looked at the street boys with a sadness. Like all children, even poorly fed ones, they had too much energy. And what outlet had these poor boys for that energy? No place to play but that crowded, filthy street. Nothing to do but to get into devilry—no proper direction. Is it any wonder they turn to wrong?*<sup>18</sup>

He believed that placing troubled young men in a supportive, homelike environment and then giving them responsibility for running their own lives would put them on the right track. Even though many of the young people in his community had been convicted of crimes—some quite serious—and were referred by judges, Flanagan insisted that the community not be surrounded by fences or walls and that the doors not have locks on them. "I am not building a prison," he told community residents. "This is a home. You do not wall in members of your family."<sup>19</sup>

### A Resident Reminisces

I recently tracked down one of the few surviving residents of the original Boys Town, a former actor and veterans advocate, Bob Paradise, now in his eighties and living in Southern California. Bob was a resident of Boys Town from about

1932 to 1938. He came there at age thirteen, rescued from the life he had been living on the streets since his parents had been killed. During his last four years at Boys Town he was the Chief of Police. When there were problems, Paradise said, “We just took care of it, like in the city. We stopped the fight, or whatever it was. We had about ten policemen.”

Although there were some adults in the community, “They didn’t interfere with us,” Paradise said, “because we had to do what we were supposed to do. We never had a situation we couldn’t handle.”

Following his graduation from Boys Town, Paradise enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to the Philippines, where he took law classes at the University of Manila under Army auspices. His education was interrupted when war broke out, and in 1942 he was captured by the Japanese. Paradise was one of the survivors of the horrendous Bataan Death March, in which twenty thousand U.S. soldiers perished, and he remained a prisoner of war until liberated by U.S. forces in 1945. His subsequent careers—in acting, directing, and legal advocacy—have all been distinguished ones. Today he specializes in representing women veterans on sexual harassment issues.

### Another Vision Lost

Boys Town, alas, was transformed over the years into a very different entity than the one Father Flanagan created. The project’s success set the transformation in motion: even while Flanagan was still alive (he died in 1948), the financial success of the community allowed its administrators to hire more and more adult “professionals” to take over construction, farming, cooking, and other tasks—which meant less hard work for the residents. And, of course, the changing perspectives on teens in American society—the inexorable and ever-increasing extension of childhood—led gradually to the implementation of the modern “treatment” approach at Boys Town, which became coed in 1979 and is now called Girls and Boys Town.

The community, now housing about seven hundred young people, is run these days according to “operant behaviorism” and “social learning theory” principles; basically, residents go to school and earn points for good behavior, and the points can then be exchanged for privileges.<sup>21</sup> All activities are closely supervised by adults. In other words, it’s now a somewhat typical “group home,” run largely by my colleagues in psychology.

Paradise thinks the new version doesn’t hold a candle to the old. It’s too “commercial,” he says, and it lacks the “friendship” and “camaraderie” of the old school. At some point, said Paradise, the modern version of Boys Town also stopped accepting the true “incorrigibles”—those referred by criminal courts for having committed serious crimes. The new treatment-oriented community also appears to lack the basic

structure that Flanagan instinctively knew was necessary for producing significant life change—one based on meaningful responsibility and control over one’s life.<sup>22</sup>

### Boys Towns in Italy

Another Irish priest, Monsignor John Patrick Carroll-Abbing, a relief worker in Italy at the end of World War II, established another chain of George/Flanagan-like communities in Italy beginning in 1945 after he noticed that young post-war street urchins in Rome seemed to be remarkably self-sufficient. The first was started near the town of Civitavecchia, forty-five miles north of Rome, and other Italian “Boys’ Towns” (the first was initially called the “Shoeshine Boys’ Hotel”) were later created in Palermo, Lucca, Pozzuoli, Chieti, Rome, and elsewhere; eventually, separate “Girls’ Towns” were established. All were governed by the young residents, generally from ten to twenty years old, based on Carroll-Abbing’s belief (according to community materials) that “young people will react enthusiastically to authentic challenge that fulfills their humanity.”<sup>23</sup>

Italy has so far avoided the “mental health” and “treatment” models that dominate here, and teens there are still often considered to be young adults. Not only do all of the Italian Boys’ and Girls’ Towns still exist, they are all still run largely according to Carroll-Abbing’s original design.

### The Down Side of Treatment

Given my background in psychology, you might be surprised by the skepticism I’m expressing about the “treatment” approach to teen problems. In fact, I earned my doctorate working with the eminent behavioral psychologist, B. F. Skinner, arguably the key person behind modern behavioristic and social-learning interventions.

Although these interventions are powerful in changing behavior—especially in the short-term—I’ve never been convinced that they actually change *people* in any significant sense, at least not when we’re dealing with relatively normal young people and adults. I helped train staff and consulted on “cases” at a variety of institutions for many years, and it was generally my impression that the residents and “patients” were just going along with the programs—complying with instructions and requests mainly to avoid penalties, lying in wait for the opportunity to leave the facility. Many were bleary-eyed from too much medication; few had meaningful relationships with other residents (why bother, when people come and go frequently and it’s virtually impossible to keep in touch?); and meaningful relationships with staff were strictly forbidden.

Skinner himself long extolled the virtues of “natural contingencies” of reinforcement and punishment over the “contrived contingencies” one finds in

treatment programs,<sup>24</sup> but many of Skinner's followers have missed this point. The natural consequences of behavior—the warm and sincere embrace of a dear friend one has helped, the anger of someone one has offended, the sight of crops one has planted with one's own hands—are far more impactful than the insincere praise and M&M-like points and tokens of a “b-mod” program. The brilliance of the George- and Flanagan-style communities lay, I believe, in the sublime power of the natural contingencies those communities provided.

## GROWING UP IN THE WOODS

Julian, my eldest son, had some rough teen years. I'm sure I don't know a fraction of what actually happened, because I was raising Justin—the easy one—while my ex-wife was struggling with Julian. When he was fourteen, his mom sent him off on a \$3,000 trip to the woods for a few weeks to try to straighten him out. As Julian remembers it:

*Mom said it was either military school or twenty-four days on Hurricane Island. It was an easy choice. We had to carry all of our supplies for three weeks on our backs, so our packs weighed upwards of sixty pounds. Our two counselors left us alone much of the time to get us to try to resolve our own disputes and figure out how the map worked. By the end of the first week my mosquito bites had melded into one continuous bite.*

*The first week or so was all hiking through woods and trails; the second week was almost entirely canoeing; and the final nine days was spent hiking up hills and mountains. About midway through the trip we were required to separate and spend a day and a night alone in the woods.*

*One day was set aside for white water rafting—a first for most of us. It was incredible. I remember seeing a bear cub sliding down a tree as it tried to flee from us. The most spiritual moment for me was when we finally reached the top of our first mountain. I'll never forget the awesome sight of the water and forests far beneath us. I took a peaceful nap by a cliff.*

*At the end of the trip everyone who had attended Outward Bound (there were many, many groups) was expected to run an eleven-mile marathon. The night before the race I ate something that made me sick and I was up until the next morning throwing up. I wasn't able to race with the group, so the counselors insisted that I make the run myself the next morning. I left the trailing counselor in the dust, and realized by the end of the 11 miles (which was quite easy for me) that I was now in the best shape of my life.*

Julian was one of many thousands of young people who are, in a sense, aban-

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### Navigating the Teen Years

*In 1858 on a voyage around Cape Horn, 19-year-old Mary Patten's husband, the captain of a large clipper ship, fell ill. The first mate was in irons for insubordination; the second mate was ignorant of navigation. Mrs. Patten had made herself mistress of the art of navigation during a previous voyage. She took command, and for fifty-two days she navigated the ship of eighteen hundred tons, tending her husband the while, and took both safely into San Francisco.*

—Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*

done in the woods each year by an innovative organization called Outward Bound, which came into being—indirectly, anyway—because of another young man named Julian more than sixty years ago.

### Origins of Outward Bound

In 1941 young Julian Holt was a student at a private school in Wales (U.K.) called the Gordonstoun School, founded and directed by Kurt Hahn, a German-Jewish genius who had originally founded the school in Germany in 1920 but later fled to England to escape persecution by the Nazis.<sup>25</sup> Hahn's teaching philosophy was a radical departure from the authoritarian style of the German schools of his day.

Hahn believed that he could build character in young people by giving them real responsibilities, putting them on their "honor," encouraging them to provide "service" to the community, providing only minimal supervision, and subjecting them to vigorous exercise. He was staunchly opposed to imposing education on people who weren't ready to learn, which he compared with "pouring and pouring into a jug and never looking to see whether the lid is off."<sup>26</sup> Julian's father, the English shipping magnate Sir Lawrence Holt, was a major contributor to the school and a strong supporter of Hahn's.

With England at war against Germany, Holt was deeply concerned about the lack of physical and emotional toughness in British Navy cadets. Hahn suggested that they create an offshoot of Gordonstoun to build a new generation of tough, independent British seamen. The new program, at first called the Aberdovey Sailing School (later: Outward Bound), was launched in 1941 with eight students from the Gordonstoun School, eight workers from Holt's shipping company, and eight young cadets from a British Naval ship, the H.M.S. Conway.

Hahn had come to believe that two- or three- week programs (mainly for young soldiers and firefighters) had virtually no long-term effects on performance and that it took at least twenty-eight days to toughen someone up long-term.<sup>27</sup> Thus began the system that is still used widely today in Outward Bound programs around the world: twenty-eight (or, today, sometimes twenty-four) days of rigorous physical training, individual and team challenges, and outdoor adventures.

### Training Toughness and Independence

In the original program, young people “learned to throw a javelin, discus and shotput, to do long and high jumps, to run and sprint and, above all, to climb and walk long distances in the rugged Welsh hills.”<sup>28</sup> According to Renate Wilson, author of *Inside Outward Bound*, “Towards the end of the twenty-eight days even the weediest were sent on cross-country hikes of up to thirty miles, climbing a couple of peaks on the way.” Although some expressed concern initially that the program would “strain” the students, “[Hahn’s] training methods demonstrated that every youngster could improve his athletic performance, no matter how inexperienced he was in a sport, and that he would not be harmed by the effort.”<sup>29</sup>

Hahn and Holt’s program also included rigorous training on and above the water, because Naval fortitude was the primary goal: rowing, sailing, climbing nets, running obstacle courses, climbing rope ladders, crossing ropes strung between trees, climbing smooth walls that approximated the sides of ships, and “getting the boys to clamber over the rigging” of a local sailing ship. “The ropes course,” according to Wilson, “became one of the features built into every Outward Bound school.”<sup>30</sup>

Participants were organized into “watches” of twelve individuals, another custom that is maintained to this day, and within each watch, a captain and other officials were elected by the watch members. Individual responsibility was stressed throughout the program. Among other things, participants “kept a record of their own progress in athletics, seamanship and land expeditions, and were put on their honor not to cheat.”<sup>31</sup> The program was said to be an immediate success: Aberdovey “toughened [participants’] bodies and armed them against the ‘enemies within’—fear, defeatism, apathy, selfishness.”<sup>32</sup> It continued to train young cadets and potential cadets until the War’s end in 1945.

After the war, similar Outward Bound schools were established in Ullswater (near the original school) and Holn Park in Devon, and an all-female version was founded in Rhownair, a few miles from Averdovey. The British Army founded two additional Outward Bound schools in Wales and Norway. In the early 1950s, Joshua Milner III, one of the teachers at the Gordonstoun School, founded the Outward

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### Leaving Drugs Behind

*Can a wilderness experience help a young person kick drugs? According to a 1991 report in the Journal of Adolescent Chemical Dependency, the wild outdoors might be just the environment some young people need to get clean and sober. Jeff, one of the subjects in the study, was a sixteen-year-old high school student with a long history of drug abuse—cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, and more, five times a week. He said drugs were his way of “finding freedom”—an escape from his father’s controlling ways. A multiple-component treatment program at the Beech Hill Hospital in New Hampshire included twenty-two days in an Outward Bound wilderness school. Jeff started out in tears because his pack was too heavy—and ended up crying with relief and gratitude because he had grown so much in the wild. Three months later, Jeff was still sober. About three-quarters of the young people in the program appeared to reap similar benefits.<sup>38</sup>*

Bound movement in the United States, which now consists of a series of “wilderness schools” and urban centers throughout the country. In addition, more than a thousand institutions of various sorts in the U.S.—universities, government agencies, and so on—use Outward Bound methodology to train their constituents.<sup>33</sup>

Among the organization’s many programs, the “Ascent Program” is of special interest here. It’s designed, according to program materials, to help people from fourteen to seventeen to “navigate through...treacherous water, teach them skills to ease the transition, and to learn more about themselves as a whole human being.” It’s touted as “an early intervention for teens who may have started down a self-destructive path, but who have not yet burned any vital bridges.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, they’re not looking for convicted criminals, but, according to Wilson, about 5 percent of their participants are in fact ordered to attend Outward Bound by “correctional services or a benevolent foundation.”<sup>35</sup>

### How Outward Bound Helps

But does it work? What effects, if any, does a challenging program emphasizing individual responsibility have on teens?

Dozens of research studies have been conducted over a period of several decades to answer this question, and the results have been overwhelmingly positive. A study of sixty delinquents published in 1969, for example, found that participation in Outward Bound produced “more favorable social attitudes and evaluation of feel-

ings.”<sup>36</sup> The key, according to the authors, is that “a young man should not just be told that he is capable of more than he thinks he can do, but rather a set of circumstances must be devised in which he demonstrates such competence to himself.”<sup>37</sup>

A Boston University study conducted in 1972 found, with non-delinquent individuals in their late teens, that the Outward Bound experience produced positive changes in the participants’ “self-concept” —roughly, their assessment of their own abilities and self-worth; the gains declined when the teens returned to their home environments.<sup>39</sup> A 1982 study by Alan Wright of Pennsylvania State University with juvenile delinquents found that Outward Bound produced positive changes in “self-esteem” (roughly, an assessment of self-worth), “self-efficacy” (an assessment of one’s ability to perform in various ways), and other measures of cognitive functioning.<sup>40</sup> A 1981 review of seventy-three studies of Outward Bound-type programs by Leslie Burton of Rutgers sums up the findings, both positive and negative, of such studies:

*In general, the results indicate that Outward Bound-type programs do have a positive impact upon self perceptions such as self-concept, locus of control, self-assertion and personality.... Actual behavior such as grade-point average, observed behavior, school functioning and absenteeism does not undergo much significant change as a result of Outward Bound-type programs. One notable exception is recidivism, which is markedly reduced in the methodologically select studies.*<sup>41</sup>

Subsequent studies confirm these general conclusions, and a recent study by Scott Husted of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln even finds that Outward Bound “positively influences academic achievement” in at-risk teens.<sup>42</sup> I’ve been unable to find a single study that suggests that Outward Bound produces any negative effects—physical, emotional, cognitive, or behavioral.

### Limitations of Outward Bound

Unfortunately, Outward Bound is only a halfway measure; it gives people real challenges and real responsibilities—but *not in the real world*. It necessarily runs into a problem psychologists call “transfer of training”: what people learn in one environment doesn’t necessarily transfer to other environments, especially when those other environments place very different demands on the learners. When the original Outward Bound was toughening up people to enter the Navy, it subsequently sent them *to the Navy*. When troubled young people are toughened up in a modern Outward Bound program, they’re subsequently sent back to the streets they came from—and to a world that treats them like helpless children.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Presidential Precedent

*George Washington, first president of the United States, completed his education in his early teens. At sixteen, he went to work for Lord Thomas Fairfax, surveying land in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. He spent part of his earnings on land purchases, and by twenty-one, had fifteen hundred acres of his own.*

Fortunately, the transfer problem is irrelevant to the main question I'm exploring in this volume. I'm not asking whether a four-week experience can produce a permanent or profound effect on behavior but rather whether young people are capable of behaving responsibly. The Outward Bound studies make it abundantly clear that Hahn was right. *When you give young people a significant amount of responsibility—in the case of Outward Bound, by subjecting them to enormous challenges in the wilderness—they rise to those challenges.* As a bonus, many are changed in positive and significant ways that carryover to some extent to the real world. At the very least, they begin to view themselves as more effective, more capable people, even though home and school environments have been telling them that they're helpless, mindless children.

Outward Bound is the largest, oldest, and best-known of a number of “adventure-based” programs that expose people, young and old, to challenging and sometimes life-changing experiences. For young participants, Outward Bound-type adventures provide, in many cases, the first opportunity they've ever had to function as tough, self-reliant, individuals. The natural world used to provide those opportunities early in life, but now, it seems, we must pay large sums (these programs cost between \$3,000 and \$60,000 to attend) to professionals to give our children a taste of real responsibility. Is this the best we can do? Are there other ways to help young people grow up?

## DOES MILITARY SCHOOL WORK?

My son chose Outward Bound over the dreaded, proverbial “military school.” Just what is military school these days, and what effect, if any, does it have on young people?

Bear in mind that modern high-school level military schools or their close relatives—correctional “boot camps”—aren't real military operations. Real military acad-

emies and boot camps serve a real purpose: to condition young soldiers, both physically and mentally, to kill real enemies and follow the orders of superiors (see Chapter Nine). Real soldiers are not treated like children. Quite the contrary: they're taught to use lethal weapons for legitimate, or at least government-sanctioned, purposes.

There are obvious reasons for real military training camps to exist and for the instructors at those camps to impose rigorous training regimens on new soldiers. As we look at correctional boot camps and military schools for young people, ask yourself whether they have the legitimacy of real military programs. If they don't, expect problems.

### Correctional Boot Camps

In the early 1980s, Georgia, Louisiana, and Oklahoma pioneered harsh, military-style "boot camps" as a way of dealing with rising crime rates and extreme overcrowding in state prisons.<sup>43</sup> Here's how a 1995 article described the entry of teen offenders into a camp in Manatee, Florida:

*All is quiet at the Manatee (Fla.) sheriff's boot camp as a van load of teen-aged lawbreakers slowly rolls up the drive to a stop. Seconds pass. Suddenly, a shrill whistle shatters the silence. A swarm of sheriff's deputies appears from nowhere. Beating their fists on the van, a dozen officers in dark glasses and drill sergeant hats scream orders at the startled youths inside.*

*The camp's newest recruits are hauled out of the van. Searched and patted down. Subjected to a head-shaving. And it all happens in double-time, with high-decibel deputies barking commands just inches from the young toughs' faces.*

*"I was scared senseless," recalls a 17-year-old recruit, whose conviction for battery, burglary and car theft brought him a four-month sentence at the Florida camp.<sup>44</sup>*

Imagine that you're one of the inductees. How would you react to the harshness of your reception? How would you react to the day-by-day abuse you suffer at the hands of the officers? Bearing in mind that you're not being prepared to fight a war, or even to get a challenging job—in other words, that there's no easy way to excuse the objectionable behavior of your oppressors—how would you account for the cruelty to which you're being subjected? Would your respect for authority increase, or would you feel more contempt for authority after such an experience?

Early reports on the correctional boot camps, such as an article about the Georgia camps that appeared in *LIFE* magazine in 1988, were encouraging:

*After prison, 70 percent avoid going back. After [boot camp], 80 percent of the young*

*men stay out of trouble. To all appearances, these boot camps seem to be a plausible way to reduce the socially and economically disastrous overcrowding that thirty-seven states are under court order to alleviate.*<sup>45</sup>

The Ford Foundation provided \$100,000 to support the boot camp program, and by the late 1980s at least fifteen states were running or developing similar programs. The point of such programs, according to the *Life* article, was “to penetrate thick young adult skulls before it’s too late.”<sup>46</sup> Truett Goodwin, identified in the article as a warden in the Georgia boot camp at Forsyth, explained the guiding philosophy with the well-tuned sensitivity of a seasoned educator: “You have to hit a mule between the eyes with a two-by-four to get his attention. And that’s exactly what we’re doing with this program.”<sup>47</sup>

### Abuse and Sadism

Tough correctional boot camps need tough correctional employees. As you might expect, these sometimes turn out to be people who enjoy shouting at and pushing around young people all day.

By the mid-1990s, troubling reports began to appear about “abuse” and “sadism” at various boot camps. In 1998 five staff members at a boot camp in Oracle, Arizona—the Arizona Boys Ranch—were indicted in connection with the death of a sixteen-year-old resident there. One of those indicted was the camp nurse, to whom the young man had been sent repeatedly with complaints of chest pains and difficulty breathing. The nurse kept sending him back to the regular staff, who continued to subject him to strenuous exercises. The coroner’s report noted that he died of empyema, a condition involving a buildup of fluids in the chest cavity, in his case more than two-and-a-half quarts of pus. He was also suffering from chronic bronchitis, pneumonia, and strep and staph infections, and his body was covered with cuts and bruises—seventy-one in all.<sup>48</sup>

Eventually, the Arizona Boys Ranch was denied a license to operate, and *seventeen* of its former employees were listed in the Arizona Child Abuser Directory. Other deaths and abuses at boot camps have also come to light over the years. Arizona, Maryland, North Dakota, Georgia, and Colorado have now shut down their boot camps entirely, and California and Florida are scaling back.<sup>49</sup> At this writing, Louisiana has just shut down Tallulah, its toughest juvenile prison, because of a ten-year history of riots, beatings, and rapes (both by staff and by other inmates)—and because of a recidivism rate of about 60 percent.<sup>50</sup>

A 1998 report issued by the Kansas-based Koch Crime Institute suggests

that recidivism might actually be slightly higher for boot camp attendees than for participants in traditional correctional programs: between 64 and 75 percent of boot camp graduates, according to Koch, commit crimes shortly after their release—a rate comparable to or slightly higher than the rate one sees in traditional programs.<sup>51</sup>

Research by Doris MacKenzie of the University of Maryland, as well as a comprehensive study by Dale Parent and Douglas McDonald of Abt Associates, also paint a fairly bleak picture of the country's more than sixty correctional boot camps.<sup>52</sup> More generally, a report published by Paul Gendreau and Mario Pappozzi in *Corrections Today* in 1995 concludes, "Corrections practitioners... report that punishment programs such as shock incarceration and boot camps have not been effective in discouraging offenders."<sup>53</sup> Finally, a 2000 report by the Institute on Crime, Justice and Corrections at George Washington University, reviewing the effectiveness of eight boot camps around the country, states:

*Although many of the programs have been well-administered and popular with public officials, they have not demonstrated a significant impact on recidivism, prison or jail crowding, or costs, which have been the three core goals of boot camps....[The] future of boots camps is not promising.<sup>54</sup>*

As one might expect, boot camps that are not entirely consumed with "breaking" the inmates do better. In a 1995 report in *Corrections Today*, Deborah Sharp agrees, first of all, that the "scared-senseless" approach generally produces only short-term, surface results; inmates will generally toe the line only as long as the taskmasters are at hand and the line is in place.<sup>55</sup> Tom Castellano, another researcher in this area sums it up well: "We basically know that the military component by itself doesn't do much."<sup>56</sup>

Sharp also notes that programs that include specific types of real-world training—in problem-solving skills, for example—or that encourage legitimate, meaningful relationships between inmates and staff produce better results than those based merely around "military" discipline. In one such program, the McNeil Island Work Ethic Camp in Washington state, "the relationship between inmates and their supervisors," says Sharp, "is closer to the link between employee and employer than between military grunt and drill instructor." Inmates have a choice of jobs, and the work is supplemented by classes on anger management, victim awareness, and life planning.<sup>57</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Discipline by the Sea

*Founded in 1910, the Army and Navy Academy in Carlsbad, California, just north of San Diego, supplements the strict military component of its program with an excellent mix of character-building experiences. It also has the advantage of being located on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean, with surfing beaches located nearby. The beauty of this program is that the main M&M cadets get for showing they can handle responsibility is more responsibility—higher ranks and more “respect” from, control over, and responsibility for other cadets. The general claim: “When the cadets are given this power and responsibility (appropriately monitored), they usually flourish as diligent leaders.” Selected cadets also serve as Peer Mediators, who handle “situations involving homesickness, getting along with roommates, respecting authority, following and leading.” Unfortunately, as I found with similar schools, the ANA doesn’t seem to have any data at hand on the effectiveness of its program.*

### Military Schools

High-school-level military schools used to number in the hundreds in the United States, but there are now fewer than fifty, and many are struggling to stay open.<sup>58</sup> Many of the studies of the effectiveness of secondary military schools were done around World War II; there seems to be relatively little interest today. An exception is a study by Lee Tarrant of Kansas State University, conducted in 1982, which found improvements in leadership skills among students at five private military schools in Kansas and Missouri. Unfortunately, Tarrant’s study also found that “consideration for others” decreased significantly among military school students in comparison with students in regular public schools.<sup>59</sup> A study conducted by John Hoar in 1981 found that military rank and military excellence among students at secondary military schools were poor predictors of the moral reasoning ability of those students—also a discouraging finding.<sup>60</sup>

The U.S. General Accounting Office, responding to a Senate request in 1993, reported that the handful of secondary-level military schools operated directly by the Army, Navy, and Air Force were “equal to or superior to private preparatory schools,” but the GAO’s report also stated that this conclusion was not based on “any new research or analysis.”<sup>61</sup> It also mentioned that the attrition rate at the Army’s high school was “as high as 40 percent,” a figure suggesting major flaws either with the school or with the admissions process.

Generally, one finds the same pattern in military schools that we saw with the boot camps: schools focusing exclusively on military discipline tend to produce short-term behavioral effects and, sometimes, a long-term dislike for authority, whereas schools that give young people meaningful training and real responsibility produce better outcomes.<sup>62</sup>

The meaningfulness of the experience is key. An experience has meaning when we believe it is connected to people or things we really care about: our immediate family, for example, or our careers or our country. That's one of the reasons "real" military schools like the United States Military Academy at West Point produce outstanding results. The people entering such academies (which are at the college level) are headed toward officer-level careers in the military. Admission is highly competitive, and the training makes sense. One learns to follow orders, lead others, work in teams, handle weapons, and so on, so that one can advance one's military career and, if necessary, defend one's country. Cadets are given significant responsibilities related to real-world challenges, and the most extreme form of individual accountability—the "honor system"—is enforced.

Although humiliation has often been a part of the training regimen at West Point—at least for entering cadets—in no sense are West Point cadets treated like children. They are taught, almost from day one, to become strong leaders, not helpless followers, and the system works well. West Point graduates often have exemplary careers both in and out of the military; in the class of 1915 alone, 59 of the 164 graduates became generals, earning a total of 111 stars, and Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, John J. Pershing, Dwight D. Eisenhower, George S. Patton, Douglas MacArthur, and many other notables were West Point graduates.<sup>63</sup>

Placing enormous demands on young people—at least demands that they find meaningful—seems not only to keep them out of trouble but, in many cases, to bring out the very best in them. But why?

## THE POWER OF RESPONSIBILITY: TWO THEORIES

In 1971, on the campus of Stanford University, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo set in motion one of the most famous social science studies of the twentieth century: the Stanford Prison Experiment. Twenty-four college students were assigned randomly to one of two groups—guards or prisoners—and then asked to play those roles in rooms renovated to resemble prison cells. Some of the guards soon became so abusive and some of the prisoners so distressed that Zimbardo had

to stop the experiment after a mere six days.<sup>64</sup> The experiment is said to show the enormous power that roles play in our lives—a power so great that it can quickly turn perfectly decent, intelligent college students into insensitive tyrants.

Because Zimbardo himself served as the prison superintendent, and because he failed to conduct any controls (such as issuing “orders” for participants to be “extra nice” to each other), it’s possible that the abuse he witnessed was due entirely to “experimenter expectations”—in other words, that students were performing the way they did in order to please their professor. This issue aside, roles are indeed very powerful, just as Zimbardo said they were.

The very first day someone becomes a teacher or a police officer or a cashier or a dad, one behaves, and even feels, very much like the character one is supposed to play. It’s like magic! I remember, quite distinctly, the first time I pushed baby Julian down the street in a stroller. People were approaching from the other direction, and I suddenly had a strong urge to push them aside to clear the way. Where did that urge come from, I wondered? Hormones? Not likely. I was now a “father,” and I was doing what I believed fathers were supposed to do—namely, protecting my child. I was playing a role, somewhat the way an actor does in a play, except that actors are motivated by money and applause, whereas I was motivated by “reality”—by what B.F. Skinner called “natural contingencies of reinforcement and punishment.”

*What happens when you put a young person into the role of “adult”?* And no, I’m not talking about shouting “Grow up!” at your fifteen-year-old. I’m talking about *really* putting someone into that role, just as I was *really* put into the role of Dad. The answer is that the teen *acts, and even feels, like an adult*. That’s why very young soldiers, or young people who suddenly find themselves responsible for younger siblings or disabled parents, or young people who no longer have access to parents or other authority figures, or young people told by Father Flanagan to set up their own government and police force, mature so quickly. When thrust into adult roles, they act and feel like adults. Even pre-teens can do this to some extent, but for post-pubescent teens, the transformation is sometimes quite radical for the simple reason that teenagers are equipped, both mentally and physically, to *be* adults.

### Role-Playing Theory

Under this theory—let’s call it the Role-Playing Theory of Adulthood—do young people actually *become* adults? For a question of such Talmudic proportions, let’s consult the Talmud.

The ancient rabbis tell the tale of a selfish man who is convinced by a rabbi to do one good deed for his family or the community every week. Over the years, these deeds accumulate, and on his gravestone the man is remembered for his

kindness and generosity. But was this unpleasant fellow *really* kind and generous, or was he just following orders? Some of the sages say yes, the generosity was real, and others say no, the man was a fake. It's a split decision! So perhaps young people playing adult roles are "really" adults, and perhaps not. By the same logic, perhaps "adults" playing adult roles are "really" adults, and perhaps not. It depends on how willing you are to distinguish between someone's actions and someone's hypothetical "self."

I'm comfortable calling people who teach "teachers" and people who protect the public and carry badges "police officers," no matter what they are *really* like in the dark confines of their souls. I'm also comfortable calling young people who behave like adults "adults." It makes no sense to me to hesitate to call someone an adult simply because of his or her age or appearance. I think most people would agree that we want adulthood to refer to a set of abilities, not to someone's height or numerical age. More about this in Chapter Six.

### Restoration Theory

According to Role-Playing Theory, young people given adult responsibilities become adults in some sense because of the power of roles. But there might be another, more intriguing, reason responsibility is life-changing for our young.

Soon after puberty, many or most young people are fully equipped to function as adults. When we infantilize them, we interfere with normal development. Giving young people meaningful responsibilities might simply be a way of *restoring normal functioning*. Under this theory, which I'll call our Restoration Theory of Adulthood, artificially extending childhood holds people back, and it might even stunt growth permanently, a possibility I'll explore to some extent in Chapters Seven and Nine. Giving young people adult responsibilities restores the child-adult continuum that Jean Liedloff spoke about and thereby allows development to get back on track; the false and decaying skin of the "old child" is shed, and the hidden adult emerges.

## WANTING ADULTHOOD NOW

Whatever the reasons for its effectiveness, responsibility plays an enormous role in shaping character, as programs like the original Junior Republic or the modern version of Outward Bound remind us. Such programs also remind us of the importance of preserving the child-adult continuum. Where modern society has destroyed that continuum, it may be possible, by providing young people with certain training and experiences, to rebuild the continuum quickly and thus to create a kind of "instant" adulthood.

But many young people today aren't willing to wait. They want adulthood *now*, and they often find their own ways to achieve it. There are at least three ways a young person can achieve adulthood instantly in our society without a shred of assistance from adults. From a certain moment on, everyone around that young person will treat him or her with entirely different expectations. From that moment forward, he or she will behave radically differently, rising in varying degrees to the challenges of real adulthood. Three relatively simple acts shout to society, in tones that cannot be ignored, "I am an adult, damn it! And you will treat me that way from now on!"

These acts are *getting married*, *having a baby*, and *committing a serious crime*. I'll turn to crime and pregnancy in the next chapter, and I'll take a surprising look at young spouses in Chapter Eight and at young mothers in Chapter Eleven.

**Q:** *Are all teens capable of taking on the responsibilities and handling the authority that adults have?*

**A:** No, but many adults also handle responsibility and authority poorly: they drink before they drive, abuse drugs, overeat, cheat on their taxes, and so on. A better question would be: Are all teens *incapable* of acting like adults? The answer to that question is also no. Yet we hold back all teens based strictly on a superficial characteristic: age. We've learned not to make this mistake with the elderly; now we need to take a fresh look at teens, evaluating them based on their individual abilities.

## Chapter 5

# Storm and Stress

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*I wanna thank you mom, I wanna thank you dad  
for bringing this fucking world to a bitter end  
—Marilyn Manson, “Disposable Teens”*

**Overview.** *American teens are the most distressed in the world, and they are also the most distressed segment of American society. G. Stanley Hall, the pioneering psychologist who first defined adolescence a hundred years ago, insisted that the “storm and stress” we see during the teen years was an inevitable outcome of evolutionary processes. His theory, however, was based on a faulty theory from biology that was completely discredited by the 1930s. Turmoil is not a necessary feature of the teen years. On the other hand, in several areas—crime, conflict with parents, high-risk behaviors, substance abuse, and mood disorders—American teens are often in bad shape, and new research shows a relationship between the degree of impairment and the degree to which teens are infantilized.*

Let’s start by talking about blatant fraud, a persistent myth, and a faulty theory.

The fraud: mislabeling and then lying about images of animal embryos printed in a scientific text.

The persistent myth: that as we grow, we relive the evolutionary history of our species.

The faulty theory: “Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”

The idea that individual development (“ontogeny”) mimics evolutionary development (“phylogeny”) got its start in the 1800s with biologists like the Frenchman Alcide Dessalines d’Orbigny and the German Johann Friedrich Meckel (known in history books as “the younger” because his distinguished grandfather had the same name). But the theory became elevated to “law” status—the so-called “fundamental law of biogenetics”—in the late 1800s by the German naturalist Ernst

Haeckel. In his popular book *The Natural History of Creation* (*Naturliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*), published in 1868, Haeckel appeared to demonstrate that developing embryos of various species all resembled each other in their early stages and all passed through stages that seemed to mimic evolutionary history. At first, he said, young embryos look like fish (with gills), then like reptiles (with tails), and so on. He showed drawings (printed from woodcuts) of embryos from humans, monkeys, dogs, and other species which appeared to prove his point.<sup>1</sup>

He was passionate about his theory, mainly because it seemed to him to lend support to Darwin's new theory of evolution (published in 1859). Darwin himself was impressed by Haeckel's ideas, and he also was grateful to Haeckel for promoting evolutionary theory among German scientists.<sup>2</sup> Recapitulation theory caught on among scientists and even in the general public, like Freud's theory of the unconscious. Darwin's theory was (and still is) difficult for most people to understand, but the recapitulation idea is easy. In some places Haeckel's theory was probably more popular than the theory of evolution itself. What's more, even though Haeckel's original claims about recapitulation were restricted to embryos, the idea soon grew: many people came to believe that we relive the evolutionary history of the human species over the course of our lifetime.

But Haeckel's own contemporaries knew his ideas were flawed, and some even spotted a serious defect in his book. Some of his embryo diagrams were *identical*. Haeckel ultimately admitted that he had made just one diagram and then had the printer repeat it several times, labeling it with different species names in different places. He insisted that the original embryos were so similar that he had committed no great wrong in faking the diagrams. Willful deception, however, doesn't go over well in science, and, among experts, anyway, Haeckel's ideas were soon rejected.<sup>3</sup>

### A Highly Flawed Theory

Haeckel's indiscretions aside, recapitulation theory was weak from the outset. Early embryos of different species actually differ from one another substantially, for one thing. Even if they're alike in superficial respects, that doesn't mean their growth is mimicking evolution. Perhaps embryos just grow from simple, general forms into more specific forms (an idea first proposed by Karl Ernst Von Baer in 1828<sup>4</sup>).

Haeckel claimed that his embryonic observations provided support for Darwin's theory, but, again, this makes no sense. However embryos happen to grow has *no* implications for the validity of the theory of evolution. Darwin explained how natural selection, acting over many generations, could account for the

diversity of life on earth. An embryo, like a mature organism, is just a *result* of that process; it doesn't *prove* (or disprove) that evolution occurs.\*

But here's a funny thing. Haeckel's shoddy ideas caught on not only among many scientists and intellectuals, they also made it into biology texts. What's more, they were repeated from one text to another for *generations*, probably because textbook writers get a lot of their information from other textbooks. Even more absurd, recapitulation theory is *still* described in serious terms in some biology texts today, a fact that the late Steven Jay Gould said should make us feel "astonished and ashamed." He attributed the persistent error to "mindless recycling," a phenomenon so widespread in textbook writing, he said, that we may never escape it.<sup>5</sup>

And what, you may ask, does all this have to do with the artificial extension of childhood? Far, far too much.

## G. STANLEY HALL: THE MAN WHO INVENTED ADOLESCENCE

G. Stanley Hall, the psychologist who put the modern concept of adolescence on the map a hundred years ago, believed in recapitulation theory, and his own characterization of adolescence is a spin-off from that theory. To Hall, the turmoil of the teen years was the *inevitable* consequence of recapitulation. In reliving our evolutionary past, said Hall, we must inevitably pass through a stage of great chaos—some "ancient period of storm and stress when old moorings were broken and a higher level attained"—a time of "savagery," with "its tribal, predatory, hunting, fishing, roving, idle, playing proclivities."<sup>6</sup>

This is a serious problem. There's an old expression from the computer field, captured by the acronym "GIGO": Garbage In, Garbage Out. The computer output you get is only as good as the data you input in the first place. The same is true in science. It's difficult (although perhaps not impossible) to derive a good theory from a bad one. If recapitulation theory is bunk (it is), then we need to be very skeptical about the validity of Hall's perspective on adolescence.

Consider some of Hall's own statements on adolescence (I've added the emphases):

*While adolescence is the great revealer of the past of the race, its earlier stages must be ever surer and safer and the later possibilities ever greater and more prolonged,*

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\*No serious scientist takes Haeckel's recapitulation theory seriously. Consider this unambiguous statement from *The Beginnings of Human Life* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1977, p. 32) by biologist Erich Blechschmidt: "...the so-called basic law of biogenetics is wrong. No buts or ifs can mitigate this fact. It is not even a tiny bit correct or correct in a different form.... It is totally wrong."

for it, and not maturity as now defined, is the only point of departure for the superanthropoid that man is to become.<sup>7</sup>

*Everything, in short, suggests the culmination of one stage of life as if it thus represented what was once, and for a very protracted and relatively stationary period, the age of maturity in some remote, perhaps pigmoid, stage of human evolution, when in a warm climate the young of our species once shifted for themselves independently of further parental aid.... Thus the boy is father to the man in a new sense in that his qualities are indefinitely older and existed well compacted untold ages before the more distinctly human attributes were developed.*<sup>8</sup>

*This long pilgrimage of the soul from its old level to a higher maturity which adolescence recapitulates must have taken place in the race in certain of its important lines long before the historic period, because its very nature seems to involve the destruction of all its products and extinction of all records. Just as the well-matured adults, as is elsewhere shown, has utterly lost all traces and recollection of the perturbations of the storm and stress period..., so the race must have gone through a long heat and ferment, of which consciousness, which best develops in stationary periods, was lost, partly because growth was so rapid.*<sup>9</sup>

Hall believed in Haeckel's faulty theory uncritically, and he not only embraced this embryonic theory, he enlarged it, aged it past puberty, and cast it in bronze. Even more disturbing, he did so in a way that makes the underpinnings of his own theory of adolescence virtually invisible to the modern eye: in other words, Hall's successors bought his own assertions about adolescence uncritically, entirely unaware of the faulty foundations of his ideas.

To push this metaphor to the brink, Hall created the life-size, three-dimensional, rock-solid of image of Teen in Turmoil that Americans have believed in for a hundred years, but the impressive statue that he sculpted has been resting on a platform composed of the remains of some old German biology texts that long ago decayed to dust.

We've already seen that adolescence (as a time of turmoil) is far from inevitable—that it's relatively new in human history, that it's rare in other cultures, and that it can be reversed with serious doses of real responsibility. Hall had access to such information, but he believed in adolescence as a matter of faith, because a tumultuous stage of human development seemed to him to be a *requirement* of recapitulation theory.

At least that's the grand side of Hall's belief. On the more mundane side,

Hall was misled by what surrounded him: the hordes of poor and immigrant and working-class youths that seemed to dominate the streets of Baltimore (where he was a professor at Johns Hopkins University from 1882 to 1888), the daily headlines covering the debates about youth crime and child labor and compulsory education, the new sentimental attitude toward young people that was blossoming in the late 1800s, the creation and spread of the new juvenile justice system (complete with industrial schools, receiving homes, and reformatories), and the powerful new voices of America's nurturing women.

### Hall's Magnum Opus: The Book That Cast Adolescence in Stone

G. Stanley Hall presented his concept of adolescence in a massive, 1,373-page, two-volume tome called *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, published in 1904.<sup>10</sup> It was filled with anecdotes and data about troubled teens, but his data could be interpreted in multiple ways (as all data can), and he rarely compared the failings he saw in teens with the failings of his fellow adults.

Here is an example of how he described and documented teen problems. Although Hall often provides references, none is given to support these particular anecdotes:

*Corré and others give many representative cases of grave crime in early puberty in strongly motive temperaments before knowledge and power of control have developed. A young nurse, e.g., having no sense of the value of life poisoned a child with phosphorus from matches in order that she might go out and seek amusement. A boy of fourteen stabbed a playmate who had reproached him. Another of the same age killed a comrade to rob him of ten centimes, and another violated and strangled a girl of nine, imagining an elaborate romance to escape the police. One of nine killed his brother of eight to get his new shoes. Another shot his two sisters, aged fourteen and sixteen, because jealous of the preference shown them by his parents.... Two boys plotted and killed an old man "to amuse themselves." Eleven boys banded together to steal and rob, partly for sheer mischief, stealing nothing of value. Two boys of fifteen fought a duel with pistols with seconds of the same age. A lad of eighteen stabbed a strange girl who refused his advances in the street. Such cases could easily be multiplied indefinitely from the current chronicles of time.<sup>11</sup>*

Did these incidents actually occur? If so, are they indicative of universal, inevitable tendencies in teens, or are they indicative of the cultural problems of Hall's times?

## Biological Determinism

Hall also cites the “great and epoch-making” work of the Italian scholar Cesare Lombroso in the newly founded field of criminology, which demonstrates, said Hall, that “criminals in general, tested anthropometrically, have smaller brains, larger jaws, [and] less facial expression” than normal people. Criminals, said Hall (still discussing Lombroso) also “love sententious phrases or obscene images, to which adolescents have a special predilection.” Lombroso, said Hall, “intimates that even some plants have criminal traits.”<sup>12</sup>

Although it’s counterintuitive to blame teen problems on a theory like Lombroso’s (after all, teens’ skulls don’t change much when teens grow up), Hall was convinced that physical shape was an important key to understanding teen problems. Citing a paper by George E. Dawson called “A Study in Youthful Degeneracy,” published in 1896, Hall writes:

*Dawson found among boys and girls in reformatory institutions a tendency to shorter stature, lighter weight, diminished strength in the muscles of the hand, greater sensitiveness to pain, small, broad heads, broad faces, deformed palates and skulls, defects of sight and hearing, dulness of touch, and inferiority in attention, memory, and association. Degeneration of mind and morals is usually marked by morphological deviations from the normal.*<sup>13</sup>

But could the physical weakness, shorter stature, and broad faces have had anything to do with the fact that most of the young people in reformatories were poor immigrants?

These were the days when both the educated public and the new scientific field of psychology, which itself had only been founded in the late 1870s, were obsessed with finding biological explanations for human behavior. The Austrian physician Franz Joseph Gall had invented “phrenology”—the study of how head shapes were related to personality—in the late 1700s, and his ideas were more popular than ever (although still incorrect) a hundred years later. Phrenology was still going strong even in the early 1900s; American socialites couldn’t wait to get their skulls measured by quack physicians carrying large calipers. Lombroso’s theories of the late 1800s were derived from Gall’s.

Around this same time “racial” psychology was making its way into the new psychology textbooks, and American and European intellectuals were also taken with “eugenics,” a program to improve the human race through selective breeding. Founded by Sir Francis Galton, Charles Darwin’s first cousin, eugenics was intended to be the fast lane on the journey to that “superanthropoid” state Hall mentioned.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### No Need for Adolescent Revolt

*For most of man's existence there was no... revolt among youth. Adolescents for thousands of years followed easily in their parents' footsteps. What makes for adolescent revolt is the fact that a society keeps the next generation too long dependent—too long in terms of sexual maturity and a striving for independence.*

—Bruno Bettelheim, *The Children of the Dream* (1969)

Biological determinism was very much in the air while Hall was writing his book, and Hall, a creature of his times, believed strongly that adolescence was *determined*—a fixed feature of human development that could be explained and accounted for in scientific fashion. To make his case, he relied on Haeckel's faulty recapitulation idea, on Lombroso's faulty phrenology-inspired theories of crime, on a plethora of anecdotes, and on one-sided interpretations of data. Given the issues, theories, standards, and data-handling methods of his day, he did a superb job. But when you take away the shoddy theories, put the anecdotes in their place, and look for alternate explanations of the data, the bronze statue tumbles hard.

I have no doubt that many of the street teens of Hall's time were suffering or insufferable, but it's a serious mistake to develop a timeless, universal theory of human nature around the peculiarities of the people of one's own time and place. The teenage turmoil of Hall's day was *not* inevitable. Even Hall suggested at one point that teens might fare better if subjected to the "regulatives they still have in older lands with more conservative traditions."<sup>14</sup>

## TWO FREUDS ON TEENS

In 1888 G. Stanley Hall became the first president of the newly founded Clark University (in Massachusetts), which opened the following year. In 1909, Hall invited Sigmund Freud to speak there (along with Carl Jung and others) and to receive an honorary degree. This marked the first academic recognition Freud had ever received and the only honorary degree he would ever receive. Even though Freud was already revered in some circles, his Jewish heritage gave him few professional options in Europe.<sup>15</sup> This also marked his first and only trip to America.

Freud was profoundly grateful to Hall for the honor he received at Clark, but he never adopted Hall's negative views on teens. Freud said little about teens over

the course of his half-century career—barely anything compared with the tomes he wrote about childhood. If adolescence was a critically important part of human development, wouldn't Freud have noticed? The main task of the teen years, said Freud, is to “cease to be a child,” to “detach” from parents, and to “become a member of the social community.”<sup>16</sup>

Freud also questioned the wisdom with which adults handle teens. “It is remarkable,” he wrote, “how seldom [teens] are dealt with in the ideal manner—that is, in one which is correct both psychologically and socially.”<sup>17</sup>

### Normal Teens Are “Abnormal”

Freud's daughter Anna, on the other hand—herself a distinguished psychoanalyst—had a great deal to say about teens. She acknowledged her own depression as a teen (growing up around the turn of the twentieth century in a home run with military strictness by her father) and even captured her teenage anguish in a poem, which reads in part:

*For one hour, one day, I do so wish  
To be rid of my self, no longer to know  
My own face, my own poor hand,  
Just once not to feel my thoughts.*<sup>18</sup>

Writing about teens in books and articles published mainly toward the end of her career, Anna Freud believed wholeheartedly in an adolescence dominated by “*sturm und drang*” (German for “storm and stress”).<sup>19</sup> According to her:

*...it is normal for an adolescent to behave for a considerable length of time in an inconsistent and unpredictable manner; to fight his impulses and to accept them; to ward them off successfully and to be overrun by them; to love his parents and to hate them; to revolt against them and to be dependent on them; to be deeply ashamed to acknowledge his mother before others and, unexpectedly, to desire heart-to-heart talks with her...*<sup>20</sup>

She was so sure about the inevitability of turmoil during the teen years that she expressed concern about teens who seemed calm and happy: “To be normal during the adolescent period,” she said, “is by itself abnormal.”<sup>21</sup>

## TREATING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DIGNITY

Although G. Stanley Hall saw the teens years as necessarily dark, he didn't

approve of the strict regimens and laws that were being implemented daily in early twentieth-century American to try to get teens under tight control. He knew that treating teens as “mere children” was a grave mistake. In effect, Hall warned against infantilization, just as I have been doing in this volume. Quoting colleague E. G. Lancaster and then speaking for himself, Hall wrote:

[According to Lancaster,] “at no time in life will a human being respond so heartily if treated by older and wiser people as if they were equals or even superiors. The attempt to treat a child at adolescence as you would treat an inferior is instantly fatal to good discipline.” Parents still think of their offspring as mere children, and tighten the reign when they should loosen it. Many young people feel that they have the best of homes and yet that they will go crazy if they must remain in them.... The one unpardonable thing for the adolescent is dulness, stupidity, lack of life, interest, and enthusiasm in school or teachers, and, perhaps above all, too great stringency.<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere in his book, Hall reminds us of the importance of treating young people with the kind of dignity we extend toward fellow adults:

...we are progressively forgetting that for the complete apprenticeship to life, youth needs repose, leisure, art, legends, romance, idealization, and in a word humanism, if it is to enter the kingdom of man well equipped for man’s highest work in the world.<sup>23</sup>

His perspective on young people is very different than the one I’ve been developing in this volume, but his advice is similar: *It’s a mistake to treat teens like children.*

For Hall, disciplining a teen is like provoking a wild animal, because, to him, teens are reliving the savagery of our evolutionary past. Unlike Hall, I’m certain that ontogeny is *indifferent* to phylogeny (it doesn’t “recapitulate” it) and that our evolutionary history doesn’t require teens to behave savagely. Evolution equips us with a small number of reflexes, a wide range of individual differences, some general social tendencies, some significant gender differences, and an *enormous* capacity for learning. Not only do teens have the potential to be “normal during the adolescent period,” as far as I’m concerned this period shouldn’t even be; it exists mainly because of ignorance on the part of adults.

This still leaves us with a practical problem. Even if G. Stanley Hall and Anna Freud were wrong about the inevitability of adolescence, modern American teens often feel terrible and behave badly. Even if this is so because our culture has artificially extended childhood, we still need to face our self-created nightmare squarely. Just how much storm and stress do we see among modern teens?

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Yet Another Stage?

In a 2001 textbook entitled *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood and other writings*, psychologist Jeffrey Jansen Arnett identifies “a new stage of life” he calls “emerging adulthood”—a period from eighteen to the mid-twenties characterized by “identity explorations,” “instability,” “self-focus,” “feeling in-between,” and “possibilities.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, recognizing that childhood has now been extended to age twenty-six or so in the United States, Arnett wants us to consider those last few years of extended childhood to be yet another stage of life.

As pioneering sociologist W. I. Thomas once said, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” It’s likely that Arnett’s label for this new stage will help to dignify and preserve it, but why reify these new years of extended childhood? Wouldn’t we be better served by trying to understand and reverse the process that has produced them?<sup>25</sup>

## G. STANLEY HALL REVISITED: THREE KINDS OF TURMOIL

In a 1999 article called “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered,” developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jansen Arnett of the University of Maryland College Park reviewed a variety of current research in primarily three areas: conflict with parents, mood problems, and risky behaviors. The question he raised was: Was Hall right? In other words, does modern research with American teens confirm that they go through a period of extreme turmoil after puberty? The answer, he said, is yes.<sup>26</sup>

### Conflict with Parents

According to Arnett, “Contemporary studies have established that conflict with parents increases in early adolescence (compared with preadolescence) and typically remains high for a couple of years until declining in late adolescence.”<sup>27</sup> According to one recent study he cites—a “meta-analysis,” which is a study of studies—“within adolescence, conflict frequency is highest in early adolescence and conflict intensity is highest in midadolescence.”<sup>28</sup> Translating this into plain English, when your son or daughter is between ages fourteen and sixteen, you should probably stay clear of your house.

Conflict between parents and teens occur about twenty times per month, according to one study and “is especially frequent and intense between mothers and early adolescent daughters.”<sup>29</sup> As you might imagine, emotional closeness de-

clines between parents and offspring during the teen years and so does the amount of quality time that parents and their offspring spend together.

Some experts believe, says Arnett, that conflict between teens and parents has an upside—that it might accelerate the rate at which teens learn to become independent, and that it might also help parents learn to let go. But anyone who’s been there knows full well that this sort of conflict is far more destructive than helpful.

Years ago clinical psychologist Henry Marcucella told me that he thought teens were especially odd in one respect: “They sometimes act like children and sometimes like adults, with no in-between state at all.” In retrospect, I find this idea to be consistent with my recent thoughts about the artificial extension of childhood. Mom and Dad know you only as a child and have difficulty seeing you any other way. At some point, however, you begin to see yourself as an adult, and you “try out” your adult side with increasing frequency. When it works—when people show respect for what you say or do—you feel valued. When it fails—when people dismiss what you have to say out of hand—you revert to the only other state you know: childhood. This might sound dysfunctional, but it actually makes good sense. You know how to behave like a child quite well, for one thing, and when you behave this way, you also meet the expectations of those around you. It’s not the most sophisticated kind of drama, but at least everyone knows their lines.

Arnett confirms that “adolescents do indeed report greater extremes of mood and more frequent changes of mood, compared with preadolescents or adults.”<sup>30</sup> A number of studies have assessed mood changes using the “beeper method”: teens and adults are provided with beepers and instructed to make notes about their behavior, thoughts, and mood whenever the experimenters activate their beepers throughout the day. Such studies show that American teens experience (a) greater extremes of emotions than do adults—especially negative emotions, (b) frequent feelings of self-consciousness and embarrassment—two to three times as frequently as adults experience such feelings, (c) frequent feelings of awkwardness, loneliness, and nervousness, and (d) a general decline in happiness compared with how they felt as preadolescents.<sup>31</sup>

## Risky Behaviors

I’ll revisit this issue in the next section of this chapter as well as in Chapter Seven, but for now let’s consider Arnett’s findings. His review of the research literature leads him to conclude that the teen years in the United States are indeed a time of risk taking and that for some kinds of behaviors risk taking continues into the early twenties. “This pattern,” he says, “exists for crime as well as for behavior such as substance abuse, risky automobile driving, and risky sexual behavior.”<sup>32</sup> Specifically:

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Child or Adult?

*In July 2006 in Ephrata, Washington, a fifteen-year-old male was convicted of a murder he committed when he was twelve. According to prosecutors, the perpetrator planned the murder, beat the victim—a thirteen-year-old developmentally disabled individual—and then stabbed him thirty-four times. The sentence? Twenty-six years in prison.<sup>35</sup> If this crime was truly premeditated, and if the perpetrator was of normal intelligence and could tell right from wrong, was it right to treat him as an adult, or should this case have been handled by the juvenile justice system? In the latter case, he might have served a few years in a reformatory and then would have had a clean record at age eighteen.*

*Rates of crime rise in the teens until peaking at age eighteen, then drop steeply.... Rates of most types of substance abuse peak at about age twenty.... Rates of automobile accidents and fatalities are highest in the late teens.... Rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) peak in the early twenties..., and two thirds of all STDs are contracted by people who are under twenty-five years old....<sup>33</sup>*

In his review, Arnett also acknowledges that “it is clear that the biological changes of puberty do not make adolescent storm and stress universal and inevitable” (my italics). “This is easily and unmistakably demonstrated,” he says, “by the fact that not all cultures experience the same levels of adolescent storm and stress, and some evidently do not experience it at all.”<sup>34</sup> Finally, Arnett points out the obvious—that there are “substantial individual differences” in the way the teenage years play out. Not every teen has a tough time.

## AN OVERVIEW OF TURMOIL IN TODAY'S TEENS

We've seen some modest indications that teens aren't doing too badly, but we've also seen that in three important areas many American teens are indeed in rough shape: parental conflict, mood problems, and high-risk behaviors. Before we begin (in Part II of this book) our detailed examination of the underlying capabilities of teens, let's look more closely at some major areas of concern, especially the ones that make the headlines every day: crime, substance abuse, sex, depression, and suicide.

## Violence and Crime

Not long ago I spoke about teen problems on a Fox television program called “The O’Reilly Factor,” hosted by the articulate, conservative host, Bill O’Reilly. The topic was teen gangs, prompted by the arrest of nine middle-class gang members in Las Vegas who had videotaped each other brutally beating peers. I told O’Reilly what I’ve been telling you: Teens are out of control because they’ve been treated like children and isolated from adults.

O’Reilly balked at first, saying that teens “aren’t emotionally equipped to be adults,” but when I reminded him how much responsibility teens were able to handle only a few decades ago (during the Great Depression, for example, or during World War II), he said, tentatively, that my perspective was “interesting and important.” He protested again when I said that those violent teens in Las Vegas (whose videos were being shown on-screen as we spoke) were “just trying to be adults.” “Nobody could call those kids adults,” he said. But not only were they emulating what adults do, they had transformed themselves into adults *instantly* by committing a serious crime. In fact, news reports had already indicated that all nine teens were going to be tried in court *as adults*.

Whether we like the idea or not, young people who commit serious crimes are indeed emulating adults—adult behavior, adult emotions, and adult ideas. They see adults on the streets, on TV, in movies, and in newspapers and magazines doing heinous things every day. What’s more, when a young person commits a crime, he or she is demonstrating *control* over his or her own life. A crime says, “I’m *powerful*. I’m *strong*. I’m *fearless*. I’m *independent of my parents and my teachers*.” And if it’s serious enough, a crime makes you an adult *officially*—instantly transforming you in the eyes of the law from a child (who would normally be shielded by the dubious protections of the juvenile justice system) into an adult criminal, subject to the rigors of adult criminal court. As a bonus, a serious crime also gives you a full set of constitutional rights, which guarantees you a lawyer, a speedy trial, the right to confront your witnesses, the right to a court transcript, and so on.

Here is an overview of the criminal proclivities of some young people in America today:

**Gangs.** According to the 2002 National Youth Gang Survey (conducted by the National Youth Gang Center, an agency of the federal government’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention), all United States cities with populations over two hundred fifty thousand have significant gang activity each year, and between one-fourth and one-third of gang members are female.<sup>36</sup> Gang involve-

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### The Strength of Wild Animals

*...should a young person feel that the environment tries to deprive him too radically of all the forms of expression which permit him to develop..., he may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives.*

—Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968)

ment sometimes begins when children are as young as seven or eight, and one recent survey of six thousand eighth graders in eleven cities revealed that 11 percent of them were currently members of gangs.<sup>37</sup> Most gangs engage in at least some criminal activities, including assault, homicide, tagging, hate crimes, larceny, drug trafficking, and vehicle theft. Common gang weapons include: bats, pipes, spiked wristbands, chemical mace, knives, handguns, sawed-off shotguns, Uzi machine guns, AK-47 assault rifles, 9-mm semi-automatic handguns, homemade bombs, Molotov cocktails, and grenades. In 2002 there were approximately 21,500 active gangs and 731,500 gang members in the United States, most between ages fourteen and twenty-four.<sup>38</sup> In 2004 half of the homicides in Los Angeles County were gang related.<sup>39</sup> *Like it or not, gang activity is not childlike; it is most definitely adult:* Gangs emulate small governments and armies. They have charismatic leaders, nationalistic loyalties, emblems, hierarchies, dress codes, intricate communication systems, colors, rites, traditions, ranks, territories, strict codes of conduct, and systems of justice, promotion, demotion, and expulsion—just like many adult organizations.

**Violence at schools.** School violence has been and continues to be a problem nationwide. Schools are targets for violence because (a) many young people resent being forced to go to school, and for some school is a place of failure and frustration, (b) schools crowd large numbers of young people together for long periods each day and hence serve as breeding grounds for gangs, cliques, jealousies, rivalries, bullying, and racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts, and (c) schools are where the “enemies” are located: the strict or insensitive teachers and administrators, the bullies, the romantic and social rivals, and so on.\* According to the CDC, in 1997, 37 percent of high school students had been in a physical fight during the last year, and a 1997 survey suggests that nearly one in five high

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\*According to a 2001 report on juvenile crime by the National Research Council, “Contrary to their intentions, schools appear to foster problems among misbehaving children and adolescents through such common practices as tracking, grade retention, suspension, and expulsion. The panel took special note of apparent racial and ethnic biases in the administration of these practices.” (p. 4)

school students had carried a weapon (a gun, club, or knife) to school within the prior month.<sup>40</sup> According to a 1998 report issued by the United States Department of Education, more than six thousand students had been expelled from American schools the previous year for bringing firearms or explosives to school—56 percent of those from high schools, 34 percent from middle schools, and 9 percent from elementary schools.<sup>41</sup> Of even greater concern, between 1996 and 2003, 147 students and eleven staff members were killed or wounded in twenty-eight separate shooting incidents in United States schools. In the worst such incident, which took place on April 20, 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado killed twelve students and one teacher and wounded twenty-three others before killing themselves. They had spent a year planning the attack, which was supposed to kill more than five hundred people, but the bombs they had planted on campus were disabled by police.<sup>42</sup> More recently, a sixteen-year old student at a high school in Red Lake, Minnesota, injured seven people and killed ten, among them five students, a security guard, and a teacher at his school.<sup>43</sup> Various plots against schools continue to be uncovered.<sup>44</sup>

**Gambling.** According to the National Council on Gambling, recent studies show that gambling is now a more prevalent problem among teens than drinking, cigarettes, or marijuana. One study suggests that 80 percent of young people between twelve and seventeen have gambled in the last twelve months, and a British study suggests that the mean age at which children start to gamble is about eight-and-a-half. Recent studies suggest that between 5 and 8 percent of young people in American now have a “serious” gambling problem.<sup>45</sup>

**Crime.** Young people commit a large number of crimes in the United States every year—more than three million on school campuses alone.<sup>46</sup> Many youth crimes are violent, and the public has demanded tougher remedies, often based on sensational media reports, such as a recent Associated Press article about teens in Lompoc, California who set fire to a homeless man,<sup>47</sup> rather than on sound statistics. That said, the legitimate statistics are disturbing: nationwide, 1.6 million juveniles were arrested in 2002.<sup>48</sup> In California the arrest rate among people ages ten to seventeen was 4,434 per 100,000 in 2002, a drop from a peak of 9,313 in 1974; this sounds good, but the 2002 arrest rate was still 34 percent higher than that of 1960.<sup>49</sup> Nationwide, the overall rate of violent crimes by teens increased by 49 percent between 1980 and 1996.<sup>50</sup> FBI statistics suggest that the peak age at which people (of all ages) commit violent crimes is eighteen (see Appendix 3 for further details).<sup>51</sup> According to a comprehensive 2001 report by the National Research Council (NRC), “most juveniles break laws,” although only 4 percent of juvenile arrests are

for serious crimes. As of 2006, the most recent data from the FBI suggest a dramatic upward spike in teen violence: in Boston alone, a 54 percent increase in robberies and a 103 percent increase in weapons arrests between 2004 and 2005.<sup>52</sup> The proportion of female juveniles arrested for committing a crime has increased steadily since at least the early 1980s; in 1986 females accounted for 22 percent of juvenile arrests, a figure that increased to 30 percent by 2004.<sup>53</sup> As of early 2005, seventy-two people were on death row for murders they committed as minors; their sentences were reduced under the Supreme Court's recent decision in *Roper v. Simmons*, which prohibits executing offenders who committed their crimes before age eighteen (see Chapter Fourteen).<sup>54</sup>

**Guns.** According to surveys, 31 percent of American teens know someone their age who carries a gun, and 14 percent of our teens have seen or been in fights in which someone used a gun.<sup>55</sup> In 1998 nearly *three out of ten* high school males were believed to possess a firearm, and, as I noted in Chapter One, nearly a million guns were brought into American classrooms.<sup>56</sup>

**Homicide.** Homicide is now the second leading cause of death for young men and women (combined) between fifteen and nineteen, and it's now the third leading cause of death for young women between fifteen and nineteen. About 20 percent of deaths in the ten to twenty-four age group are due to homicide, and four out of five of those deaths are from gunshot wounds. Many of these deaths are caused by adults, but they are usually adults who are involved in gang or other activities with the minors.<sup>57</sup>

**Juvenile Court.** Juvenile courts process about 1.5 million cases per year, with roughly five thousand cases being "waived" to the adult criminal courts; the rate of waivers has generally been increasing. The juvenile justice system in California alone costs over a billion dollars a year to run.<sup>58</sup>

**Types of Crimes.** Young people commit the full range of crimes committed by adults: rape, homicide, larceny, bank robbery, drug possession and sales, arson, assault, forgery, and so on, and, as I noted in Chapter Two, they are also arrested for a variety of offenses that have been created especially for minors: truancy, running away from home, drinking alcohol, and so on. In some categories (e.g., property crimes and theft), teens are more active than adults; in others (e.g., murder and aggravated assault), they're less active. Sometimes teens get creative; in Florida and California in recent years, occupants of several cars have been killed when teens have dropped large rocks or bricks off of highway overpasses.<sup>59</sup> It's no wonder that there's a term—*ephebiphobia*—for fear of teenagers.<sup>60</sup>

### Drugs and Alcohol

Drugs and alcohol serve many purposes, both for adults and for young people.

Actress Carrie Fisher (of “Star Wars” fame) used psychoactive substances to “self-medicate”—to escape the pain and chaos of her daily life. Fisher began abusing chemicals when she was a teen; it was ten years before a mental health professional figured out that she had long been suffering from bipolar disorder.<sup>61</sup>

It’s common for young people to use drugs and alcohol in this way: to relieve the pain of their own persistent psychological or physical problems. Teens and adults also drink or take drugs to bond with, impress, or manipulate friends, colleagues, or lovers. Ecstasy, the current rage among young people, is supposed to be an especially effective mood-booster and friendship-maker.

Alcoholic beverages are produced by a 137 billion dollar industry; although alcohol providers aren’t allowed to sell directly to young people, they still make money when young people drink their products; *someone* is paying for it, after all. Legal drugs (such as Ritalin, Prozac, and Xanax) are provided by a 216 billion dollar industry (in the United States alone); this industry spends more than 2.5 billion dollars per year to convince consumers to take their products and physicians to prescribe them; in recent years, this industry has made concerted efforts to expand into the youth markets, in some cases convincing physicians to prescribe drugs to children which had never been tested on children or approved for their use.<sup>62</sup>

The illegal drug industry (providing drugs like Ecstasy, marijuana, cocaine, PCP, and heroin) conducts perhaps 50 billion dollars worth of business each year in the United States.<sup>63</sup> Young people are the main targets of this industry for simple reasons: It’s difficult for them to purchase alcohol over the counter, and they don’t have control over their prescription medications or medical treatment. If Jamie Lee Curtis or Rush Limbaugh want more vodka or Vicodin, they can get them legitimately and privately (Limbaugh was unclear on that, it seems), but young people don’t have such options. The solution: the corner “connection.”

Here is a quick overview of drug- and alcohol-related activities by American young people today:

***Prescription Drugs.*** The rate at which young people have been given prescription drugs has skyrocketed in recent years. According to a recent study by University of Maryland researcher Julie Magno Zito and her colleagues, between 1987 and 1996 the rate at which drugs were prescribed to children and teens doubled or tripled in large Medicaid and HMO programs they studied.<sup>64</sup> The most common conditions resulting in prescriptions were attention deficit disorder (ADD) and its close and equally-suspect cousin, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Ritalin, Strattera, Adderall, Concerta), followed by depression (Prozac, Paxil, Luvox, Zoloft), followed by various other mood disorders (Xanax, Valium,

Haldol, Ambien). But that's just for starters. A 2004 analysis of drug trends by Medco Health Systems suggests there had been a 49 percent increase in ADD and ADHD prescriptions in the previous three years for children under 5, contributing to a 23 percent overall increase in usage for young people. According to Medco, over the same brief period antidepressant use by minors increased 21 percent, and the use of drugs for autism and other behavioral problems increased 71 percent. The bottom line: *spending on behavior-altering drugs for minors has now edged out spending for all other drugs*, including antibiotics and medications for asthma, allergies, and skin conditions.<sup>65</sup> Because adults both prescribe and take such drugs with great frequency—many of which are now advertised incessantly on television—our society sends a clear message to young people that drug use is acceptable for both young and old. The most recent trend: “pharming” parties at which young people trade and sample prescription drugs—some their own and some stolen from parents.<sup>66</sup>

**Overdoses.** According to the federal government's Office of National Drug Control Policy, in 1999, 82,904 young people between ages twelve and seventeen were treated in hospital emergency rooms because of adverse experiences with illegal drugs. As I noted in Chapter One, that number increased to 97,029 in 2002.<sup>67</sup>

**School shooters.** Although it's unreasonable to blame school shootings on prescription medications (there aren't enough data to support that idea), it's interesting to note that some of the most notorious school shooters were taking psychotropic drugs: Kip Kinkel, the fifteen-year-old from Oregon who killed his parents and two students in 1998, was taking the antidepressant Prozac, as was Jeffrey Weise, the shooter in the 2005 Red Lake massacre; T. J. Solomon, the fifteen-year-old from Georgia who shot six students in 1999, was on the ADD drug Ritalin; and Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters, was taking the antidepressant Luvox.<sup>68</sup>

**Marijuana.** Surveys suggest that three out of four young people try marijuana, and upwards of 20 percent of high school seniors smoke it regularly. The marijuana smoked by today's young is about ten times as potent as that available in the 1960s (that is, it has about ten times the concentration of THC, the active ingredient in the plant).<sup>69</sup>

**Alcohol.** Alcohol use by young people waxes and wanes, depending in part on the aggressiveness of public health campaigns—and largely, no doubt, on momentary fads. Surveys suggest that about two-thirds of middle-school students and perhaps 90 percent of high school students have tried alcohol. Half of high school juniors and seniors drink regularly, and about 25 percent of high-school drinkers admit to frequent binge drinking (consuming five or more drinks in a row). Alcohol is implicated in a high percent of all automobile fatalities and more than half

of all suicides, homicides, and accidental deaths among young people. People between sixteen and twenty-four supposedly cause 42 percent of all fatal alcohol-related crashes, even though they drive only 20 percent of the total vehicle miles traveled. According to a 2004 report, 13.6 percent of all drivers involved in fatal crashes were between the ages of fifteen and twenty, and 29 percent of those drivers had been drinking.<sup>70</sup>

**Street drugs.** Young people also use cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin, and hallucinogens such as LSD and PCP (also called “angel dust”). According the American Medical Association, more than half of people in the twelve-to-seventeen age range say that they know a classmate who uses LSD, heroin, or cocaine. Young people also have discovered ways to get high on a wide variety of inhalants, including gasoline, nitrous oxide, aerosol sprays, and airplane glue. The AMA also claims that 85 percent of young people say that drugs are the most serious challenge they face.<sup>71</sup>

**Steroids.** In their obsession to look like their athletic heroes in the movies and magazines, between 2 and 4 percent of young people—mainly males—have used anabolic steroids without a physician’s prescription. Usage increased during the 1990s and now appears to have leveled off or to have declined slightly. Steroids increase strength and muscle mass, but they can also damage the reproductive system and cause serious mood problems.<sup>72</sup>

**Ecstasy, OxyContin, and More.** Ecstasy (often called “X”, “Candy,” or the “Love Drug”), a mild hallucinogen, has gotten especially popular among young people in recent years, and it even has its defenders in the adult professional community.<sup>73</sup> Ecstasy use among teens supposedly tripled among young Americans between 1998 and 2002, possibly because of a sharp drop in its cost, and a recent report suggests that usage may have declined in 2003, perhaps because of a shift to other drugs.<sup>74</sup> The use of the painkiller OxyContin (called “Oxy” and known by many as the “poor man’s heroin” or “hillbilly heroin”) has also increased dramatically in recent years.<sup>75</sup> In 2000, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 4,969 young people (quadruple the figure just two years prior) were admitted to emergency rooms in the United States because of overdoses of GHB (gamma hydroxybutyrate)—a date rape drug also known as “G” or “Easy Lay.” With Internet guidance, GHB can be mixed up at home.<sup>76</sup>

**Cigarettes.** As of 2004, about 22 percent of American high school students and 11.5 percent of junior high school students smoked cigarettes.<sup>77</sup> It’s been estimated that six thousand American teens try cigarettes every day and that two thousand of them become regular smokers.<sup>78</sup> There are now about 1.5 million female teen smokers in the United States<sup>79</sup>

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### The Standardized Teen

*Youth after youth, bewildered by the incapacity to assume a role forced on him by the inexorable standardization of American adolescence, runs away in one form or another, dropping out of school, leaving jobs, staying out all night, or withdrawing into bizarre and inaccessible moods.*

—Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968)

Drug and alcohol abuse is glorified every day in America in movies, on television, on the Internet, in novels, magazines, comic books, and so on. Attractive, trendy young people are frequently high or drunk in movies like *Animal House*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Thirteen*, *Weird Science*, *Dazed and Confused*, and *Clueless*, and we also glorify illegal drug use by adults in movies like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (starring Johnny Depp and Benicio Del Toro). The Woodstock music festival of 1969, attended by about five hundred thousand young people, was famous for its open drug use, and that tradition is still going strong. The open use of drugs by both young and old (some of whom were probably at Woodstock!) is still common in festivals like the “Burning Man,” which is now held in multiple locations in the Western United States every year and which drew more than thirty thousand attendees to the Back Rock Desert in Nevada in 2003.

Official statistics suggest that overall drug and alcohol use may have declined in the late 1990s and has been increasing in recent years, but I have some doubts about the figures. The real extent of our teens’ interest in illicit substances doesn’t assume statistical form for the simple reason that most of these activities are kept secret, and the secrecy is likely to increase when public opinion becomes more negative. Given that hospitalizations for overdoses appear to be increasing, overall usage is probably increasing, too, no matter what the survey data say.

“Raves”—large, intense, parties where drug use is common—have been popular among teens in major cities in recent years, although perhaps no longer the fad they use to be. In San Diego at this writing, fifteen raves are openly advertised on the Internet; presumably a larger number are harder to find. Like it or not, drug, alcohol, and tobacco use by young people appears to be a fixture in American society.

### Sexual Activity

Your perspective on teen sex might change when you read Chapter Eight (mine did when I wrote it), but, meanwhile, let’s take a quick look at the sexuality of today’s American teens. Bear in mind that young people who have sex are *defi-*

nitely not behaving like children. One might quibble about the meaning of crimes that young people commit, but there's no question about the meaning of the sex they have: they're behaving like the young adults they really are, exactly as evolution intended. What's more, sex is an easy route to adulthood in this country. In most states, one is instantly emancipated from parents when one marries, and one instantly takes on many adult responsibilities when one gives birth.

**Teen pregnancy.** According to the Guttmacher Institute, more than three-quarters of teen pregnancies are unintended, resulting in about 500,000 live births and more than 350,000 miscarriages or induced abortions each year.<sup>80</sup> Although the birth rate for teens has dropped in recent years, it's still occurring at an overall rate of forty-nine births per thousand fifteen-to-nineteen-year-old women, the highest rate by far in the industrialized world. To put this number in perspective, consider that the teen birth rate in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, Sweden, and other countries is less than ten births per one thousand women ages fifteen to nineteen.<sup>81</sup> In 2001 in Nevada, one of four teens who gave birth had already given birth to at least one other child.<sup>82</sup> Between eight hundred thousand and nine hundred thousand women ages nineteen and under become pregnant each year in the United States<sup>83</sup>

**AIDS.** According to recent data from the Centers for Disease Control, there are forty thousand new cases of HIV infections in the United States each year, and about half of the newly-infected are under twenty-five.<sup>84</sup> As of 2002, only 38 percent of sexually active teen couples are thought to have regularly used condoms.<sup>85</sup>

**Rape.** According to a 2003 article by health researcher Ruth Kershner, "The greatest increase in arrested rape offenders involves adolescent males." Seventeen percent of "single-offender" rapes and 30 percent of "multiple-offender" rapes are now committed by young males.<sup>86</sup>

## Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

On television recently I caught an especially eerie film called *The Virgin Suicides*, starring James Woods, Kathleen Turner, and Kirsten Dunst. In this 1999 film, based on a 1994 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, young male teens recount their obsession with the five Lisbon sisters, the dreamy and mysterious teenage inhabitants of a house in their neighborhood.

After thirteen-year-old Cecilia commits suicide—slitting her wrists didn't work, so a few weeks later she jumped off the roof and was impaled on a fence—their controlling mom (Turner) becomes stricter than ever. She pulls the sisters out of school and makes them prisoners in their home. They spend most of their time languishing in bed, dreaming about exotic places. The most beautiful sister, Lux (Dunst), asserts her

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Dead Virgins

*In the 1999 film "The Virgin Suicides," directed by Sofia Coppola (daughter of Francis Ford Coppola of "Godfather" fame), five beautiful teen sisters commit suicide, mainly, it seems, to escape from life with their controlling mother. Here are the opening lines of this disturbing film:*

*Narrator: "Cecilia was the first to go."*

*(Shots of thirteen-year-old Cecilia in a bathtub full of bloodied water; being carried from the house by paramedics; lying in a hospital bed.)*

*Doctor: "What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets."*

*Cecilia (emphatically): "Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a thirteen-year-old girl."*

independence by having sex with random men on the roof. At the end of the film, all four of the remaining sisters commit suicide on the same night.

Elements of this film are all too realistic: parents are sometimes fatally controlling, teens often languish, and young people sometimes take their own lives—at least in modern America. Near the end of the film, barely noticeable and in the background, a drunken, tuxedo-clad young man falls backward into a swimming pool at a posh party. As he's climbing out he says, "*You don't understand me! I'm a teenager. I got problems!*" That not only describes the role that American teens believe they're supposed to play in life, it also fits adult perceptions of teens, as well as the credible data.

Jeffrey Arnett's review of recent research on storm and stress reminded us of the obvious: that the moods of American teens are often disturbed. But that's just one among many aberrations in the world of teenage mental health. Here are some others:

***Suicide.*** According to the National Center for Health Statistics (part of the CDC), teen suicide was fairly rare in the 1950s (2.7 per hundred thousand people ages fifteen to nineteen each year). The rate increased during each of the next four decades, reaching a peak rate of 11.1 in the 1990s and declining somewhat in recent years.<sup>87</sup> As I noted in Chapter One, survey data suggest that 8.5 percent of high school students may attempt suicide every year and that more than 17 percent seriously contemplate suicide.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps as many as 10 percent of our teens have attempted suicide at some point in their lives. In poor communities in the United States, researchers believe that as many as 70 percent of teens have at least contemplated

suicide. Suicide is now the third leading cause of death among high school students, and many deaths that aren't labeled that way probably should be. Many reckless, violent crimes by young people—especially young blacks—are really cases of “suicide by cop.”<sup>89</sup> Among the twenty-seven young people who committed suicide in Los Angeles County in 1999, one was ten, two were twelve, and one was thirteen.<sup>90</sup>

**Depression.** Depressive tendencies increase slightly among young males over the teen years and more dramatically among young females. Although young males kill themselves more frequently than young females, females attempt suicide twice as frequently as males.<sup>91</sup> Depression has long been an epidemic among teens, and mental health professionals (spurred by intense campaigns by major drug companies) are now beginning to diagnosis it earlier and earlier—even in toddlers. A new extensive study of sadness by Rosemarie Kobau and her colleagues at the CDC suggests that the peak age of sadness among adults is eighteen. (See Figure 5.1.)<sup>92</sup>

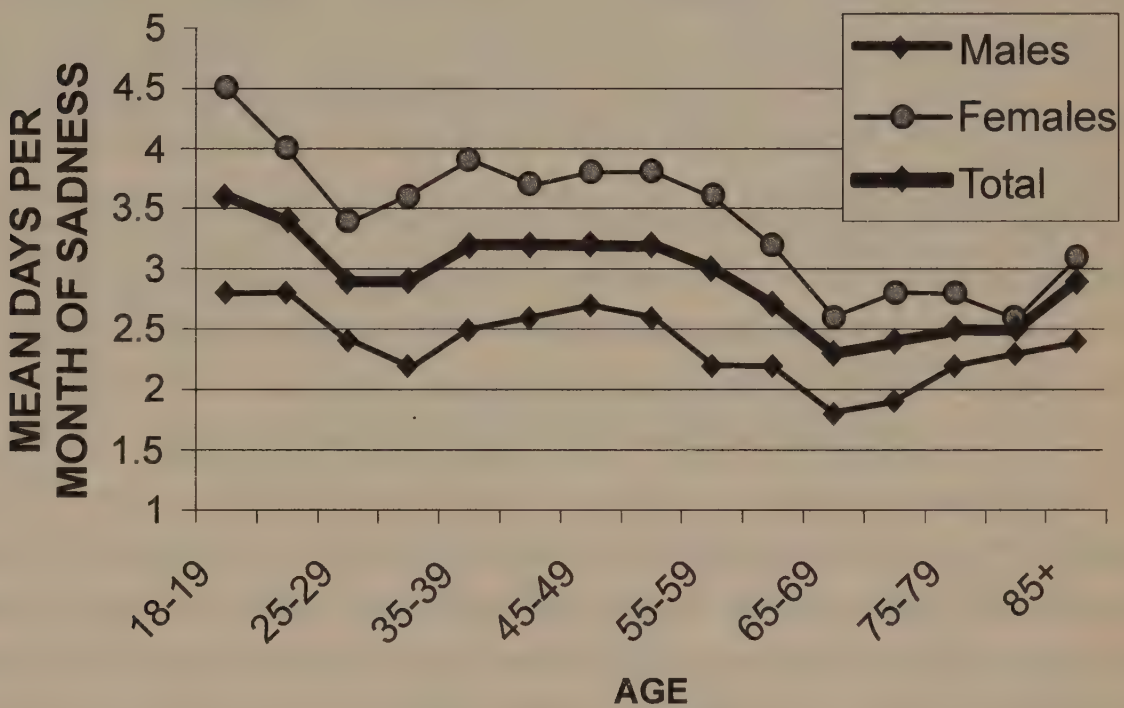


Figure 5.1. Sadness by Age. In a telephone survey of over 166,000 Americans eighteen and over, researchers recently found that sadness peaks at age eighteen. The peak is especially high for young females (upper curve). Source: Kobau et al., 2004.

**Other Disorders.** The federal Center for Mental Health Services estimates that 20 percent of young people from ages nine to seventeen have a diagnosable behavioral or emotional disorder and that between nine and thirteen percent are suffering from a “serious emotional disturbance with severe emotional impairment.”<sup>93</sup> A 1992 survey by the California Department of Mental Health suggested that between 5 and 7 percent of California’s young people were suffering from serious psychological disorders<sup>94</sup>; that’s between 460,000 and 644,000 people.

**Getting in Trouble.** Troubled youth often end up in trouble. Roughly half of the high school students with severe emotional problems drop out, and about one in five students with such problems are arrested at least once before age eighteen. Three quarters of the young people in juvenile corrections facilities are supposedly diagnosable with behavioral or emotional disorders.<sup>95</sup>

**Giving Up.** According to a recent investigative article in the *Washington Post* by Shankar Vedantam, each year in the United States desperate parents turn over thousands of children and teens to child welfare services as a means of getting them psychological help.<sup>96</sup> Because mental health services are often not covered by insurance, parents often have no choice but to file complaints with social workers or police in order to get help. Residential treatment centers for psychological problems can cost up to \$250,000 per year; by turning young people over to authorities, the state ends up footing the bill. The exact number of young people who are disposed of in this way is difficult to determine, but Vedantam reports that in Pima County, Arizona alone, 1,750 young people were turned over to child welfare officials for this purpose in 2001. Nationwide, the total could be in the hundreds of thousands.

**Eating Disorders.** Eating disorders are far more prevalent in young people—especially young females—than in adults. Virtually all young females in our society diet to some extent, but in some cases they do so dangerously and for long periods. In the condition called “anorexia nervosa,” young women starve themselves, sometimes to death. About one in a hundred teenage females are anorexic. Perhaps one-tenth that many males also limit their food intake excessively. In a related disorder called “bulimia,” women are also obsessed with their weight, but they tend to gorge themselves and then to eliminate the food by forced vomiting. Bulimia is rare in young teens; it tends to emerge in the late teens or early twenties. The prevalence of bulimia is difficult to determine because bulimics are extremely secretive about their condition. Media images of extremely thin people probably underlie most cases of anorexia and bulimia.<sup>97</sup>

**Anger.** As we’ve already seen, teens get angry a lot; this is evident from the material we’ve reviewed on crime, gangs, parent-teen conflicts, and so on. Just one footnote: Headlines have been telling us in recent years that “research” demonstrates that teen anger and aggression is “caused” by the violence young people see in movies and, on television, and in video games. But *virtually all* of this research is “correlational” (a topic I’ll return to in a moment), which means that it *doesn’t* support the strong conclusions being drawn from it. We know that people with violent tendencies are drawn more to violent content than peaceful

people are; that fact alone can account for most if not all of the correlations my colleagues keep reporting. It's also possible that violent content makes some people more *peaceful* through a process called "catharsis." We certainly know that an entire generation—the Baby Boomers—was raised on violent media content (army and cowboy shoot-em-ups) without suffering any obvious ill-effects. Communications professor Jib Fowles reviews some of the relevant research—and shoddy thinking—on this sensitive topic in a 1999 book called *The Case for Television Violence*.<sup>98</sup>

## Our Troubled Teens

*On average, American teens are the most troubled teens in the world, and the teen years are the most difficult that we face in life.* Our teens are difficult to raise, often unhappy at home, overly immersed in a vacuous teen world that's largely the creation of large corporations, excessively interested in their appearance, overly dependent on drugs and alcohol, unnecessarily careless about sex, and excessively angry, violent, moody, and depressed.

G. Stanley Hall was wrong about recapitulation and he was wrong about the inevitability of teen turmoil, but he was *correct* in his characterization of the highly troubled teens that newly industrialized America was manufacturing. Now, a century later, they're considerably worse.

### A DISTURBING CONNECTION: INFANTILIZATION AND TEEN TURMOIL

In Chapter One, I described one of the results of the study I conducted recently with Diane Dumas. When we gave our forty-two-item Infantilization Scale to a hundred teens (from ages thirteen to seventeen), we found that their average score was over twenty-six, suggesting that teens in modern America are often treated like children.

There is another outcome of our study, though, that's even more disturbing. We also gave these teens a standardized test called the Adolescence Psychopathology Scale (APS), which measures a wide variety of indicators of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional disorders.<sup>99</sup> The question was: Is there a relationship between psychopathology in teens (in other words, scores on the APS) and infantilization (in other words, scores on our Infantilization Scale)? A positive correlation in scores would suggest a positive relationship: The greater the infantilization, the greater the psychopathology. Our result was strong: The "correlation coefficient" summarizing the relationship between scores on these two

tests was 0.43, suggesting a fairly large positive relationship between infantilization and certain forms of psychopathology.\*

Although this is a dramatic result, it doesn't *prove* that psychopathology in teens is caused by infantilization. Our result could also suggest that teens who "act out" are also the most likely to be restricted by parents or other authorities.<sup>100</sup> Correlational findings—the vast majority of findings we see reported in the media every day—cannot establish causal relationships.

### Probable Cause: The Artificial Extension of Childhood

G. Stanley Hall conjectured that treating teens like children would produce "instantly fatal" results—anger, hostility, and tendencies to escape, among other things—in other words, multiple signs of psychopathology. Now we have correlational findings—the research I conducted with Diane Dumas—that are consistent with Hall's conjecture. We've also seen the following:

- A spiraling increase in both the laws that restrict teens and the variety and intensity of teen problems that have emerged over the last 150 years (Chapter Two).
- Few signs of teen turmoil in cultures that maintain a continuum between childhood and adulthood, as well as evidence that teen problems emerge in these cultures when that continuum is broken (Chapter Three).
- Evidence that even troubled American teens sometimes straighten out overnight when given heavy doses of responsibility and respect (Chapter Four).

Finally, we have our common sense, which suggests that the more restrictions you place on people who consider themselves to be autonomous and competent, the angrier and less manageable they become.

I believe we can draw only one reasonable conclusion from these observations: *the storm and stress we see during the teens years in modern America are in all*

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\*A correlation coefficient of this sort can range from -1.0 to +1.0, so 0.43 is fairly strong on the positive side. The correlation was also highly statistically significant (at the 0.01 level, which means, roughly, that the probability of getting this correlation by chance alone is less than one percent). The 0.43—the correlation of greatest interest to us—was between scores on the Infantilization Scale (IS) and scores on the "externalizing" scale of the APS. This scale looks at problems like substance abuse, anger, aggression, and interpersonal difficulties, the kinds of behaviors one sees most often in troubled teens. We also found a small and marginally significant positive relationship ( $r=0.15$ ,  $p<0.15$ ) between the IS scores and scores on the "internalizing" scale of the APS, which looks at issues like boredom, introversion, and self-concept.

likelihood caused by the artificial extension of childhood past puberty. We hold our young people back and isolate them completely from adulthood. Many react in hostile or self-destructive ways.

**Q:** *Isn't all the aggression and craziness we see in teenagers caused by hormones?*

**A:** Although puberty brings about significant hormonal changes, such changes are not the cause of teen turmoil. Tens of millions of teens in preindustrial nations around the world also reach puberty every year, but the mood problems we see in America are almost entirely absent in such countries. Moreover, physiological research shows that the hormonal changes that occur during pubertal maturation don't predict behavior very well.<sup>101</sup> Teen problems in the United States are caused by a host of factors related to the artificial extension of childhood: poor roles models (peers and media icons), peer pressure, isolation from adults and conflict with parents, mandatory schooling, a lack of control over their lives, and so on.



# Part 2

## The Capabilities of Young People



## Chapter 6

# “Adulthood”

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*Teach your parents well, their children's hell will slowly go by,  
and feed them on your dreams, the one they fix, the one you'll know by.*  
—Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, “Teach Your Children Well”

**Overview.** Adults don't always measure up to high standards of “adulthood.” Like teens, they often behave in destructive or self-destructive ways. When one looks carefully at the competencies required to function as an adult, one finds that once people have passed puberty, age is a poor predictor of competence. Our new research shows, in fact, that teens are, on average, as competent or nearly as competent as adults in virtually every area of adult functioning. This research also shows that adults greatly underestimate the capabilities of teens. Because teens are infantilized, their actual performance may not reflect their competence, but that competence is ready to be expressed at any time.

The Darwin Awards are given annually to people who have killed or damaged themselves in embarrassing ways. Here are three winners:

In 1989, after a Kung Fu instructor in Australia told the members of his advanced class that they were now “ready to kill wild animals with [their] bare hands,” one member of the class broke into the lion cage at the Melbourne Zoo to test his mettle. The next morning about all that remained of the young man were his hands, each grasping tufts of fur tightly in its fingers. Perhaps he had been able to flip the lion a few times before he was devoured, perhaps not.

In 1997, burglars in England used a welder's torch to cut through the wall of a building housing the loot. Unfortunately, the loot was fireworks. When sparks from the torch hit a crate, the entire building blew up. The perpetrators managed to survive and have never been found.

In 2002 a Kansas man's car broke down just as it was crossing some train tracks.

He got out of the car to try to fix it. That failing, he called for help on his cell phone. According to the conductor of the oncoming train that killed him, when he was struck he had the cell phone at one ear and was using his other hand to block the train noise.<sup>1</sup>

Adults, it seems, sometimes do silly, dangerous, and self-destructive things—and the Darwin Awardees aren't the only ones. How about the twenty thousand adults who commit murder every year in the United States, or the half million people who commit forcible rape, or the more than two million people who commit burglary? And how about the forty-six million Americans who smoke cigarettes or the thirty-nine million Americans who have eaten themselves into obesity? How about the 1.5 million people who are arrested for drunk driving every year? Or the three million pathological gamblers in the United States? Or the ten million adults who are addicted to prescription medications? Or the more than a million adults who get divorced every year?

And how about the leagues of leaders and soldiers worldwide who, during the twentieth century alone, caused the deaths of roughly 175 million people?<sup>2</sup>

## THE “ADULTNESS” INVENTORY

What is an adult, anyway? We might choose, as our lawmakers do, to define the term by an arbitrary age boundary—anyone eighteen or over, for example—but is that really what we want “adult” to mean? Or is the age boundary just a rough cutoff point at which we think most people *become* adults? If so, what characteristics do adults have, or at least what characteristics are adults supposed to have? Do all adults have these characteristics in equal amounts? And to what extent do teens have these same characteristics?

Diane Dumas and I attempted to answer these very basic questions. We were particularly interested in isolating those mysterious characteristics that make one truly an adult. After reviewing the relevant research literature, interviewing many adults, and consulting with three other psychologists and two psychiatrists with expertise in adult development issues, we concluded that there are fourteen different skill-sets or “competencies” that distinguish adults from non-adults. One needn't be an expert or even moderately competent in all or even most of these areas to be considered an adult, but unless one is skillful in at least some of them, one will probably be considered “immature” or “childish,” no matter what one's age. The people we consider to be mature are typically competent in many or most of these areas.

### Love

Adults are supposed to know the difference between sex and love. They're

supposed to have experienced love, or at least to have some idea about what it means to experience love. They’re supposed to know the difference between parental and romantic love, and to know that there are many different ways of expressing love. They’re even supposed to know that concepts like “true love” and “the one” are, more or less, myths—or at least that they exist mainly in fairy tales and Hollywood movies. As you’ll see, Diane and I don’t claim to know the truth of all such matters; rather, we set out to determine how much adults, defined by age only, know about them—and then to compare our adult scores to those of teens.

## Sex

In theory, adults know a great deal about contraception, homosexuality, how to please a partner, and how to make babies. They’re supposed to know that condoms often fail, for example, and that masturbation is common among both males and females (somewhat less so among females). In fact, though, many adults know surprisingly little about sex. A famous case in the psychopathology literature regards a couple that had tried for two years to get pregnant, finally ending up in therapy with a psychiatrist, whose job it was to help them deal with the pain of their persistent failure. Almost by accident, the therapist discovered over the course of their discussions that the couple had mistakenly been having anal intercourse for two years—a revelation that easily explained their difficulties.

## Leadership

Adults are supposed to know about leaders and, to some extent, to be able to act as leaders—as leaders of other adults, of children, or at least of pets. They’re supposed to know that leaders must sometimes make tough decisions, that leaders are in some sense servants of their followers, and that leaders almost always must report to other leaders higher up a chain of command. Adults are also supposed to be somewhat brave—at least in defending their loved ones or in killing harmless insects—and they’re supposed to be able to defend their rights.

## Problem Solving

Adults are supposed to be able to solve a wide variety of problems—financial, work-related, plumbing-related, and personal—and they’re supposed to know where to go for help when they need it. They’re also supposed to know the difference between right and wrong and to be cognizant of the consequences of their actions. They’re supposed to be able to think independently and even to be aware of their own faulty beliefs. Tall orders, for sure, but remember that one needn’t be a master of *all* of these skills in order to be considered an adult.

### **Physical Abilities**

Adults, or at least healthy adults, are supposed to be physically self-sufficient. We make allowances when people are sick or injured. The infirmities of old age are handled variously: when elderly people become weak, incontinent, or otherwise impaired, we often revert to treating them like children, even though, in some sense, we still recognize the elderly as “adults.” In general, adults are supposed to be physically strong, to have intact senses, to be able to climb stairs without assistance, and so on. We expect far less of children.

### **Verbal and Math Skills**

Adults in our society are supposed to have mastered the proverbial Three R’s (reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic), and they’re supposed to know basic things like the days of the week, the number of days of the year, the number of days in February (even in leap years), the number of hours in a day, and so on.

### **Interpersonal Skills**

Adults are supposed to know how to converse with, show respect for, forgive, apologize to, get along with, and assist other people. With children, we give basic reminders like “Remember to share,” but adults are supposed to have mastered such lessons in basic civility. Adults are also supposed to be honest in their dealings with other people, and they’re supposed to have the good sense to follow the instructions of police officers—in other words to recognize that people play different roles in society.

### **Handling Responsibility**

Adults are supposed to be able to accept blame for their wrongdoing (a matter discussed at some length in Chapter Twelve in the context of various religious teachings). They’re supposed to be able to make commitments and then honor them. When they begin tasks worthy of completion, they’re supposed to persist in completing them.

### **Managing High-Risk Behaviors**

We try to keep children (and teens, by extension) away from cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, guns, and cars, because, presumably, they’ll damage themselves or others if they have access to such things. Adults, on the other hand, are supposed to be ready to handle risky items and activities responsibly. Among other things, they’re supposed to know that driving under the influence of alcohol is extremely dangerous, that the heavier one is the more alcohol one can tolerate without ill effect, that mixing alcohol with certain drugs can be fatal, that smoking can ruin one’s health, that the safe use of guns involves considerable skill, that improper use of prescription medication is dangerous, and so on.

## Managing Work and Money

Adults are supposed to be able to get and keep jobs. They’re supposed to know that it’s important to be on time, that “a job worth doing is worth doing well,” that we’re supposed to persevere when the going gets tough (and not, as people say so often these days, “go shopping”), and that it’s important to prioritize and complete the most important tasks first. Adults are supposed to know how to spend money wisely, how to save, how to invest for the future, how to plan for emergencies, how to manage debts, how to write checks, and how to balance a checkbook.

## Education

Adults are supposed to have obtained at least a basic education, and they’re supposed to appreciate the value of education. They’re also supposed to know basic education laws—for example, that young people are required to attend school until at least age sixteen or so (depending on one’s state of residency).

## Personal Care

Adults, unlike children, are supposed to practice basic hygiene, to comb their hair, to wear clean clothes, and so on. They’re also supposed to eat three nutritionally-balanced meals a day, to avoid between-meal snacks, to brush and floss their teeth, to get a good night’s sleep, to maintain a healthful weight, and to avoid too much salt or sugar or fat in their diets. They’re also supposed to be able to recognize a variety of medical and psychological problems—signs of cancer, asthma, sleep apnea, depression, bipolar disorder, and so on—and to know when and where to get help if they or their loved ones need it.

## Self Management

Adults are supposed to be able to manage their own behavior—to use an alarm clock to make sure they awaken on time, to keep an appointment book to make sure they know why they set their alarm clock, to keep a list of things to do so they know what they’re supposed to pick up on the way back from the appointment, and so on. They’re also supposed to know basic techniques of “self-control”—counting to ten, for example, as a way of preventing their anger from getting out of hand.

## Citizenship

Finally, adults are supposed to know some basic things about government and about how to be good citizens. They’re supposed to register to vote and to participate in elections, to pay taxes, to serve on juries, and so on, and they’re supposed to know most basic laws and to obey them.

## HOW ADULT ARE YOU?

The following are sample questions from Part II of the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood (EDTA)*. All are answered yes or no. The actual test has one hundred forty questions (ten per competency area) in random order, with no designations regarding the separate competencies.

<i>Competency</i>	<i>Questions</i>
1. <i>Love</i>	Some say that true love lasts forever. Does it? Must people be loved in order to be fulfilled? Is love enough to make a marriage successful?
2. <i>Sex</i>	Safe sex means having sex in a safe place. Is this true? Can women get pregnant at any point in the menstrual cycle? Can oral sex make someone pregnant?
3. <i>Leadership</i>	Can someone be both a leader and a follower? Are you willing to fight for your rights? Are leaders always right?
4. <i>Problem Solving</i> agree?	Most problems have just one solution. Do you agree? When you have trouble solving a problem, do you ask for help? Can you make decisions without help from other people?
5. <i>Physical Abilities</i>	Are you strong physically? Do you have difficulty hearing? Do you tire easily?
6. <i>Verbal and Math Skills</i>	Is 25 percent the same as one fourth? Do you know how to write and send a letter? $134 + 62 = 196$ . Is this correct?
7. <i>Interpersonal Skills</i>	Do you have any trouble making friends? Do you honor your commitments? If a police officer told you to get out of your car, would you comply?

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 8. <i>Handling Responsibility</i>     | <p>Do you accept the blame when you make a mistake?</p> <p>When you start something, do you finish it?</p> <p>When things get tough, do you tend to give up?</p>  |
| 9. <i>Managing High-Risk Behavior</i> | <p>Can drinking alcohol damage your health?</p> <p>Coffee counters the ill effects of alcohol. Is this correct?</p> <p>Drugs and alcohol can mix to produce deadly effects. Is this true?</p>   |
| 10. <i>Managing Work and Money</i>    | <p>Do you have some money saved for emergencies?</p> <p>To keep a job, you must be on time. Do you agree?</p> <p>If you wanted to get a job or change jobs, would you know what to do?</p>  |
| 11. <i>Education</i>                  | <p>Learning new skills can enhance your life. Do you agree?</p> <p>School attendance is generally required by law until age sixteen. Is this correct?</p> <p>You can earn a high school diploma by completing school or passing an equivalency test. Is this correct?</p> |
| 12. <i>Personal Care</i>              | <p>Adequate sleep is important for health. Do you agree?</p> <p>Are you at your ideal weight?</p> <p>If you had thoughts of hurting yourself or others, would you know where to get help?</p>   |
| 13. <i>Self Management</i>            | <p>Do you exercise regularly?</p> <p>Do you write down appointments?</p> <p>Do you keep a list of things to do?</p>   |
| 14. <i>Citizenship</i>                | <p>Is it true that you must be twenty-one to vote in the U.S.?</p> <p>Is it true that most people in the U.S. don't have to pay any taxes?</p> <p>The only two political parties in the U.S. are the Democratic and the Republican. Is this true?</p>                     |

## How Good Is the List?

Is this list of competencies complete? If one defines the fourteen areas broadly enough, the list is actually fairly good, but it can never really be complete. One can always argue for changes and additions, especially if one's favorite values or skills haven't been given adequate attention. "Managing Family Roles" could be listed as a separate competency area, for example; adults, one could argue, are supposed to know how to be good parents and spouses, as well as how to be good caregivers for their elderly parents. We've covered some parenting and spousal issues under other competencies, but perhaps they should have been given greater emphasis. In constructing scales of this sort, one always has to make some arbitrary decisions. Fortunately, one also has the option of revising the test!

## Designing the Test

Now that we had a reasonable breakdown of adult competencies, obvious questions came to mind: Does anyone actually have these characteristics? In other words, just how widespread is adulthood among adults? And just how widespread is adulthood among teens?

Over a period of months, Diane and I developed hundreds of yes/no questions meant to measure a respondent's knowledge in each of the competency areas, eventually narrowing down the list to ten questions in each area; that gave us one hundred forty questions in total, which were then placed in random order (according to numbers generated by a computer). For most questions, a "yes" reply was indicative of competence. For example, a "yes" reply to "Do you write down appointments?" suggests competence in the area of self-management. Other questions (called "reverse-scored" questions) required a "no" to indicate competence. For example, a "no" reply to "Are leaders always right?" suggests competence in the area of leadership.

Following standard practice in test construction (I've developed about a dozen competency tests over the years), the test also included some redundant questions: positive or negative variants of other questions. Including redundant questions gives a tester an easy way of getting a quick assessment of the "reliability" of the testing instrument. Nearly-identical questions should be answered the same way by the test-taker. If they're not, either the questions are faulty—ambiguous, perhaps—or the test-taker is dishonest or distracted.

These questions constituted the core of the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood* (EDTA), which Diane administered to one hundred adults (from ages twenty to seventy-one, mean age 41.9) and one hundred teens (from ages thirteen to seven-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### A Tycoon at Twelve

*Twelve-year-old Kevin Colleran was selling baseball cards out his parents' unoccupied storefront in New Haven, Connecticut, and trying to figure out a better way to turn a profit. He placed an ad on America Online but got frustrated when he learned that his ad would disappear unless he re-posted it frequently. He soon realized that he could turn a big profit by performing repetitive, tedious tasks like this for existing companies, and so Cyber Marketing Solutions International was born. By his senior year in high school, he was vice president of a local labeling company, Neato, and also worked two days a week on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. By the time he reached his senior year in college in 2002, he had successfully launched six businesses and was writing for Playboy.com and Collegiate Monthly 101 magazine.<sup>3</sup>*

teen, mean age 15.2). The teen sample was “stratified”—intended to be diverse and to mimic some major characteristics of teens nationwide. They came from seven United States cities: Atlanta, Georgia; Dallas, Texas; Memphis, Tennessee; Oceanside, California; Pensacola, Florida; San Diego, California; and San Marcos, California. Three quarters of the teens lived at home full-time with one or both parents; seventeen lived with one or both of their parents part-time, and eight did not live with their parents. Seventy-eight of the teens were full-time students, but none came from gifted programs. Twenty-three worked part-time, one worked full time, and the rest did not work. Thirty-nine of the teens were Caucasian; twenty were African American; fifteen were Hispanic; eleven were Asian; four were American Indian; and the remaining eleven listed themselves as Other. Fifty-one of the teens were male, and forty-nine were female. Teens received modest remuneration—a free movie ticket and snacks—for participating in the study.

The adult sample consisted of thirty-one males and sixty-nine females. Sixty-one of the adults were parents, but only about 40 percent of those individuals had children thirteen or over. Fifty-five of the adults were college graduates (nearly twice the national average for adults over twenty-five). Forty were African Americans; twenty-nine were Caucasian; seven were Hispanic, ten were Asian, eight were American Indian, and six listed themselves as Other. All subjects were recruited by Diane through friends, family, colleagues, church groups, and co-workers.

## Results

The tests we administered contained more than just the competency questions, but let's focus on those for the moment. Just how superior were adults to teens in fourteen competency areas that define "adulthood"?

The answer is: barely, if at all.

For three of the competencies—love, leadership, and problem solving—we did find statistically significant differences between the mean scores of teens and adults, with adults outscoring the teens. But the absolute differences between the mean scores were small. Adults scored 8.32 on love, and teens scored 7.95 (out of a possible 10)—a difference of less than 5 percent. Adults scored an impressive 8.88 on leadership, and teens scored 8.20—a difference of 8.3 percent. And adults scored 8.43 on problem solving, and teens scored 8.06—again, a difference of less than 5 percent.

On two other scales—work and self-management—the differences between the adult scores and teen scores were "marginally significant" (at the .05 level), again in the adults' favor, but the absolute differences were less than 4 percent.

On the other nine scales, we found no significant differences at all between the adult and teen scores. This means that the differences between the scores were so small (in relation to the variability in the scores within each group) that one couldn't reasonably trust that the differences between the group means were real.

When statistical significance hasn't been demonstrated, one is supposed to behave as if the group means are identical, but it's interesting to examine such means in any case. On the sex, responsibility, high-risk behaviors, education, and self-management scales, the adult means were slightly larger than the teen means (although, again, the differences might not be real). On the interpersonal skills, personal care, and citizenship scales, the means were virtually identical, and on the physical abilities and verbal and math scales, the teens were *slightly ahead* of the adults (same warning).

The range of scale scores was also interesting: adult scores ranged from 7.91 to 8.95, whereas teen scale scores ranged from 7.95 to 8.63. The adult range was *larger* than the teen range, and the lowest adult scale score was *lower* than the lowest teen score.

The overall group mean for the adults was 116.7, and the overall group mean for the teens was 114.2. The difference between the scores was statistically significant, but the absolute size of that difference (2.5) was only 2.1 percent of the overall teen mean.

This is a remarkable result, especially when you consider that fifty-five of the

adults in our sample were college graduates—more than double the rate of college graduates in the United States. In other words, whereas our teens were reasonably representative of the general population, our adults were far better educated than the average adult. Presumably, with a less educated adult sample the differences between the groups would have been even smaller—or perhaps the teens might have outscored the adults on a number of scales.

Overall, these results provide fairly conservative evidence that there is no appreciable difference between the adult competencies of teens and adults.

## WHY DON'T WE APPRECIATE OUR TEENS?

Perhaps you're skeptical about these results. That would be understandable, because they contradict everyday beliefs and experiences. One certainly runs into the occasional mature or knowledgeable teen, but the idea that, on the average, teens are as competent as adults seems farfetched.

To come to terms with these results, we need, once again, to push aside a number of preconceptions—to “think different,” as Apple would have it. Here are five possible reasons why teens might indeed be extremely competent without us knowing it.

### Preconceptions

First, as University of California sociologist Mike Males asserted in his fact-rich book *Framing Youth*, it's possible that teens are getting a raw deal (also see Appendix 3 of this volume). Maybe teens aren't so bad, and their negative image is a creation of sensation-seeking media professionals and nervous, self-serving politicians. In other words, maybe teen competence is staring us in the face, and we just can't—or won't—see it.

Do adults really underestimate the abilities of teens, as Males suggests? To answer this question, Diane and I added a set of twenty-four items to the test we administered to adults. The basic question we asked was deliberately generous and broad, encouraging respondents to give teens every possible benefit of the doubt: “*In your opinion, do many young people (from age thirteen to seventeen) have the potential to behave in the following ways?*”

Note that we didn't ask whether *all* young people have these abilities, just whether “many” do. We also didn't ask whether young people *currently* behave in these ways, but merely whether they have the “potential” to do so. Even so, the results were discouraging—and illuminating.

### WHAT DO ADULTS BELIEVE ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF TEENS?

Adults were asked to respond to twenty-four items after being given the following question: "In your opinion, do many young people (from age thirteen to seventeen) have the potential to behave in the following ways?" Respondents answered "yes" or "no" to each item. (From the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood*.)

1. Experience romantic love?
2. Have sex in a responsible manner?
3. Lead other people?
4. Drive a car responsibly?
5. Serve in the military in a competent manner?
6. Own and handle firearms responsibly?
7. Hold political office?
8. Vote in elections?
9. Show courage?
10. Find a job?
11. Hold a job?
12. Start a business?
13. Live on their own?
14. Raise a family?
15. Own and care for property responsibly?
16. Drink alcohol responsibly?
17. Smoke cigarettes responsibly?
18. Manage money responsibly?
19. Make responsible decisions about their own education?
20. Make responsible decisions about their own medical care?
21. Make responsible decisions about their own psychological care?
22. Make responsible decisions about their own religious upbringing?
23. Make responsible decisions about their own schedules?
24. Make responsible decisions about the way they dress?

The average adult appears to think pretty poorly of teens. Out of a possible high score of twenty-four, the mean score on this test was 11.4. In other words, on a percentage basis, our adults gave teens a score of 48 percent—a failing grade, for sure. Half of our adults, in fact, gave teens only ten points out of twenty-four, and five of our one hundred adults gave teens a pathetic score of three—meaning they believe that teens have virtually no adult competencies—not even any “potential.” On the other extreme, four of the adults gave teens a perfect score of twenty-four.

Something strange is going on here. How can perspectives on teens be so radically different—like the perspectives of contemporary leaders in education we examined in Chapter One? Scores covering a range of twenty-two points on a twenty-four-point test are virtually unheard of on a scale of this sort. After all, everyone is looking at roughly the same set of teens; we may see different teens at home, but we’re all looking at nearly the same teens in the movies, on television, and in the newspapers.

The low mean score supports the basic idea that the “average” adult thinks poorly of teens, but the enormous *range* of scores suggests that adult perceptions of teens are *too* flexible—in other words, that many adults might indeed have faulty preconceptions about teens.

The opinion scores I just described are consistent with the infantilization scores I discussed in Chapter One: Apparently adults infantilize teens because they believe teens are incompetent.

### Performance Versus Competence

We might also understand the high scores that teens obtained on the *EDTA* competency scales by examining the relationship between competence and performance. Perhaps you’ve heard the old joke about the little mute boy. His parents were concerned about his lack of language, so year after year they brought him to a parade of experts, but the boy still couldn’t talk. One morning when the boy was ten the family was sitting around the kitchen table eating breakfast when the boy suddenly said, “*This oatmeal is cold.*” His parents were dumbfounded. “You can talk?” his father gasped. “Then why haven’t you said a word until now?” The boy replied, “Because until now everything was okay.”

Just because one *can* do something doesn’t mean one *will* do something. “Competence” is what one *can* do; “performance” is what one actually does. The distinction is important, and so is the relationship between these two domains. The competence domain is vastly larger than and fully encompasses the performance domain. In other words, what we actually do is a small portion of what we are capable of doing.

I've taught seminars on creativity—my major area of scientific research since the late 1970s—for many years, and I've also developed tests that measure the competencies that underlie creative expression, as well as games and exercises that strengthen such competencies. Very few adults express much creativity, but my research suggests that virtually everyone is capable of enormous creativity—in the arts, in literature, in invention, and more (see Chapter Ten).<sup>4</sup> Then why is creativity so seldom expressed?

In kindergarten, almost all children are creative: they make up stories, draw outlandish pictures, and use toys in ever-changing ways. But by the end of the first grade, very few children express creativity. This is likely because of the deleterious effects of socialization and regimentation. The kindergarten class has traditionally been free-form: Play is allowed, children sit around tables or move around; toys are present; daydreaming and silly questions are tolerated.\* The first-grade class, on the other hand, is highly regimented: Children sit at desks; the toys are gone; questions need to be “relevant”; daydreaming and silly questions are prohibited.

The regimentation continues throughout our school years, effectively shutting down creative expression in all but a few misfits whom the system can't manage to socialize. But there are ample signs—our continuing dreams and daydreams, for example—that our creativity machinery remains intact throughout our lives, and it's easy to demonstrate this to adults with a few quick exercises and then, with some further training, to increase creative expression dramatically. So the creativity “competency” may be present even though virtually no creativity is shown. Similarly, teens may very well have adult competencies without demonstrating them.

### Personal Experience

Third, it's possible that most adults aren't aware of teen potential because the teens they actually see behave badly. They're angry or deceitful or disrespectful. They refuse to follow the instructions of adults. They're doing drugs, smoking cigarettes, having sex irresponsibly, or worse. If that's what you see—a good possibility in the modern United States—then that's what you'll believe.

But personal experience isn't always the best teacher. The teens you see might not be representative of all teens, and, more important, the way the teens in your life are behaving right now is almost certainly a poor indicator of the way they *might* behave under other conditions—in other words, of their “competence.”

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\*This is changing rapidly. Under pressure to raise test scores to secure federal funding, many school systems are now regimenting kindergarten classes and introducing much of the curriculum that used to be reserved for the first grade. In my daughter's kindergarten class this past year, the students even had homework four nights a week.

## Infantilization

Fourth, teens might be behaving well below their potential for the simple reason that we treat them like children. Just about everything we do tells them they're incompetent. We protect them from danger (driving, cigarettes, alcohol); we don't trust them to work or own property or spend money; we don't allow them to make basic decisions about their health, education, or religion; we force them to attend school whether they benefit from school or not; and we often refer to them as “boys,” “girls,” or “children,” even though they may be shaving or menstruating.

What happens when you treat a whole segment of the population as if it's inferior and helpless? As blacks and women can tell you, many people in such a sub-population tend to believe what they're told and then to behave as expected. The “yassuh” of the subjugated black, the passive behavior of the 19th-century woman—these were produced by a society that molded generations of blacks and women to be exactly what society expected. But as blacks and women have demonstrated over the last century, performance can be a very poor predictor of competence. When we infantilize teens, we might create many of them in the image we have in mind, but that doesn't necessarily tell us about their potential.

## Our Own Incompetence

Finally, teens and adults might have similar scores on the *EDTA* not because teens are so incredibly competent but because adults aren't. The adult scores were high, but they were far from perfect; even though the scales tested elementary knowledge, and even though our adult sample was better educated than the average American adult, our adult subjects made errors on every scale, missing relatively simple questions about government, math, diet, money, work, citizenship, alcohol, sex, and so on. Out of a total of fourteen thousand questions answered by our adult subjects, 2,326 were answered incorrectly—a sizable number of errors.

I think that most of us—adults, that is—are well aware of our lack of perfection—of our grudges, angry outbursts, memory lapses, careless drinking or driving, lies and misrepresentations, addictions, bad moods or petulant moments, insensitivity, poor diets, inability to commit, and so on. Yet based strictly on our age and some legal definitions, we're also reasonably comfortable calling ourselves “adult,” even though we may suspect at times that we're not worthy of the title.

In other words, we're *selective* about what characteristics and behaviors we pay attention to, always seeking to confirm the supposition that we're adults. At the same time—and even when there may be evidence to the contrary—we're quick to dismiss teens as incompetent, also judging teens by their age rather than by their capabilities,

expressed or potential. In other words, we're also *selective* about how we pay attention to the characteristics and behaviors of teens, always seeking to confirm our supposition that teens are incompetent children (more about this in Chapter Fourteen).

Age is simply not a reliable measure of adulthood, at least not once people are past puberty. Teens have the potential to be very adultlike, and adults sometimes act immaturely. On average, teens and adults are probably equally capable of exhibiting adult behavior, no matter how teens may currently behave day-to-day and no matter what our preconceptions may tell us.

**Q:** *How can I find out if my teen is capable of handling more responsibility?*

**A:** The simplest way to find out is to give your teen a chance. Help him or her open a bank account, for example; teach your teen how such accounts work and how to balance a checkbook, and then see what happens. You might be surprised at how well your thirteen- or fourteen-year-old will do. As I indicated in this chapter, Diane Dumas and I have also developed a comprehensive test, the *EDTA*, that measures "adulthood" competencies in fourteen different areas. Scores on tests of this sort can help pinpoint skill areas where a teen is strong or weak. See Appendix 1 of this volume for an abridged version of the *EDTA* that you can score yourself.

## Chapter 7

# Young People Are Capable Thinkers

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*Life's filled with many paths which one should I take?  
When the choice comes, I won't run. I'll be thinking straight.  
—Youth of Today, "Thinking Straight"*

**Overview.** Scientific research shows unequivocally that the cognitive abilities of teens are, on average, superior to the cognitive abilities of adults. Reasoning ability peaks in the early or mid teens, for example, and so does intelligence. Most memory functions peak in our early teens, and all of these abilities decline throughout adulthood, some quite dramatically. Research also shows that the ability of teens to make sound decisions about health matters, including abortion, is equal to that of adults. Media reports suggest that teen problems are produced by a faulty “teen brain,” but a close examination of the relevant research does not support the claims. The teen brain is, at best, a reflection of teen problems, not their cause. The brain itself changes throughout life, and—consistent with the pattern of changes in cognitive abilities—it reaches its maximum size at about age fourteen and shrinks thereafter. A seventy-year-old’s brain is typically the size of that of a toddler.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget was, arguably, one of the two or three most eminent and influential scientists in the history of psychology. His passion was the cognitive development of young people, and his meticulous research and elaborate theorizing—most of which took place during the early and middle 1900s—still forms the core of modern developmental psychology. His views on young people have been challenged to some extent by contemporary researchers, but his basic findings still stand.

His general proposal was that thinking progresses through a series of inevitable stages from infancy through adulthood. The thinking of little children is qualitatively different from the thinking of adults, and he showed precisely how thinking changes over the years. When you show a six-month-old a funny toy, he or

she will likely reach for it, but when you cover the toy with a pillow, the child will almost immediately move on to something else; in other words, the child will behave as if the toy disappeared into thin air. The old saw “out of sight, out of mind” can be taken literally with very young children. But by the time a child is a year old or so, he or she will try to find the toy beneath the pillow. The child has learned that the toy continues to exist when it’s out of sight. As Piaget put it, the child has mastered the concept of “object permanence.”

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development is based on the outcomes of hundreds of experiments of this sort with children of various ages. Generally, one finds that thinking starts out to be remarkably primitive and then gradually becomes more adultlike. Object permanence is one of many concepts one needs to master in order to achieve adult thinking, according to Piaget.

This is not the place to review Piaget’s theory in detail. For present purposes, what’s important is that Piaget’s stages culminate in a period called “formal operational thinking”; for Piaget, this kind of thinking is, more or less, the highest we can attain, and, in that sense, it’s the kind of thinking one should find in adults.<sup>1</sup> Three obvious questions come to mind: What is formal operational thinking? When it is typically achieved? And do all adults achieve it?

### WHEN DO WE THINK MOST CLEARLY?

Formal operational thinking has two distinct characteristics that differentiate it from more primitive forms. First, formal operational thinkers can think about the world symbolically. They’re not stuck thinking about one particular apple; they can *imagine* that apple, or think about the concept of *all apples*, or think about all apples as part of larger classes (fruit, food, red objects, etc.). They can even think about abstract ideas related to apples: sin, health, and patriotism, for example. More important, they can “operate” on symbols in orderly ways. They can turn the image of the apple upside down, or spin it at high speed, or say what makes apples different from oranges or dogs or park benches without having any of the objects present.

To see whether people had achieved this kind of thinking, Piaget and his colleagues gave people various problems to solve. A correct solution was always a good sign, but Piaget was also interested in seeing *how* people solved the problems. In one problem, Piaget and his long-time colleague Bärbel Inhelder asked young people to figure out how to vary the speed with which a pendulum swings. They were given a string that could be varied in length, along with small objects of different weights which could be attached to the end of the string.

Subjects in this simple procedure typically experiment with the materials in four different ways: they shorten or lengthen the string, tie on objects of different weights, swing the object from different heights, and push the object with weaker or harder pushes. It turns out that there is only one determinant of the frequency of the pendulum motion: the length of the string. Because there are four different possible determinants of the movement, many people have difficulty singling out the correct one. To do so, one needs to be able to isolate each determinant, one at a time, while varying the other three—a procedure the eighteenth century English philosopher John Stuart Mill called the “method of concomitant variation.” People who can figure out how to do this are said, in Piaget’s lingo, to be capable of the “operation of exclusion”—one of several formal operations that typify fully-developed adult thinking.

This particular operation is normally achieved by age eleven or twelve. This might surprise you, because perhaps it wasn’t immediately obvious to you how to solve the pendulum problem. Your own difficulties notwithstanding, *all* of the formal operations—if they are going to be mastered at all—are typically mastered by age *fourteen or fifteen*. The young teen, according to Piaget, is capable of “experimental and logico-mathematical thinking,” of “philosophical speculation,” of “theory construction,” and even of “analyzing his own thinking.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, shortly after puberty we are capable of adult thinking—at least as far as Jean Piaget was concerned.

Piaget even acknowledged—and subsequent research has confirmed—that it might be possible to speed up the mastery of formal operational thinking somewhat. According to a 1955 essay by Inhelder and Piaget, “...the age of eleven-to-twelve years may be... a product of a progressive acceleration of individual development under the influence of education, and perhaps nothing stands in the way of a further reduction in the average age in a more or less distant future.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps even more interesting, Inhelder and Piaget speculated that “fundamental affective acquisitions of adolescence parallel the intellectual acquisitions”<sup>4</sup>—in other words, that teens also had the potential to achieve a high level of emotional maturity between ages eleven and fifteen.

### **Bad News About Our Thinking Abilities**

That’s the good news. Now here’s the bad. Many adults never achieve formal operational thinking, and if they haven’t done so by age fifteen or so, they probably never will. What’s more—and this is consistent with what we’ll learn later in this chapter about intelligence and other cognitive abilities—our ability to think operationally starts to *decline* in our twenties and continues to do so throughout our lives.

Piaget himself believed that almost anyone could achieve formal operational thinking. In an article he published in 1972 (toward the end of his long career), he wrote:

*...in principle all normal individuals are capable of reaching the level of formal structures on the condition that the social environment and acquired experience provide the subject with the cognitive nourishment and intellectual stimulation necessary for such a construction.*<sup>5</sup>

He's saying that environmental input appears to be important—that one's thinking ability will be stunted if one doesn't get adequate "cognitive nourishment"—another argument, I believe, against the artificial extension of childhood. In any case, by the 1970s researchers began to discover that a great many people failed to master formal operations.

In a 1975 report, for example, by Jan D. Sinnott of the Catholic University of America, many subjects in two different age groups (average age thirty-three, and average age sixty-seven) failed to show mastery of a number of different Piagetian tasks, and older subjects generally did much more poorly than younger subjects—even though they all had two weeks to work on the problems in their own homes. Overall, only about two-thirds of Sinnott's subjects showed mastery of tasks requiring formal operational thinking.<sup>6</sup>

A 1972 study by C. Tomlinson-Keasy of Rutgers University yielded similar findings. Formal operational tasks given to groups of females in three age groups (average age 11.9, 19.7, and 54, respectively) were mastered by a third of the youngest subjects, by two-thirds of the twenty-year-olds, and by only about half of the middle-aged women.<sup>7</sup> (See Figure 7.1.) A late 1970s study conducted in the Soviet Union by N. A. Podgoretskaya with subjects between sixteen and fifty-five also showed considerably poorer performance by adult subjects.<sup>8</sup>

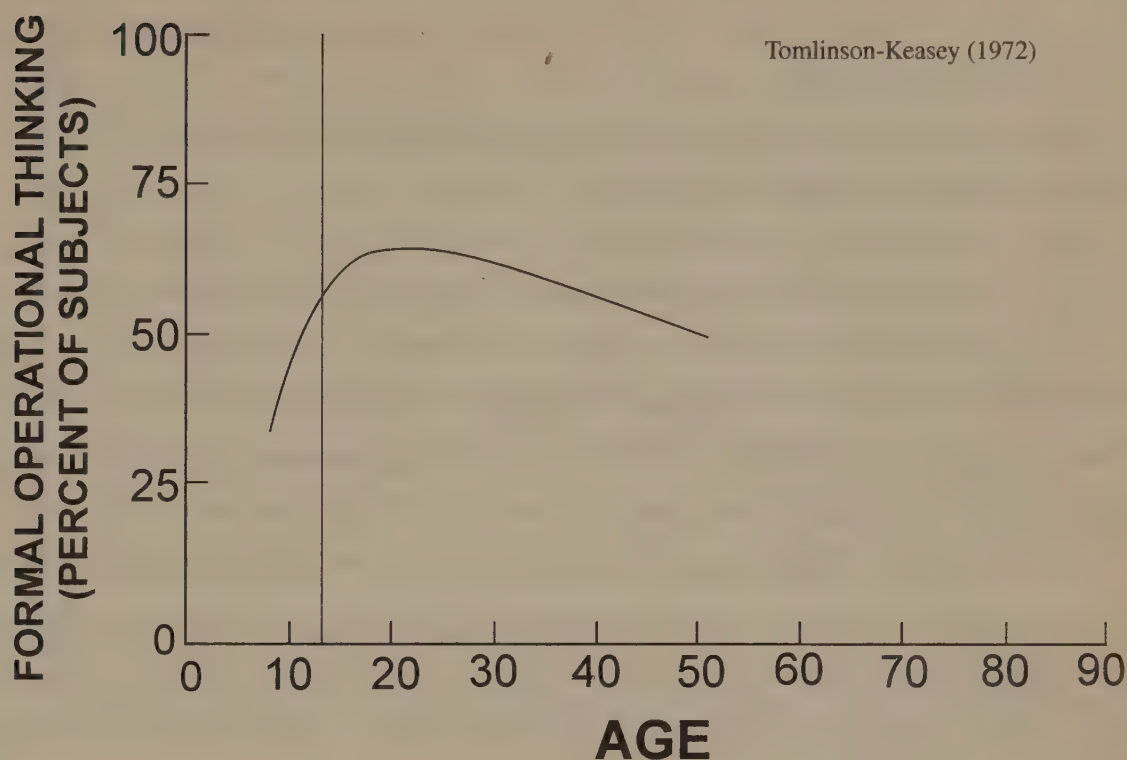


Figure 7.1. Formal Operational Thinking by Age. Several studies indicate that formal operational thinking—Piaget’s highest stage of reasoning—begins to emerge around the time of puberty, and it appears that many adults are incapable of this thinking. A 1972 study by Tomlinson-Keasy looking at three age groups of women (mean ages twelve, twenty, and fifty-four) found evidence that our reasoning powers may even decline as we get older.

Piaget’s confidence in our ability to think clearly has not been borne out, but that could be because of inadequate stimulation—poor schooling, pop culture, and, of course, infantilization—rather than because of inherent limitations. The decline in functioning that seems to occur after our twenties could come from lack of practice: perhaps in the 1970s when the Tomlinson-Keasy study was conducted, middle-aged women had little reason to continue to exercise their logical powers past their school years. But research still supports Piaget’s basic assertion: We become capable of formal operational thinking at about age eleven, with the peak in our abilities occurring by age fifteen.

### Making It Personal

As I write this, I’m now fifty-three years old. A quarter of a century ago, at age twenty-seven, I published an article in *Harvard Magazine* called “Growing Older, or What Else I Learned in Graduate School.” It was a lament about many aspects of growing older—and especially the fact that I was now facing “a physical and emotional future that no one ever prepared me for.” Among the many early signs of aging I described was this:

*...you can no longer think as well.... A junior faculty member remarked that he could no longer solve the puzzlers in Scientific American. When I was fourteen I could routinely think ten moves ahead in three-dimensional tic-tac-toe (four-by-four-by-four). I've lost nearly half a move a year.<sup>9</sup>*

I was aware even then about the mental prowess of the fourteen-year-old—at least my own. What has happened to your own mental prowess? Have you noticed any decline? Perhaps you're thinking: "I may not be as adept as I once was, but my judgment has improved greatly." I'll deal with the judgment issue later in the chapter, and, again, you might be surprised by what the research shows.

One final note: Piaget himself published his first scientific article (on the albino sparrow) at age eleven, and during his teens he published a number of impressive technical articles in malacology, the field concerned with the study of mollusks. His own life exemplifies the enormous power of the teenage mind—if it is properly "nourished."

## WHEN DOES MORAL REASONING PEAK?

It's often presumed that American teens are generally immoral, or perhaps even amoral. In general, social scientists are reluctant to moralize or even to study morality—probably too reluctant, considering how important moral concerns are in the world at large. But there is one aspect of morality that psychologists have studied for decades, and that is called "moral reasoning."

The issue is a narrow one: in situations in which one must make judgments about morality, *what kind of rationale does one use?* This may sound too narrow to be interesting, but it turns out to be a fascinating area of study for the simple reason that people use remarkably different rationales when they render moral opinions. What's more, our ability to make such judgments seems to develop in a series of inevitable stages, just like our general intellectual ability. Researchers who have studied moral reasoning have also found that very few people ever reach the highest possible stages—far fewer than reach the highest stages of intellectual development.

The study of moral reasoning was pioneered by an American psychologist named Lawrence Kohlberg, whose life ended tragically in 1987 in what appeared to be a suicide (I mention this as a gentle reminder about the imperfection of adults). Over a period of many years, Kohlberg and his students and colleagues

presented people of different ages with various moral dilemmas, such as this classic pharmacy dilemma:

*Bill's beloved wife is deathly ill, and the only medication that will relieve her incredible pain is far beyond Bill's means. One night he breaks into a small pharmacy owned by a local businessman and steals enough medication to give his wife relief for the remaining weeks of her life. Was Bill wrong or right, and why?*

They found that people's analyses of these problems were of six different types, ranging from concrete and simplistic to quite abstract. Kohlberg concluded that these six types constitute "stages" of reasoning and that we progress through the stages from early childhood through adulthood—some of us further than others.

### **Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development**

The first two stages, typical of children under nine, comprise what Kohlberg called Level I or "preconventional" reasoning—reasoning that's egocentric or individualistic. When young children are asked to explain why an action is right or wrong, they talk about the rewards and punishments at stake—how someone will benefit or be penalized. In Stage 1, the child can only conceive of one person's rewards and punishments; in Stage 2, he or she recognizes that different people have different interests that might conflict with each other. Applied to the pharmacy dilemma, a Level I analysis would focus on the consequences of the theft: "Bill was right to steal the drug because his wife will be so grateful," or "Bill was wrong to steal the drug because he's going to get in trouble."

The next two stages, mastered by pre-teens and teens, comprise Level II or "conventional" reasoning—reasoning that's based on the expectations of the community, which include the laws passed by our legislatures. Stage 3 thinkers accept, more or less without question, the way family and friends have defined "good" and "bad." Stage 4 thinkers recognize the demands of the larger community; they recognize, for example, that laws are good and must be followed. They also know, though, that it might be right to disobey a law when obeying it would conflict with obligations people have to other people. Applied to the pharmacy problem, conventional thinkers might respond: "Bill was right to steal the drug because it's his duty as a husband to take the best possible care of his suffering wife," or "Bill was wrong to steal the drug because the laws against theft, which provide stability for all of us, are more important than the suffering of one person. If everyone did what Bill did, our society would break down in chaos overnight."

These kinds of rationales probably sound familiar to you, because, as Kohlberg

notes, “The conventional level is the level of most adolescents and adults in our society and in other societies.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, there’s a good chance that you are a conventional thinker and that you gave a Stage 4 rationale for your response to the pharmacy dilemma: “Bill was right to steal the drug because his obligations to his suffering wife were more important than his obligation to follow the law.”

Kohlberg identified two other types of moral reasoning, which he called Level III or “postconventional” types. These, he said, are mastered by a small number of people in their twenties and remain relatively rare among adults. The postconventional thinker has “differentiated his or her self from the rules and expectations of others and defines his or her values in terms of self-chosen principles.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, he or she has formulated general principles of right and wrong which may or may not coincide with laws or with the expectations of the community. Clearly, society can’t tolerate too many postconventional thinkers, especially ones who formulate principles that reject the need for stoplights or that justify the mailing of letter bombs to scholars and administrators (Ted Kaczynski comes to mind).

Postconventional thinking applied to the pharmacy problem might yield a response like “Bill was right, because the obligations we have to loved ones must always be put ahead of laws passed by legislators. After all, laws are merely crude approximations of the obligations people have toward their loved ones; they are necessarily imperfect.” (If you read Kaczynski’s manifesto in *The Washington Post* years ago, you may recognize his style here.)

### How Moral Reasoning Changes Over Time

According to Kohlberg, after age nine, most young people rapidly master the skills of conventional moral reasoning, and very few of us ever progress beyond that point. The statistics are impressive. In a twenty-year longitudinal study conducted by Kohlberg and his colleagues, no thirteen or fourteen year olds were still at Stage 1, and only about 20 percent were still at Stage 2. Fifty-eight percent of the thirteen and fourteen year olds tested were straddling Stages 2 and 3—that is, showing clear signs of conventional moral reasoning—and nearly 20 percent were fully conventional in their thinking.

By age eighteen, more than two-thirds of the subjects exhibited fully conventional thinking. As subjects aged, their thinking continued to advance, but not quickly and not much. By the time the subjects were in their twenties or thirties, about 90 percent of them had reached Stages 3 or 4, but only a handful—11 percent—showed any signs of postconventional reasoning, and none moved fully to Stages 5 or 6.<sup>12</sup>

Kohlberg’s study was conducted with males only, but more recent cross-sectional and longitudinal studies conducted in Israel, Turkey, and India have con-

firmed Kohlberg's original findings.<sup>13</sup> The bottom line: most teens are capable of conventional, adult-like moral reasoning, and very few adults ever advance beyond such reasoning.

Kohlberg noted that all moral reasoning requires general reasoning powers, and he referred specifically to Piaget's stages to account for the progress of moral reasoning during our early years. Conventional moral reasoning, said Kohlberg, requires only "low' formal operations," which Piaget thought most young people could master by eleven or twelve.<sup>14</sup> So even if teens may, according to the modern keepers of right and wrong, behave immorally at times, they're quite capable of *reasoning* about moral issues very much as adults do.

Although studies exist that question the moral reasoning abilities of young people,<sup>15</sup> researchers who have taken the time to try to understand what young people are saying in the context of their life circumstances consistently point to the complex and sophisticated moral reasoning that many young people demonstrate. Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles found evidence of this sophistication in young people around the world,<sup>16</sup> and Harvard education professor Carol Gilligan, using "narrative" techniques, concludes that "adolescence may be a critical time for moral education" because "adolescents are passionately interested in moral questions." Citing breakthrough research by Kay Johnston with eleven- and fifteen-year-olds as a "watershed" in her thinking about development, Gilligan suggests that we sometimes underestimate the moral sophistication of young people because we don't ask the right questions—or *enough* questions. After Johnston asked her subjects to analyze moral dilemmas from Aesop's fables, she then asked them if they could give a *different* analysis than the one they had first given. About half of the subjects were able to do so, and nearly all of those individuals were even able to say which analysis was preferable and why.<sup>17</sup>

## WHEN ARE WE MOST INTELLIGENT?

In the recent film *Thirteen*, about which I'll say more in Chapter Ten, a young female who has always been a good student is corrupted by a peer. She becomes unruly, experiments with drugs and sex, and shirks her school work. We've all seen or heard of cases like this: In elementary school and perhaps middle school, the young person performs beautifully, only to slide into oblivion in high school. This hardly seems to support the idea that we reach the peak of our reasoning ability in our early or mid-teens. But Piaget and Kohlberg weren't

the only ones to arrive at this conclusion. Even the mavens of the classic intelligence test agree.

### Our Highly Intelligent Teens

In a 1944 book called *The Measurement of Adult Intelligence*, David Wechsler, the developer of two of the most widely used intelligence tests in the Western world, the WISC and the WAIS, indicated that intelligence peaks at about age fifteen—and that it generally declines throughout adulthood.<sup>18</sup> Although raw scores on Wechsler’s original test for adults continued to increase somewhat after age fifteen, Wechsler concluded that the highest “mental age” we can reach is fifteen and a half. (See Figure 7.2.) According to Wechsler, “[There] are no mental age equivalents for ages above fifteen and a half, and... beginning as early as age fourteen, the differences between succeeding half year scores are so small as to make them unreliable.”<sup>19</sup>

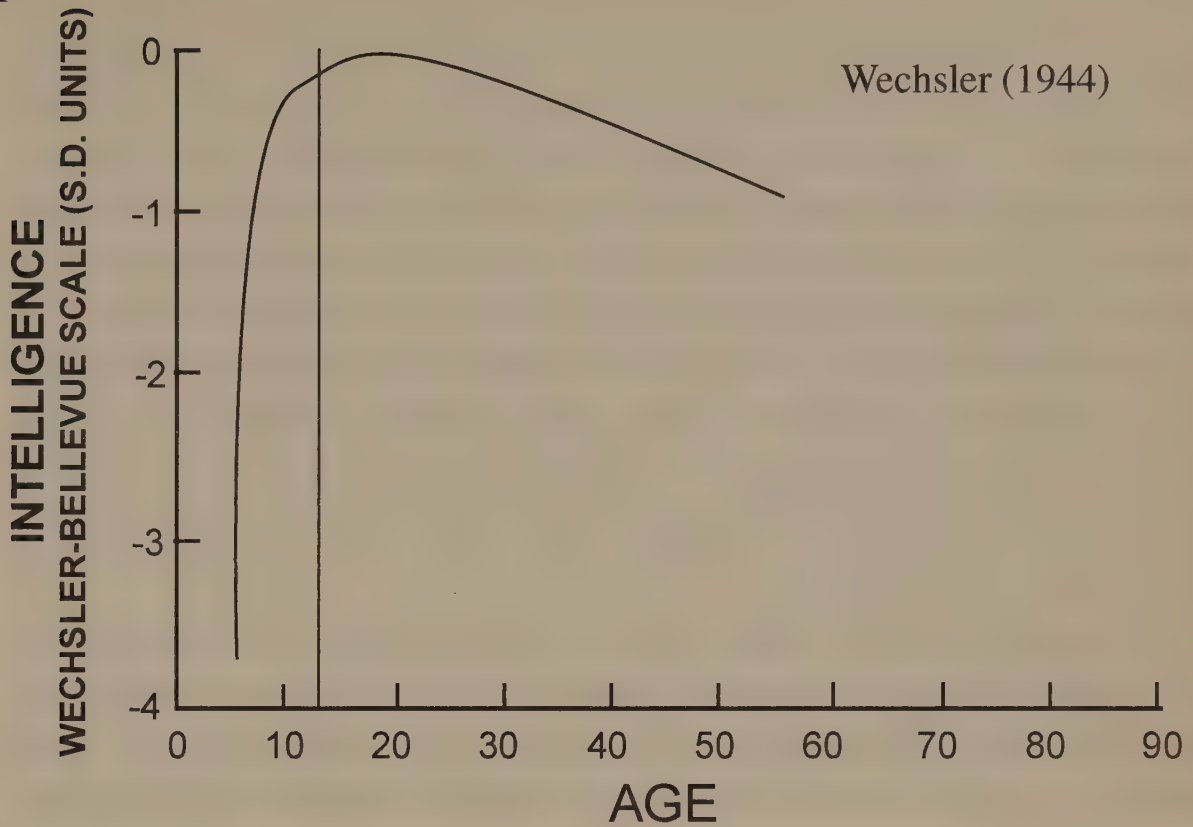
Even more impressive, a 1948 paper published in the *British Journal of Psychology* by J. C. Raven suggests that intelligence peaks even earlier—perhaps at thirteen or fourteen.<sup>20</sup> The Raven paper is the better of the two for our purposes, because Raven used a non-verbal test called “Progressive Matrices,” whereas Wechsler’s test relied in part on verbal skills. The Progressive Matrices test, first introduced by Raven in 1938, presents a series of diagrams to the test-taker to see if he or she can recognize patterns. Since the material is abstract, it can be considered an early form of the so-called “culture-free” test that became popular later in the century. Presumably, scores on this test depend less on the test-taker’s specific experiences than do his or her scores on verbal tests. In this respect, it’s a fairly good vehicle for looking at how intelligence changes over the life span.

### Then Why Do Many Teens Seem So Unintelligent?

If our intelligence (defined in the traditional way, as the ability to think clearly, logically, and rationally) peaks during the early or mid-teen years, why do so many teens seem so unintelligent?<sup>21</sup>

***Teens in Isolation.*** First, teens are generally isolated from adults and lack meaningful responsibilities, so they may not be receiving the intellectual nourishment about which Piaget spoke. Even though intelligence has a substantial genetic component, it’s also affected by experience. Denied a wide range of adult challenges, American teens may be developing their intelligence in narrow ways, determined largely by the artificial boundaries of the classroom—assuming, of course, that they’re even profiting from what the classroom has to offer, which is debatable in many cases.

A



B

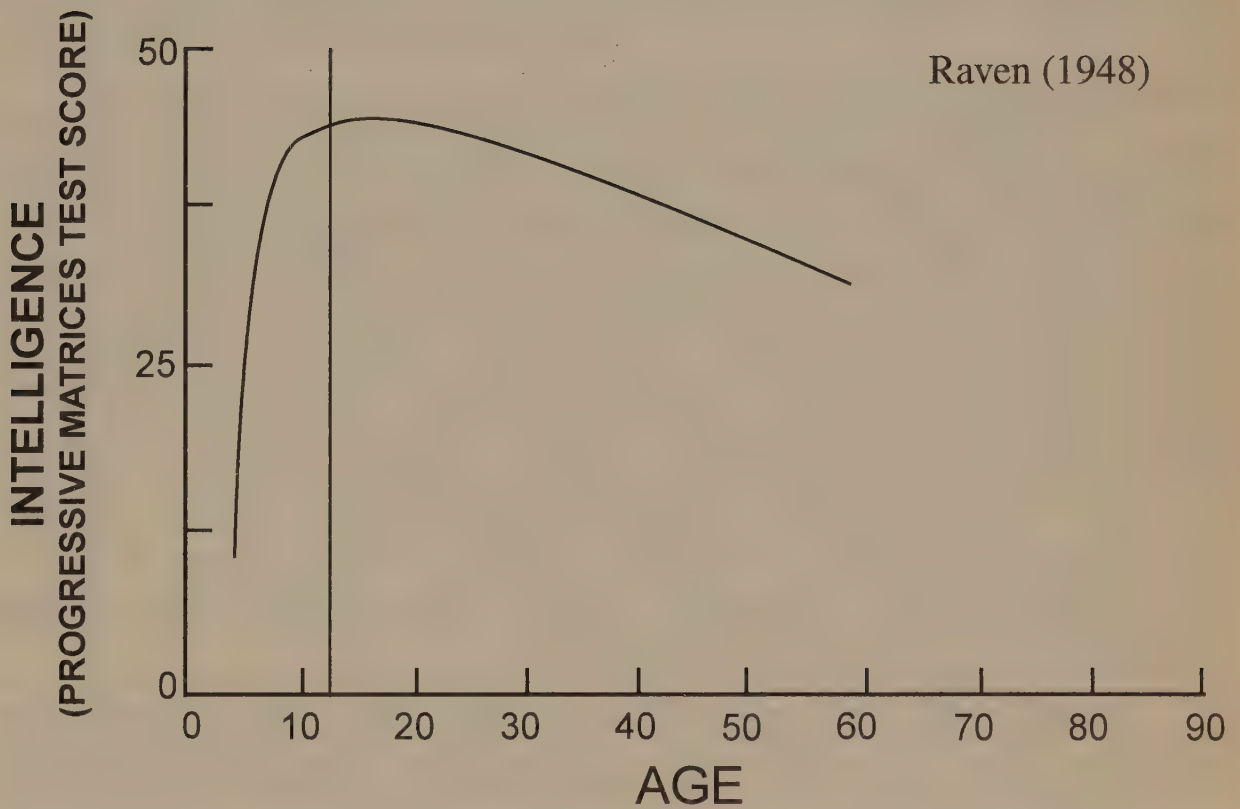


Figure 7.2. Intelligence by Age. Although our intelligence ranking within our age group (roughly, our “IQ”) remains fairly constant for much of our life, our actual raw scores on intelligence tests follow the patterns shown in these two graphs: Our scores are highest at or shortly after puberty, and then they decline slowly throughout our lives. After age thirty or so, we can never think as clearly as we can in our teens.

**Infantilization.** Second, as the data I collected with Diane Dumas show clearly, teens in modern America are infantilized—more tightly controlled and restrained even than active-duty United States Marines or incarcerated felons (Chapter One). Infantilization plays out in many ways; among other things, it creates a relationship between adults and teens that’s inherently adversarial. It’s difficult to like or respect someone who treats you like a child when you no longer are, and you may act irrationally around such a person. In addition, as I’ve mentioned earlier, when we treat teens like children, we may also be encouraging them to behave that way: dependent, helpless, and ignorant—at least when they’re around us. A teen who is underperforming at home or in school may be razor sharp with peers or on the street, where there is at least the possibility of earning real respect.

**Drugs and Alcohol.** Third, numerous studies suggest that drug and alcohol abuse can impair cognitive functioning.\* Unduly influenced by peers and mass media, isolated from adults, and infantilized by authority figures, teens abuse drugs and alcohol to an alarming extent (Chapter Five). It’s possible that the enormous intellectual potential teens have is diminished in many cases by substance abuse. I find this possibility especially disturbing, because it means that we might not only be ignoring teen potential, we might also be permanently destroying it.

**The Impact of Peers.** Fourth, teens tend to imitate each other, not adults. They spend almost all their time with peers and virtually no time with adults, so this shouldn’t be surprising. In countries where adolescence hasn’t yet emerged, the opposite is true: Teens spend almost all their time with the kinds of adults they will eventually be (Chapter Three). In the United States teens are also presented, day in and day out, with attractive, charismatic teen role models through glitzy television shows, movies, music videos, and print magazines—a powerful set of industries created and maintained especially for this purpose. The role models are not industrious, intelligent, dedicated, adult-like young people. Instead, they’re superficial, irresponsible, promiscuous, risk-prone, substance-abusing, disrespectful, and sometimes quite bizarre.

The role-model industry sets up our young people to behave well below their potential. Acting dumb, like the protagonists in the 1989 film *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, is cool. Acting like an adult—like the authoritarian,

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\*The hysteria over drug abuse by teens sometimes leads to exaggerations, however. For example, investigators at Johns Hopkins University provoked major headlines in 2001 when they announced that their research demonstrated that Ecstasy produces significant brain damage and a Parkinson’s-like disease. A subsequent news report revealed that the drug they used was actually methamphetamine, not Ecstasy.<sup>22</sup>

uninformed enemy—invites ridicule by peers and is even discouraged by adults. When the protagonist in *Thirteen* turns cool, in order to maintain her credibility with her new cool cohort, it's absolutely necessary that she start failing at school. We see this again in 1980s film *Can't Buy Me Love*, in which a young man cuts himself off from his fellow nerds after he's able to buy his way in to the popular crowd.

Depending on your age and musical taste, you may have run across the popular Nirvana song, "Smells Like Teen Spirit." The words in "Smells Like Teen Spirit" are virtually impossible to decipher. Lead singer Kurt Cobain—a great talent who suffered from depression and committed suicide at age twenty-seven—creates little more than a lyrical mush by slurring and mumbling every line. A student of mine recently explained to me what this famous song is about. "Smells Like Teen Spirit," it turns out, is a lament about the fact that when you're a teen, it's desirable to be depressed, self-hating, and stupid. Sings Cobain, "Load up on guns/ Bring your friends/ It's fun to lose/ And to pretend.... I'm worse at what I do best/ And for this gift I feel blessed." This is the context in which we're trying—and often failing—to educate our young people.

***Tougher Competition.*** Finally, it's possible that some teens who don't seem very bright really *aren't* very bright—relatively speaking, anyway—even if they performed well in elementary school.

Throughout life, many of our test scores—grades in school, for example—tend to drop. There are a number of reasons for this, the main one being that as we grow older the competition gets stiffer. In elementary school, we're competing against twenty or thirty neighborhood kids. In high school, we're competing against hundreds of people from a much larger geographical region; some of the slowest students intensify the competition by dropping out and disappearing from the educational system. In college, we're competing against a far more select group, and in graduate or professional school, we may be competing against a highly select group drawn from people around the state, the country, or even the world.

We move through a similar progression as we rise to higher heights in our profession; the competition gets tougher and tougher until we finally rise to the level of our incompetence. As we get older, the various tests we're given also tend to get harder; as people compete with each other in increasingly competent groups, more difficult tests are needed to sort people out.

So some young people, subjected to tougher and tougher demands, will necessarily do worse and worse. As they drop to positions of lower status in what the late Richard Herrnstein called the "meritocracy,"<sup>23</sup> some of them will feel increasingly frustrated, especially if they've been victims of the modern self-esteem move-

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Burns on Memory

*By the time you're eighty years old you've learned everything. You only have to remember it.*

—George Burns

ment. When we approach life with unrealistic expectations, we are invariably disappointed.

The bottom line is that some of the teens for whom we once had great expectations will simply not be able to meet those expectations. This in no way invalidates my basic point: on average, intelligence peaks in the early or mid teens, no matter how some individuals may perform.

### But Doesn't IQ Stay Stable Throughout Life?

If you have a background in psychology or education, you might be aware of the fact that “IQ” stays relatively stable from elementary school until old age. This would appear to contradict my repeated assertions that intellectual ability peaks when we're young. But “IQ” is not the same as “intelligence,” even though some people use the terms interchangeably.

“IQ” stands for “intelligence quotient,” the result of an arithmetic division. The intelligence quotient is computed, more or less, by dividing one's “raw” score (in other words, one's *actual* score) on an intelligence test by the *average score* obtained by people in one's age group. So IQ remains fairly stable because one's intellectual *rank* in one's age group stays fairly constant. If you were at the top of the heap when you were ten, you'll probably be at the top of the heap when you're seventy. While this may be reassuring, it tells you nothing about what's happening to those raw scores, which are in fact increasing rapidly during childhood and decreasing slowly all through adulthood, just as Wechsler and Raven found.

IQ is a *relative* measure—useful if you're an administrator trying to decide which students to put into an advanced class—whereas the raw scores are *absolute* measures of ability. Our intellectual ability indeed peaks during our early or mid-teens, stays somewhat stable during our twenties, and declines gradually for the rest of our lives. Because this happens to virtually everyone, our rank within our own age group will necessarily stay fairly constant; everyone is getting smarter and then less smart at about the same pace. Hence the stability of—and misleading nature of “IQ.”

## The Disturbing Truth About Intelligence

Like it or not, after age thirty or so, our ability to reason is never again as good as it was in our teens. Raven puts the matter bluntly:

*Apparently by the age of fourteen, a child's trainability has reached its maximum, while after the age of thirty, a person's ability to understand a new method of thinking, adopt new methods of working, and even to adapt to a new environment, steadily decreases. If the decline continues at the same rate after the age of sixty, it would appear that by the age of eighty, the average person's capacity to succeed in the Matrices Test is less than that of the normal child of eight years, and it has, in fact, been found that old people only understand the test at all if it is given to them in the form of boards and movable pieces, just as one would give the test to a little child.<sup>24</sup>*

I can't think of any way to put a good spin on this inevitable trend; it's simply the way things are. My eight-year-old is advancing so fast—especially in his technical skills on remote controls, VCRs, CD players, handheld video games, and the computer—that it scares me sometimes. A decade from now, when he'll be eighteen and I'll be sixty-three, I suspect that I'll be relying heavily on him for technical help, just as my elderly parents now rely heavily on me. This is not simply because older people have less experience with new technologies; it's because, as Raven said, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to “understand a new method of thinking” as we age.

One of my son's handheld video games—a variation on the old Space Invaders game—requires lightning-quick judgment and reflexes. He can win almost every time, but so far I haven't won once. I mention this because some people believe that reaction-time, and specifically our ability to make quick, accurate judgments about meaningful stimuli, may be a core component of intelligence. It's probably no coincidence, therefore, that a 1981 study by Robert J. Weber and his colleagues shows the same developmental trend for this type of reaction time that we found for intelligence: We're slow when we're children; we become quite fast as young adults; and we're very slow when we're old.<sup>25</sup> (See Figure 7.3.) Generally speaking, teens think quickly, and if you're over thirty, you no longer do.

## Human Potential—and Constraints

But what about the “human potential” premise (Enabling Premise Number Three) that I touted in Chapter One? Even if teens do score well on some tests of reasoning ability, isn't it true that people of all ages have the potential to get such scores?

Unfortunately, there are genetic and developmental limits to potential. Our

genes specify a “reaction range” for all of our characteristics, physical and psychological. For some characteristics, like height, the range is small, meaning that experience can’t change height appreciably. For other characteristics, like weight, the range is large, meaning that experience can alter that characteristic dramatically. For characteristics like intelligence, the range is moderate: perhaps sixteen to twenty points on a standard IQ test for which the mean score is one hundred. A rich environment will boost you to the top of your possible range, and a poor environment will keep you at the bottom. But no amount of training can make an idiot a genius or vice versa.

The data I’ve reviewed so far in this chapter also suggest that there are developmental constraints on our reasoning ability. We’re most able to reason clearly when we’re in our teens, and no matter how aggressively we may try to train people of other ages, this basic fact is unlikely to change. The value of the Human Potential Premise is to remind us that teens—and, for that matter, people of all ages, races, and so on—may have abilities that are not currently being *expressed*. The premise should not be interpreted to mean that all abilities are infinitely malleable but rather that an individual’s present performance may not be an accurate indicator of that person’s *potential* performance.

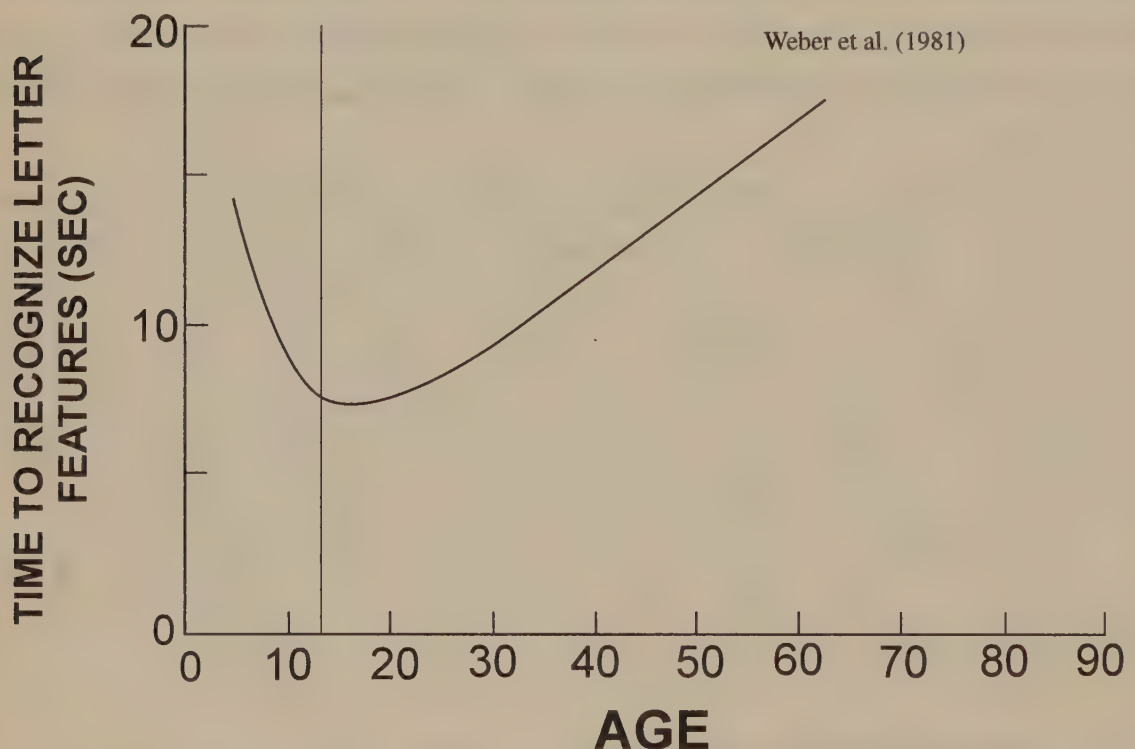


Figure 7.3. Recognition Time by Age. A study by Robert J. Weber, Larry Hochhaus, and William D. Brown of Oklahoma State University looked at how quickly people of various ages could react to features of letters, such as which way internal corners were facing. The authors found, in general, that children (mean age nine) responded slowly on this type of task, that young people (mean age twenty) responded quickly, and that old people (mean age sixty-eight) responded slowly.

## Fictional Characterizations of Intelligent Young People

Even though teens have a bad “rep” in modern America, we do occasionally see media portrayals of extremely smart young people: *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, a TV show that aired from 1989 to 1993, was about a young genius who became a medical doctor at age fourteen. While he was making life-and-death decisions about people’s health, we also saw him isolated from and rejected by his peers, and his judgment was also often questioned by skeptical adults.

The 1985 film *Real Genius*, starring Val Kilmer, focuses on a brilliant fifteen-year-old student and his somewhat older companions at a research university modeled after Cal Tech; they’re being duped by shady government types into building a super laser weapon, but they get the last laugh, and, in a spectacular scene in which their professor’s house is destroyed by exploding popcorn, the last shot.

And various children’s stories, movies, and television shows also occasionally acknowledge the potential intellectual prowess of young people: in the 1985 film *The Goonies*, a young Asian boy called “Data” is an ingenious inventor; The Cartoon Network’s contemporary show *Dexter’s Laboratory* is about a similar character, who, among other things, invents an age accelerator so that he can stay up late to watch movies; in the long-running prime-time show, *The Simpsons*, precocious eight-year-old Lisa is said to be able to read at the “fourteenth grade level”; Malcolm of Fox TV’s sitcom, *Malcolm in the Middle*, supposedly has an IQ of 165, but the show doesn’t emphasize his intelligence; and Frank and Joe, the world-renowned Hardy Boys, were teen super-sleuths of the early 1900s whose exploits were recorded in more than 250 books.

## Real Real Genius

So much for fiction. Do real young people measure up? Even though they’re isolated from adult society, great young intellects sometimes break through. In modern America we see them mainly in the chess world, one of the few domains in which we allow the intellectual abilities of young people to be expressed with few restrictions. Elementary school children regularly compete in local, regional, national, and even international tournaments, and occasionally young teens appear who dominate the entire chess-playing world.

For Americans the greatest chess legend of all time is Bobby Fischer, who became the youngest international grandmaster in history in 1958 at age fifteen and who eventually (in 1972) became World Champion in a celebrated bout with the Soviet Union’s legendary Boris Spassky. As amazing as Fischer was, as of this writing at least seven young people have outdone him—the youngest being the Ukraine’s Sergey

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Keeping an Eye on City Government

*City officials in Berkeley, California, were stunned one day in 1998 when eleven-year-old Ellie Lammer presented them with the results of her evaluation of the city's parking meters. With a hundred nickels and a stopwatch in hand, the resourceful sixth-grader picked fifty expired meters at random and fed two nickels into each. That should have yielded eight minutes of parking time, but she found that only 6 percent of the meters (that is, just three) were accurate and that 66 percent of the meters cheated drivers. Remarked one city official, "It was very impressive how exhaustive [her report] was. We don't get reports this thorough when we pay consultants hundreds of thousands of dollars."<sup>26</sup>*

Karjakin, who became an international grandmaster in 2002 at age twelve years, seven months (see box).

I've also found a number of examples of great accomplishments in mathematics by young people, but all took place in centuries prior to the twentieth—in other words, well before the artificial extension of childhood was in high gear. France's Guillaume L'Hospital and Scotland's James Clerk Maxwell both made significant contributions when they were fifteen, for example, and Joseph-Louis Lagrange became a professor of mathematics at the Royal Artillery School in Turin at age sixteen.<sup>28</sup> (See table on page 182.)

What kinds of intellectual feats might young people demonstrate today—in math and science, in high tech, in invention, and so on—if they were given more meaningful intellectual challenges and opportunities, and if they weren't so busy "hanging out" in the restrictive and meaningless teen world we've created for them?

## WHEN DOES MEMORY FUNCTION BEST?

Another book I'm writing these days—called, at the moment, *Memory Unlimited*—is a practical guide to a new variant of a mnemonic technique developed by orators of ancient Greece. The book focuses on something you probably already know: it's possible, with skill and practice, to remember things you wouldn't otherwise be able to remember.

But mnemonic techniques don't tell us about an individual's natural, untutored memory ability. To assess that, it's interesting to look at a phenomenon called "incidental memory," first studied in 1929 by Raymond B. Willoughby of Clark University.<sup>30</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### The Search Is Over

*Like many people, I wondered for years where Bobby Fischer disappeared to after he defeated Boris Spassky in Iceland in 1972. The answer isn't pretty. In 1975 the World Chess Federation stripped Fischer of his world title because he refused to defend it. Fischer remained in relative seclusion until 1992 when he agreed to a five-million-dollar rematch with Spassky in Yugoslavia, defying a United States law prohibiting Americans from doing business there at the time. In a press conference before the match, Fischer produced a copy of the warning letter he had received from the United States State Department and spat on it. He won the match, but a warrant was issued for his arrest, and he hasn't returned to the United States since. Fischer spent recent years living in relative seclusion in Japan, where his long-standing paranoid tendencies escalated.*

*Since 1999 he has broadcast dozens of programs from a Philippines radio station blaming the world's troubles—and his own—on Jews. This is ironic, because his mother was Jewish and it appears that his natural father was, as well. His invectives against the United States have also grown. Just hours after the attack on September 11, 2001, he said on the air, "This is all wonderful news. I applaud the act.... I want to see the U.S. wiped out." In July 2004 Fischer was arrested by Japanese authorities for trying to travel with an expired passport, and American authorities then tried to get him extradited to the United States to face the 1992 charges. He was eventually granted asylum in Iceland.<sup>27</sup>*

### Incidental Memory

Willoughby gave hundreds of people from age six to "sixty-eight-plus" a simple "digit substitution" task roughly along these lines: On the top line of the paper, each of the digits from 1 to 9 was paired with an unusual symbol. Below that line the digits appeared in random order in six rows of fifteen digits each, and it was the test-taker's task to copy the appropriate symbol below each symbol as fast as possible. This is pretty much a copying task—not that interesting—and Willoughby found that young children completed it fairly slowly, that people got faster until about age twenty, and that they got slower each year after that. No big deal, really, because the task is so mundane.

But then Willoughby had an insight. He wondered how well people could

Young Contributors in Mathematics		
Name	Age	Accomplishment
Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)	16	Proved theorem of conic sections
	18	Invented world's first calculator
Guillaume François Antoine de L'Hospital (1661-1704)	15	Solved a problem of Pascal's
Alexis Claude Clairaut (1713-1765)	16	Published <i>Recherches sur les courbes à double courbure</i>
	18	Devised proof of one of Newton's theories on cubics
Joseph-Louis Lagrange (1736-1813)	16	Became professor of mathematics in Turin
Gaspard Monge (1746-1818)	16	Originated descriptive geometry
Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777-1855)	17	Developed a law of quadratic reciprocity
	18	Invented the method of "least squares"
Simeon Denis Poisson (1781-1840)	18	Wrote an essay on finite differences
Everiste Galois (1811-1832)	17	Made discoveries in the theory of equations
James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879)	15	Published a paper on oval curves
William Kingdon Clifford (1848-1879)	18	Solved a problem in probability

remember which symbol was paired with each digit, even though they had never been asked to remember the pairings; in other words, what would they remember accidentally, or "incidentally"? The results were dramatic. (See Figure 7.4 page 184.) From childhood until about age thirteen, performance on this task improved rapidly, and it declined gradually from thirteen until old age, when performance was substantially worse than it was in childhood. In other words, children don't remember much accidentally, and old people barely remember *anything* accidentally. But young teens have *excellent* "incidental memory"; without effort, they can remember things they never even intended to remember.

Other studies also reveal superior or peak memory abilities in teens. In 1928, H. E. Jones and his colleagues asked questions of 429 people from ages ten to fifty-nine about some movies immediately after they had seen them in a movie theater. Because they weren't told beforehand that they would be asked questions about the

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Getting Younger Every Day

*When, nearly forty years ago, fifteen-year-old Bobby Fischer became an international grandmaster in chess (which means, roughly, that you have to equal or better the performances of grandmasters in three international tournaments), the feat was considered amazing—even unbeatable. Since then the age record has been broken seven times:*

*Bobby Fischer, fifteen years, six months*

*Judit Polgar, fifteen years, four months*

*Peter Leko, fourteen years, four months*

*Etienne Bacrot, fourteen years, two months*

*Ruslan Ponomarev, fourteen years, seventeen days*

*Teimour Radjabov, fourteen years, fourteen days*

*Bu Xiangzhi, thirteen years, ten months*

*Sergey Karjakin, twelve years, seven months*

*Sergey was five when his dad taught him to play chess; unfortunately for Dad, by age seven Sergey was winning virtually every game. He hopes to become World Champion while still a teenager.<sup>29</sup>*

films, one might consider this another study of incidental memory. The researchers found that scores were highest among respondents in their late teens—and, as we've seen before, that people in their early teens were near the peak of performance. Performance declined gradually from the early twenties onward.<sup>31</sup> (See Figure 7.4.)

In addition, a 1995 study by Linda S. Siegel of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education found that “working memory”—the kind of memory you're exercising while you're actively repeating some new information—follows nearly this same pattern, with the decline starting even earlier: by age fifteen or sixteen.<sup>32</sup> Siegel did not find a decline in yet another kind of memory—so-called “short-term” memory. (See Figure 7.4.) In short-term memory, a small amount of information is retained for a few seconds, even though we're not actively rehearsing that information. Short-term memory performance was poor for young children, reached a peak by about age thirteen, and then seemed to level out, at least until people were in their forties (the oldest subjects she tested).

Then what about all those forgetful teens? The various conjectures I made about their absent intelligence are applicable here, too. We might fail to detect the

exceptional memories of teens because teens are infantilized, because we make them our adversaries, because they're unwilling to perform optimally when they're around us, because they're trying to emulate dysfunctional role models, because they're isolated from adults, because they lack meaningful challenges, or because some may be abusing drugs or alcohol (another outcome, I believe, of infantilization and isolation). But the *potential* is clearly there. If you're past thirty or forty and you play the "memory" card game with a teen—the one where you turn over one card at a time and have to locate pairs—you're likely to be slaughtered. I tried this. Once.

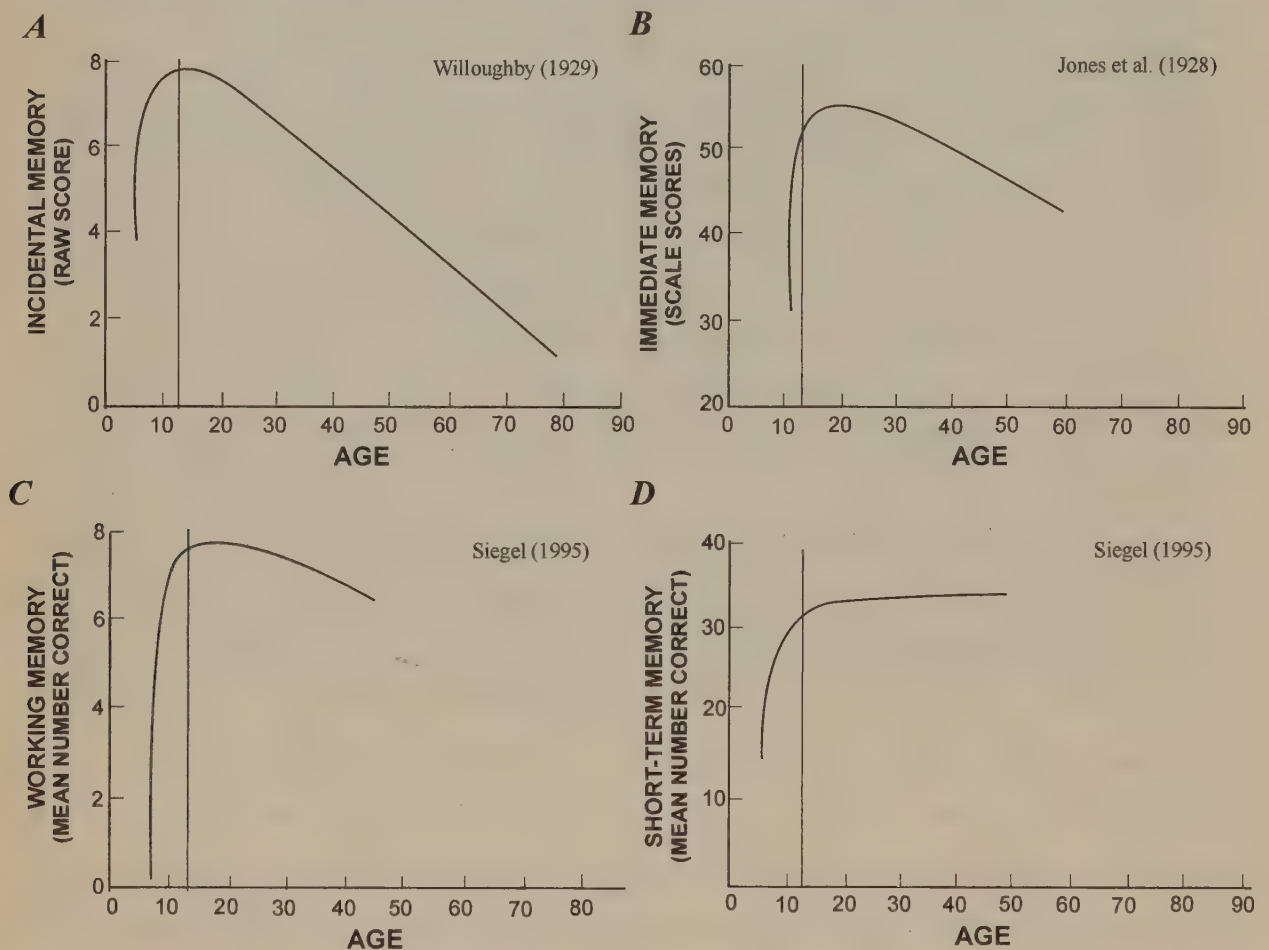


Figure 7.4. Memory by Age. At or shortly after puberty, our memory is just about as good as it will ever be. Teens seem especially good at remembering things “incidentally” (A) and also at holding information in active, working memory (C). Most memory functions begin a long, slow decline soon after puberty. The exception appears to be short-term memory—the ability to hold a small amount of information in memory for a few seconds—which appears to continue to function well until at least our forties (D).

### TEEN JUDGMENT: AN OXYMORON?

Whenever I’ve told adult friends and colleagues about the extraordinary intellectual potential of teens, they have invariably responded, “That may be, but teens lack *judgment*.” And what is intellect, after all, without “judgment”?

But what is judgment, and why are we so sure teens lack it? When we say

someone lacks good judgment, we usually mean that he or she makes decisions that are irrational (defying some rules that we think are logical), destructive (harmful to others), or self-destructive (harmful to himself or herself).

### **Impulsivity and Rational Choice**

According to Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein, we act “rationally” when we choose larger, more delayed rewards over smaller, more immediate ones. We act irrationally—that is, we show poor judgment—when we choose smaller, more immediate rewards over larger, more delayed ones.<sup>33</sup> This perspective is sometimes summarized as: “Larger/later is better than smaller/sooner.”

This means that if someone offers you a choice between \$10 today and \$15 tomorrow, you’d be foolish to choose the smaller amount. Herrnstein looked at virtually all behavior this way. If you push away a second helping of chocolate cake, you’re making a rational choice: You’re choosing future good health over immediate pleasure. If you’re a teenager and you engage in safe sex or say no to drugs, you’re also being rational, in Herrnstein’s view.

This approach to analyzing human behavior is problematic in some respects, but you can’t fault it for being irrational. The approach is easy to quantify, and it’s easy to show in laboratory experiments that people and some animals behave (in certain situations and in varying degrees) in accordance with various formal “laws” that fit the rational-choice perspective. What’s more, people who study how choices are made find that children are more likely than adults to make the wrong choices—that is, to choose smaller-sooner rewards over larger-later rewards. Children are, in other words, “impulsive.” Several early studies by Walter Mischel of Stanford University show that impulsivity declines during childhood, and a small study by Leonard Green and his colleagues at Washington University in 1994 found that the choices made by sixth graders (age twelve) were more impulsive than those of college students (around age twenty), which were in turn slightly more impulsive than those of older subjects (average age sixty-eight).<sup>34</sup>

The problem with rational-choice theory is that under the right circumstances almost any choice can be considered rational—even overeating (in an eating contest), killing someone (in war), and killing oneself (when one is suffering and terminally ill).<sup>35</sup> Given the peculiar rules and norms of teen culture, this gives teens a lot of leeway.

### **Comparing the Decisions of Young People and Adults**

Another way researchers sometimes evaluate people’s judgments is to compare those judgments to those of more mature or experienced individuals. This method has its limitations, too, because mature or experienced individuals are

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Let's Reminisce

*If you're at least a few decades old, here's some food for thought—about your memory. Researcher Daniel Offer and his colleagues at the Northwestern University Medical School recently asked sixty-seven normal, healthy, forty-eight-year-old men a series of questions that these same individuals had previously answered in writing when they were fourteen—questions about their home environment, dating, general activities, and family relationships. The result? They had almost no real recollection of their youth; their answers matched their original answers no more frequently than one would expect if they were responding to the questions at random.<sup>36</sup>*

sometimes so set in their ways that they can't properly evaluate new or unique conditions or new approaches to solving problems. That said, let's look at a simple problem that we might give to children or adults in a study of "judgment":

*Tom, a young student, has been refusing to talk to family members or to come out of his room for several weeks. He appears to be severely depressed. Professionals have presented the family with three options for helping Tom: (a) Wait it out. See if the depression lifts on its own. (b) Bring Tom to a therapist's office for regular visits. (c) Admit him to a mental hospital where he will remain until his condition improves. What's the best way to help Tom, and why?*

This problem is adapted from one used in a comprehensive study of decision making by Lois Weithorn and Susan Campbell in 1982.<sup>37</sup> Weithorn and Campbell presented treatment problems of this sort to four groups of young people, ages nine, fourteen, eighteen, and twenty-one. How, if at all, would the groups differ in the treatment recommendations they made on various problems? Given the structure of our laws, one might guess that the nine and fourteen olds would perform similarly—that is, like children—that the eighteen-year-olds, as budding adults, would perform more like adults, and that the twenty-one-year-olds would come closest to approximating the recommendations made by experts—in this case, physicians. But that's not what the researchers found.

Generally speaking, Weithorn and Campbell found that the fourteen, eighteen, and twenty-one-year-olds *all made recommendations similar to those of the experts*. Only the nine-year-olds made inferior recommendations—and even they performed reasonably well on some tasks and "appear able to participate meaningfully in

personal health-care decision making.”<sup>38</sup> On the depression problem, 75 percent of the people in each of the three oldest groups chose the preferred treatment—outpatient psychotherapy; only 50 percent of the nine-old-olds chose that option. In addition, a scale used to evaluate the “reasonableness” of the subjects’ replies yielded virtually identical scores for each of the three oldest groups—4.13, 4.18, and 4.17, respectively. Again, the nine-year-olds scored lower: 3.24. Teen judgments on other problems yielded generally similar results. The researchers concluded:

*In general, minors aged fourteen were found to demonstrate a level of competence equivalent to that of adults.... The findings of this research do not lend support to policies which deny adolescents the right of self-determination in treatment situations on the basis of a presumption of incapacity to provide informed consent. The ages of eighteen or twenty-one as the “cutoffs” below which individuals are presumed to be incompetent to make determinations about their own welfare do not reflect the psychological capacities of most adolescents.*<sup>39</sup>

In other words, as we shift our investigation from reasoning to intelligence to memory to the gold nugget itself—judgment—we are again surprised: teens appear to be as competent as adults. The Weithorn and Campbell study is one of many that demonstrate this. In a comprehensive review of such studies in 1983 in the prestigious *American Psychologist*, Gary B. Melton concluded, “The existing literature clearly suggests that for most purposes, adolescents cannot be distinguished from adults on the grounds of competence of decision making alone.”<sup>40</sup> Melton’s conclusion is consistent with the findings of the study that Diane Dumas and I conducted on a broad range of competencies (see Chapter Six).

### **Then Why Are Teens So Reckless?**

One especially interesting study challenges the widely held belief that teens believe they’re indestructible. Conducted in the United States by Israeli researcher Ruth Beyth-Marom and her colleagues at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, the study compared the way adults and teens viewed six different risky behaviors: drinking and driving, smoking marijuana, skipping school, taking dad’s car, having sex, and attending a beer party. The 199 teens in the study were fairly young—14.8 years old, on average, and all of the 199 adults in the study were parents—42.5 years old, on average. Yet when asked to list the possible negative consequences of the risky behaviors, teens and adults produced remarkably similar lists.<sup>41</sup> Teens, it seems, know very well about the risks they’re taking. Then why on earth do they take them?

The key here is to keep in mind those circumstances I talked about earlier. If

you're fifty, it's unlikely that driving fast or smoking marijuana will impress your friends; in other words, reckless behavior probably won't be of much "value" to you. But when you're fifteen—stranded, against your will, in a vacuous teen culture—reckless behavior might have great value, and the benefits received by impressing your friends might easily outweigh some possible negative consequences of the behavior. I might get a thrill from trying Ecstasy, but no one in my immediate world is modeling the behavior, and most of my peers would be appalled if I engaged in it.

To evaluate the goodness of teen decision making, we need to take into account the pros and cons that *they* see in making their decisions, not the pros and cons that *we* see. When we take individual teen values into account, it's clearer than ever that teens are competent decision makers. For example, a study by Allen F. Abrahamse and others published in 1988 suggested that teens who felt they might gain by becoming pregnant (perhaps by becoming independent of the teen's parents) were more likely to consider becoming pregnant than teens who felt that pregnancy would harm them (perhaps by limiting their educational opportunities).<sup>42</sup> As I noted earlier, the reasonableness of a decision is determined by many life factors—not just by general principles proclaimed by adult authority figures.

### Evaluating Teen Decision Making

The scientific literature on teen decision making isn't entirely clear, and I'd be remiss in not pointing out some of the complexities. We know, for example, that teens are risk prone in some respects, but laboratory studies of teen decision making sometimes show that teens are every bit as risk *averse* as adults are, leading researchers Lita Furby and Ruth Beyth-Marom to conclude in a 1992 essay that "there is as yet little evidence that adolescents are more likely than adults to engage in behavior that seems risky to them; that is, there is little evidence that they seek out or are willing to accept greater risks."<sup>43</sup> The fact that teens perform so well in the laboratory studies supports the view that their *potential* for excellent performance is high—and, unfortunately, that the real world that we've created for them does not allow or encourage that potential to be expressed.

Some experts, such as James Byrnes of the University of Maryland, also suggest that teen decision making may be inferior to adult decision making when a great deal of specific knowledge is required to make the decision—hardly surprising—or when making a good decision depends on one's willingness to consult authorities or experts (who, needless to say, are usually adults).<sup>44</sup>

But even the most skeptical researchers note that *age* isn't always a good predictor of decision-making competence. A recent study by Elizabeth Cauffman and Laurence Steinberg, for example, suggests that teen judgment may be inferior

to adult judgment in some instances, but the authors also acknowledge that there were “considerable individual differences” among the teens and adults they tested—in other words, that some teens are excellent decision makers and some adults are poor decision makers.<sup>45</sup> More important for our purposes, Cauffman and Steinberg found that the best predictor of decision-making competence was “psychosocial maturity” (measured by various inventories they administered to their subjects), *not* age. As they put it, “psychosocially mature thirteen-year-olds demonstrate less antisocial decision-making than psychosocially immature adults.”<sup>46</sup>

### Are Teens *Supposed* to Take Risks?

Teen decision making looks especially good when we consider two other points. First, immediately after puberty, it’s possible that we’re *supposed* to take risks. Mating itself is a form of risk taking. You have to take many risks in order to find and keep a mate.

Taking risks during the teen years might also be a way of becoming more adult; after all, most of the risks that teens take involve adult behaviors: having sex, drinking, driving, and so on. For teens, taking risks might be an exercise of *good judgment*, not bad. As psychologist Frank Farley said years ago, advising teens to “just say no” might be “like telling Christopher Columbus to stay home.”<sup>47</sup>

Second, we need to bear in mind that the American teens we’ve been observing and studying in recent decades are products of teen culture. They’re isolated from adults and from adult challenges and responsibilities. Presumably, their decision-making abilities would be far better—and far more adultlike—if they had not been infantilized or if they had not been isolated from adults.

Teens are highly capable decision makers—perhaps, on average, more capable than adults. With high intelligence, peak reasoning powers, and excellent memories, they certainly have the advantage. But they often make decisions that seem inferior to adults—decisions that seem irrational or that might expose themselves or others to harm—for a number of reasons: they’re isolated from and infantilized by adults; they sometimes lack the specific knowledge they need to make good decisions; they might have some innate tendencies to take risks; and they’re immersed in a vacuous subculture that has rules and values that are often unfathomable to adults. As I keep emphasizing, this is a book about human potential. If we focus on *actual* teen decisions—especially without taking teen values into account—we’ll likely be disappointed at times, but if we look at the *potential* teens have to make good decisions, I believe we’ll be amazed.

## THE ABORTION DECISION

Becky Bell was seventeen when she got pregnant, just a few months shy of the state-proclaimed age of adulthood. In Indiana at that time (1988), she needed the consent of at least one of her parents to get a legal abortion; she could also have gone to court to ask a judge to exempt her from this requirement. But she couldn't face the shame of approaching her parents, even though, by all accounts, she had a warm relationship with them, and she was afraid a judge wouldn't help her. Through friends she learned about a place where she could go for an illegal abortion. After the procedure she developed an infection, and shortly after she died.<sup>48</sup>

Her parents, Bill and Karen—staunch Republican conservatives—soon became ardent opponents of parental notification laws, sharing their views in lectures at schools around the country. Said Bill, “It is our hope that in speaking out we can spare other families the nightmare we must now live. These laws are punitive, they're restrictive—they're deadly.”<sup>49</sup>

Given that teens are capable of making sound decisions, especially when it comes to medical matters, shouldn't minors be allowed to get abortions without the consent of their parents—and perhaps even without the consent of a court? As you'll see, even though the relevant scientific data are clear, this is not an easy question to answer. Scientific data and societal values are fairly orthogonal to each other, although data can sometimes alter such values.

### Research on the Abortion Decision

I hope I've already convinced you that many teens are capable of making excellent decisions, at least in principle. Studies on decision making about abortion further support this view.

Catherine Lewis of the University of California San Francisco has researched this matter extensively. In a review article, “Minors' Competence to Consent to Abortion,” published in the *American Psychologist* in 1987, Lewis concludes: “psychological research presently provides no basis to restrict minors' decision making on the ground of competence alone.”<sup>50</sup> Another review, published in the early 1990s, concludes that “the psychological assumption that female adolescents under the age of eighteen are not competent to independently consent to abortion...has questionable scientific validity.”<sup>51</sup>

Another extensive review, published in 2003 by Nancy E. Adler, Emily J. Ozer, and Jeanne Tschann, draws even stronger conclusions. First of all, the au-

thors conclude that “adolescent abortion patients may represent a subgroup that is more competent than pregnant adolescents who are not considering abortion.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, teens who think about abortion are, as a group, fairly serious thinkers; on the average, they don’t take the abortion issue any more lightly than adults do. Second, Adler and her colleagues summarize a number of studies showing negative effects of parental notification laws. Faced with such laws, teens like Becky Bell seek illegal and sometimes dangerous abortions; angry parents sometimes injure or otherwise abuse pregnant daughters; some teens end up expelled from their homes. Although the intentions behind such laws might be good, the effects are often bad.

### How the Courts Ignore the Research

This brings me to our unfathomable, unpredictable, and often irrational courts. In the mid and late 1970s Massachusetts judges and lawmakers made headlines because of their controversial views on a teenager’s right to seek an abortion. On August 2, 1974, the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law—over the Governor’s veto—requiring an unmarried woman under age eighteen to obtain the consent of *both* of her parents before getting an abortion. The law was challenged in court, and the matter made its way swiftly to the United States Supreme Court.

Acknowledging that delaying the abortion decision was necessarily problematic and that some minors are capable of making “mature” decisions, on July 2, 1979, in the landmark case of *Bellotti v. Baird II*, the Supreme Court invalidated the Massachusetts law and affirmed a minor’s right to seek a court’s permission to have an abortion “without parental consultation or consent.” The court acknowledged (in a footnote to the majority decision) that although maturity is “difficult to define, let alone determine,” age is an “inevitably arbitrary” criterion for determining maturity, and “the abortion decision requires...case-by-case evaluations.”<sup>53</sup>

Unfortunately, there is more to this story, most of it negative. After all, Becky Bell was still subject to parental notification laws nine years after the *Bellotti v. Baird* decision. Just what did the justices do?

Central to their decision was the following assertion, written by Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr.:

*...during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, minors often lack the experience, perspective, and judgment to recognize and avoid choices that could be detrimental to them.*<sup>54</sup>

Given the overall decision, and given the acknowledgment in the footnote that age eighteen is an arbitrary boundary for determining maturity, one would assume that our most venerable panel of judges would have based their decision on relevant research in the behavioral and social sciences. But I've scoured the Supreme Court's decision in this matter; it's completely devoid of any reference to relevant research. In fact, when you read the decision, it's apparent that the judges were basing their assertions about teen competence on folklore and intuition, rather than on scientific data.

### Soper on the Courts

A forceful essay on this topic published by law student Jennifer Soper in 1999 documents just how insensitive our courts are to scientific data on the abortion decision matter.<sup>55</sup> Soper also explains why the Becky Bells of this country face the dilemma they do. The bottom line for Soper is that "while the United States claims to base laws on the concept of capacity, it actually affords rights and responsibilities ignoring the competency of individuals."<sup>56</sup>

In a way, this is all too obvious: In our zeal to be race-, gender-, and age-blind, we often make the erroneous assumption that everyone is equally capable, or, worse yet, we draw arbitrary lines (like age eighteen, or twenty-one, or sixty-five) that group people together who shouldn't be grouped. Age boundaries are particularly insidious, because they imply that all people on one side of the boundary are equally incompetent, which is just as absurd as asserting that all people on the other side of the boundary are equally competent.

Soper also notes dramatic inconsistencies when it comes to the statutory rights of teens. For example:

*...many states declare minors presumptively incompetent to decide their own medical care. Yet, these states allow them to make major medical decisions for their own children. Thus a fourteen year old in Mississippi can authorize circumcision on her newborn son, unilaterally making the decision about whether to use or withhold anesthesia...; yet, she cannot go the dentist and have a cavity filled without written parental consent.... A fourteen-year-old mother bears adult responsibility for her child and can be held criminally negligent for any harm to the child. At the same time, she may not drive a car, hold a full-time job, or rent an apartment, and in most states faces compulsory education laws.... The fourteen-year-old who faces a presumption of incompetency but bears the burden of presumed parental capacity cannot, in most states, decide whether she wants to assume the burdens of motherhood to begin with.<sup>57</sup>*

The ironies here are blatant. Teens are not considered (by the courts, anyway) competent enough to make the abortion decision on their own, but they *are* considered competent enough to be responsible parents. Even though a young mother is fully responsible for raising her child, she's *not* allowed to drive the child to the hospital in an emergency, nor to get a full-time job to support the child. And even though she can make medical decisions for her child, she's *not* allowed to make many of those same decisions when it comes to her own medical care.

### The Continuing Court Saga

So what happened to the *Bellotti v. Baird II* decision? Didn't that allow teens to bypass their parents in seeking an abortion? No, not exactly. Although it did invalidate the 1974 Massachusetts law, it still required teens to get a court's permission for the abortion—a task that would be daunting for someone of any age. The court also expressed concerns about the “autonomy” of the parent and the importance of the family unit.

Subsequent Supreme Court decisions rendered in reaction to various parental-notification laws have placed considerable restrictions on the teen's right to consent to an abortion—and none of these decisions, as far as I have been able to determine, has been grounded in relevant scientific research about teen competence. In two 1990 decisions, for example, the Court decided that laws like the one guiding Becky Bell's tragic actions were valid: as long as a teen had the option of going to court to bypass her parents, the state could require that consent from one or both parents is required for a minor's abortion. One ruling even okayed a law requiring physicians to notify a parent in cases when a court has okayed an abortion.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the Supreme Court has put the “autonomy” and “liberty interests” of the parent ahead of the rights of the minor,<sup>59</sup> and that's the way things stand today.

On the capacity issue itself, Soper argues that although courts talk about competence, “legal questions of capacity are flawed, sporadically applied, and based on ill-defined standards.”<sup>60</sup> When questions of maturity or competence are raised, judges around the country act with considerable arbitrariness, in some cases testing a teen's vocabulary, in others focusing on how the teen is dressed. “The court's lack of uniformity,” says Soper, “exemplifies the problem with the entire capacity question.”<sup>61</sup>

But competence can indeed be measured, and I have no doubt that many teens would score substantially higher on various competency tests than would the senescent members of our Supreme Court.

## IS THERE REALLY A TEEN BRAIN?

Here's a headline from a recent *Newsday*:

*Biological reason for teen laziness:  
Brain region that governs "drive" apparently  
comes into its own in the early 20s*

*Newsday* staff writer Jamie Talan opens the piece with the following "hook":

*If you're a teenager, don't read this. Federal scientists have discovered a biological excuse for laziness.*<sup>62</sup>

As a magazine editor my reaction is, "Nice, Jamie. A good grab." As a scientist my take is, "I'm tired of the way you keep misreporting science, Jamie. *You're fired.*"

But Jamie isn't the only one misled by the research he's reporting. Even the researchers seem confused about the implications of their study. Talan quotes James Bjork of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), the lead author in the study, as saying that the study "tells us that teenagers love stuff, but aren't as willing to get off the couch to get it as adults are." Adds Bjork, "The good news is that the brain does mature."<sup>63</sup>

In other words, both the reporter and the researcher are saying that this new research—which I'll summarize shortly—shows that teens are lazy *because* their brains haven't properly matured.

But that's not what the research shows. Not at all. What's going on here, and how could a "federal scientist" make the same mistake that a reporter makes?

Before I address this issue, keep in mind that the media often tells us about studies just like this one—studies that seem to demonstrate the existence of a "teen brain" and that appear to show that teens have problems *because* they have immature brains. What actually happened in the Bjork study (co-authored by five other researchers variously affiliated with Stanford University, The Catholic University of America, and the NIAAA), and what do the results actually mean?

### Dissecting a Brain Study

First, the basic procedure: twelve young people (six male, six female, ages twelve-seventeen) and twelve somewhat older people (six male, six female, ages twenty to twenty-eight) were restrained in a brain-scanning device (a "3 T Gen-

eral Electric MRI scanner”) for about forty-five minutes while performing a simple task that allowed them to earn some money: A symbol appeared briefly (.25 seconds) on a small mirror in front of their eyes indicating what the consequences would be of pressing a handheld button after a short “anticipation” period (about two seconds). Some symbols indicated that a button-press would earn some money; some indicated that failing to press a button would cost some money. At the end of the anticipation period, the subject was given a very short time (about .25 seconds) in which to respond or not respond. Finally, information was displayed briefly (1.6 seconds) to let the subject know whether or not he or she had just won or lost money.<sup>64</sup>

Based on other research, the areas of the brain that were being scanned were believed to be indicative of the subject’s “motivation” to perform. The basic questions being asked by the researchers were: Would teens and adults perform differently on this task? And would the *brains* of teens and adults function differently on this task?

The answers, in a nutshell, were: No, teens and adults performed equally well, and yes, brain activity in the two groups did differ, at least during the anticipation period, at least on trials when subjects could earn money (but not, for some reason, on trials when they could lose money). Specifically, in a small area of the brain called the right nucleus accumbens, when there was a certain amount of money to be earned (\$5, the maximum amount that could be earned on any given trial), the average activity level of the adult brains was higher than the average activity level of the teen brains during the (roughly) two-second anticipation period before the subjects could respond. With other amounts of money at stake, neural activity in the two groups did not differ. That’s what the researchers found.

So how do we get from this extremely modest, entirely innocuous result to Mr. Talan’s assertion that teen laziness is caused by an underdeveloped brain?

There are so many problems with this study—and especially with the way the results were interpreted—that I hardly know where to begin.<sup>65</sup> But how about this: *nowhere in the study is any evidence presented that the teens in the study were lazy, or at least that they were more lazy than the “adults”* (who weren’t even much older than the teens). There is also no information given about how the teens and adults were recruited for the study. For all we know, the teens could have been star athletes, and the adults could have been couch potatoes. Given these omissions alone, I can find no possible defense of Talan’s interpretation of this study—which, alas, was echoed to some extent by Dr. Bjork.

If you want to say something about the brains of lazy teens, you need to start with teens you know to be lazy. It might be interesting, then, to compare the brain

activity in such teens to the brain activity in teens you know to be industrious—and then, perhaps, to compare the brain activity of those two groups to groups of lazy and industrious adults. Such a study could have a number of possible outcomes. In one, the brain of the lazy teen might somehow look different than the brains of the people in the other three groups. That might allow you to say with confidence that lazy teens have brains that are unique in some way—the claim that Talan seemed to be making.

But so what? If you conducted such a study and got such a result, you would still have no legitimate basis for claiming that teen laziness is *caused* by the teen brain. As we teach in elementary statistics courses, *correlation does not imply causation*. The fact that a lazy teen’s brain might have some unique functional or structural characteristics doesn’t mean that the teen’s behavior is *caused* by those characteristics. When we find that factors A and B are associated with each other (“correlated”), we still know nothing about their *causal* relationship. A might cause B, or B might cause A, or both A and B might be caused by a third factor, C. Height and weight are highly correlated, but neither causes the other; their correlation is the result of other factors, such as genes that control overall size and bone structure. Similarly, just because we see a match between certain brain characteristics and certain behaviors, that doesn’t mean the brain has *caused* those behaviors. Other factors, both genetic and environmental, may cause both the brain characteristics *and* the behavior that we see.

In some cases, a brain characteristic might be said to be responsible for a behavioral characteristic—for example, damage to “Broca’s area” is associated with various speech problems. But it’s also the case that a wide variety of behaviors—meditating, reading, drinking, having sex, and so on—literally *change the brain*. It’s fundamentally wrong to say that all behavior is “caused by the brain,” and it’s fundamentally wrong to blame all teen behavior on a “teen brain.”

Let me take this radical (but simple!) idea a step further. Without even conducting the study I suggested above, I can guarantee you that with enough digging we’d find that the brains of lazy teens are unique in some way. Of course they are! All unique behavioral characteristics *must* have corresponding brain characteristics. This is a truism. But it doesn’t tell us *anything* about the “causes” of laziness.

### **A Brain Scientist Weighs In**

These issues are explored in detail in a profoundly important but under-celebrated book by retired neuroscientist Elliott Valenstein called *Blaming the Brain*, published in 1998. Writes Valenstein:

*A person's mental state and experience can modify the brain just as surely as the other way around. When there is a correlation between two events, we should not assume that we always know which way causation flows....*<sup>66</sup>

*Various experiences can... cause structural and functional changes in the brain. It has been shown in numerous experiments, for example, that exposure to stressful situations can produce long-lasting brain changes. Animals that are stressed repeatedly have an elevated response to an injection of amphetamine, even when the drug is administered months later.... Even when dopamine neurons are removed from the brains of stressed animals and placed in a dish, amphetamine will cause excessive amounts of dopamine to be released. These results indicate that stress can produce enduring physical changes in dopamine neurons that make them hypersensitive not only to drugs such as amphetamine, but also to subsequent exposure to stress....*<sup>67</sup>

*There is now a huge amount of experimental evidence demonstrating that different types of experience can modify brain anatomy in the adult animal as well as in young animals. Early studies demonstrated that neurons in the brains of rats raised in enriched environments are significantly more branched and presumably more capable of making connections than are comparable neurons of rats raised in impoverished environments. Subsequent studies have shown that various kinds of experiences, such as repeated training on a specific task, can also modify the structure of neurons in the brain areas involved in those activities. Plasticity must be a basic property of neurons, as it is essential for learning and memory even in invertebrates.... Genes are responsible for establishing the scaffolding or fundamental organization of the brain, but a large amount of the neuronal growth that leads to the establishment of connections has been shown to be influenced (if not guided) by experience.*

*Evidence that experience can modify brain structure has also been reported in humans. It has been reported, for example, that the amount of branching of neuronal dendrites in the language area (Wernicke's area) of human brains is, on average, proportional to the amount of education. Thus, it was found that people who had a university education tend to have more branching in the language area than do people with only a high school education, and they in turn tend to have more branching than do people who did not go to high school....*

*"Anatomy is not destiny," and, moreover, genes are not even the sole determinant of anatomy. The expression of genes can be turned on and off by physiological concomitants of life experiences.*<sup>68</sup>

I can't stress enough the importance of Valenstein's message: from a scientific perspective, it is wrong—utterly and completely wrong—to say that the brain “causes” behavior (or thinking or feelings) based simply on a correlation between a brain state and that behavior.

## So Is there a Teen Brain?

What does this mean for the so-called “teen brain”? First of all, it means that the teen brain does exist, but only in the trivial sense that unique behavioral characteristics that some teens might have—anger, impulsivity, depression, and so on—must be encoded in their brains. The brains of angry people (of any age) are necessarily different than the brains of calm people, but it’s the genes and experiences of angry people that made them angry and gave them angry brains; their brains aren’t the cause of their anger.

Second, studies like the one Bjork and his colleagues conducted provide no evidence whatsoever that the brain is *causing* any of the unique behavioral, emotional, or cognitive characteristics we sometimes see in teens. The Bjork study showed (on just one task out of several that were presented) a lower level of activity in teens brains than in the brains of people in their twenties. It didn’t show that the lower level of activity caused any of the teens’ behaviors, and it certainly didn’t show that *any* property of the teen brain causes “laziness.”

Third, as we’ve seen, modern American-style adolescence is a cultural creation, which suggests that both the behaviors we see *and* the corresponding neural phenomena are caused by the way we treat our teens. The brain is not the culprit here; society is.

*If adolescence barely existed through most of human history and is still absent in many cultures, how could modern adolescence be the inevitable product of a genetically pre-programmed “teen brain”?*

When we raise young people so that they transition smoothly and swiftly from childhood to adulthood, the turmoil that typifies modern adolescence is absent—and so, presumably, are the neural correlates of such turmoil. But when we raise teens to be angry, withdrawn, or rebellious, their brains must reflect those states of mind. In other words, the teen brain is, by necessity, every bit as much of a cultural creation as adolescence itself.

## Persistent and Faulty Headlines

The headlines, meanwhile, keep getting it wrong, and they will undoubtedly continue to do so for many years to come. Consider:

- “*Brain study finds out why emotions rule*” (*San Diego Union-Tribune*): “That adolescent mood soars and dips as wildly as a roller coaster is hardly a news flash. A peek into the adolescent brain may explain why.”<sup>69</sup> Teens, we’re told, are emotional because they process information

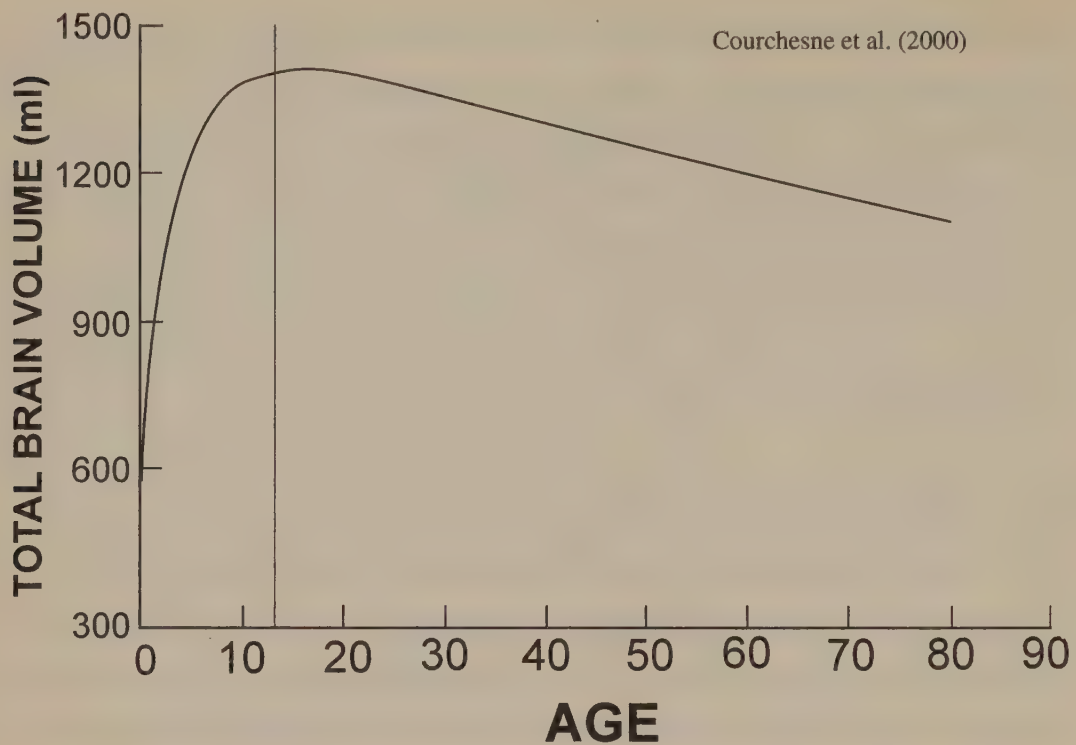
more in the amygdala than in the frontal lobe, and, once again, a researcher—Deborah Yurgelen-Todd of Boston’s McLean Hospital Brain Imaging Center—is quoted to bolster this view. But neither Yurgelen-Todd’s research nor the research of anyone else I’m aware of provides the scientific evidence needed to support the claims made in the article. Again, correlational research is simply misinterpreted.

- “*Gray matter, not raging hormones, rules adolescence*” (*Worcester Sunday Telegram*): “Parents and experts have always blamed the same hormones that catapult young bodies into adulthood for the sleeping until noon, the reckless driving, the drug use and the other woes of adolescence. But recent research shows that what’s going on above teenagers’ necks—not raging hormones—explains the changes.”<sup>70</sup> The teen brain is still growing and expanding, we’re told, and neuroscientist Fulton Crews of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is quoted as a source. But is brain growth the *cause* or the *effect* of teen behavior? Or are teen behavior and brain changes *both* just the effects of other causes?
- “*Inside the teen brain*” (cover story in *U.S. News & World Report*): “The true source of teenage behavior lies north of the gonads. It’s that three-pound blob of gray and white matter known as the brain.... With the advent of technologies such as magnetic resonance imaging, neuroscientists have discovered that the adolescent brain is far from mature.”<sup>71</sup> McMaster University neuroscientist Sandra Wetelson and others are quoted as sources. Again, none of the research cited provides appropriate scientific evidence to support the extreme claims that are made.

### Why Are We Being Misled?

Why are we being systematically misled about causes of teen behavior? Valenstein blames the pharmaceutical companies. They want us to believe, he says, that all of our emotional and cognitive difficulties are caused by our defective brains so that we’ll buy psychotropic drugs to solve our problems. Is Valenstein right? Having served on occasion as a consultant to major drug companies, I’d love to be able to tell you that he’s wrong—but I would be lying. The drug companies spend billions of dollars a year to convince physicians, policy makers, and the general public to believe the myths and buy or dispense the products, and the average television watcher probably views more than a hundred drug commercials a week these days; there is no question that the drug houses are aggressive in promoting their wares.

That said, I’m even more concerned about—and embarrassed by—my fellow



**Figure 7.5. Brain Volume by Age.** Early twentieth-century studies of brain size looked at the brains of corpses, which were subject to swelling or shrinkage. The reliability of such studies was poor. But a new study of brain volume measured brain volume by scanning the brains of living subjects, yielding highly accurate and fairly dramatic results. Brain volume peaks at about age fourteen and gradually shrinks thereafter throughout our lives. Old people have brains the size of those of young children. *Source:* Courchesne et al., 2000.

scientists. Some neuroscientists are perpetuating myths about the brain just as unabashedly as the drug companies are, in some cases perhaps to “sex up” their research. I suppose it’s possible that some of them even *believe* that correlational studies show that brain activity causes behavior.

### The Changing Brain

Some of the headlines imply that significant brain development stops with adolescence, but the brain actually changes and matures throughout our lives, again reflecting the many behavioral, cognitive, and emotional changes we undergo from birth to death. Experience, nutrition, drugs, alcohol, physical trauma, disease, and aging itself bring about changes large and small, as a number of life-span studies of the brain demonstrate.

One intriguing study, conducted by Jesús Pujol and his colleagues at the University of Barcelona, looked at changes in the corpus callosum—a massive structure that transfers signals between the brain’s hemispheres—over a two-year period with subjects from eleven to sixty-one years old.<sup>72</sup> This structure appears to grow rapidly in young people (29 percent per year in the youngest subjects in the study) but also continues to grow when we’re older (about 7 percent per year in the subjects in their twenties and about 4 percent per

year in subjects in their forties). And a 2001 study by Elizabeth R. Sowell and her colleagues at UCLA<sup>73</sup> confirmed that there is a loss of gray matter between childhood (a group of children between ages seven and eleven) and the teen years (a group of young people between twelve and sixteen), but it also showed that gray matter continues to disappear well past the teen years (a group of people between twenty-three and thirty).<sup>74</sup>

### **Our Shrinking Brains**

We've seen evidence that intelligence, reasoning ability, and some important aspects of memory all peak between ages thirteen and fifteen and decline thereafter. Do any properties of the brain follow this pattern?

Eric Courchesne and his colleagues at the University of California San Diego found this very same pattern in the brain volumes of subjects from nineteen months old to eighty years old.<sup>75</sup> (See Figure 7.5.) Brain volume appears to peak at about age fourteen, according Courchesne's 2000 study, and people in their seventies "[have] volumes similar to those of young children."

From shortly after puberty onward, the simple and sobering news is that our brains shrink dramatically—by 25 percent or more.<sup>76</sup> The average age of our Supreme Court justices is typically about seventy. According to Courchesne's data, by the time we're that age, our brain has shrunk to the size it was when we were three.

**Q:** *Isn't it true that the brains of teens aren't fully developed? Isn't that why they behave so poorly? Doesn't current brain research refute your theory?*

**A:** No brain is fully developed. Brains change throughout the life span. Teen brains aren't all that different from adult brains, but where there are some differences, those differences don't explain their misbehavior or distress. Brains are *reflections* of our behavioral, cognitive, and emotional states; they don't *cause* those states. If your daughter had been raised from birth in a preindustrial tribal culture, she would probably be much calmer and happier than she is now—and her brain would be very different than it is now; it would reflect the behavior, cognitions, and emotions that she exhibited. So, no, current brain research in no way refutes my theory, and, in my view, we all need to think carefully before blaming the brain for *any* of our difficulties.

## Chapter 8

# Young People Can Love

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*And they called it puppy love  
Oh, I guess they'll never know  
How a young heart really feels  
And why I love her so.*

—Paul Anka, “And They Called It Puppy Love”

**Overview.** *Contrary to popular belief, psychological research suggests that young people are capable of experiencing mature love, and no one has ever shown that the love experienced by young people is any different than the love experienced by adults. Moreover, although it's widely believed that young marriages are doomed to fail, census data show that males who marry in their teens have a lower divorce rate than males who marry in their twenties; in general, the divorce rate of young people isn't much higher than the divorce rate of adults, and many of our nation's most celebrated and long-lasting marriages have involved very young spouses. In other countries people still often marry at very young ages, and Western attempts to change such practices have sometimes produced disastrous results. Laws restricting marriage or sexual relations involving minors are wildly inconsistent from state to state, and in many cases such laws have been applied in ways that have caused great pain to innocent people.*

“If you have trouble, you go talk about it, argue, and get over it.” That was the advice of Mary Onesi when she and her husband of just over eighty years were interviewed by the Associated Press in 1998. They had been honored on World Marriage Day in 1995 as the longest-married couple in America, and, yes, they were still together three years later. She married her husband Paul in 1917 when he was twenty-one and she was thirteen. By all accounts, their marriage was happy and successful, and it was certainly prolific.<sup>1</sup>

Paul Onesi came to the United States from Italy when he was fifteen, arriving through Ellis Island. He worked in the coal mines in Pennsylvania at first. He met Mary when he was renting a room in her older sister's home, and it was the sister who did the matchmaking. The couple moved to Niagara Falls a few years after their marriage, where Paul went to work for Union Carbide. They had six children and saw five of them celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversaries.

Laura Cerrillo, one of Paul and Mary's twenty-eight grandchildren, explained why marriages in this close-knit family were generally quite successful: "In our family, no one ever wanted to get divorced because no one wanted to tell them."

By current thinking, there's something dreadfully wrong with his pretty picture. Thirteen-year-old Mary Corsaro couldn't *possibly* have been ready for marriage. She must have been abused or exploited or perhaps even drugged and raped. Her sister Rose must have been in on it, perhaps serving as a pimp and getting a fee from perverted old Paul. Isn't that the way we're now taught to think? At the very least, the world must have been so different back then that the people in it must have been entirely unlike people are today—members of a different species, in effect. Maybe Mary *was* ready back in 1917, but there are no Mary's in today's world. Today, thirteen-year-olds are children.

### CAN TEENS EXPERIENCE REAL LOVE?

Can teens love, and can they form successful, stable marriages? Is teen love truly just "puppy love," or can it be just as real and deep and enduring as "adult" love? And, most important of all, *are we willing to face the truth about these issues?*

Romeo and Juliet are regarded in much of the Western world as the paradigmatic romantic lovers; we celebrate their love as the purest and most intense two people can achieve. Their deaths, so tragic on the one hand, also created an undying love that has already been cherished for more than four hundred years. Just how old were Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet?

Perhaps this will help: in George Cukor's 1936 film rendition of the play, Romeo was played by forty-three-year-old Leslie Howard and Juliet by thirty-four-year-old Norma Shearer. Ian McKellen was thirty-seven when he played Romeo with the Royal Shakespeare Company in England in 1976. And in a recent ballet version of Shakespeare's masterpiece, Juliet's part was danced by Evelyn Hart, one of Canada's most celebrated ballerinas, now in her late forties. So perhaps Romeo and Juliet were approaching middle age.

On the other hand, Baz Luhrmann's famous 1996 film version of the story

starred twenty-one-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio and seventeen-year-old Claire Danes. That doesn't seem to jive with the earlier characterizations. And Franco Zeffirelli "stunned the screen world" with his 1968 film rendition, which starred seventeen-year-old Leonard Whiting as Romeo and fifteen-year-old Olivia Hussey as Juliet. Who got the ages right?

Zeffirelli was closest to the mark, but still not stunning enough. In Act 1, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's play, Lady Capulet has a frustrating exchange with Juliet's nurse, trying hard to pin down Juliet's exact age, which, it turns out, is thirteen (just a few weeks shy of fourteen). Even more notable are Lady Capulet's remarks to Juliet about age and marriage:

*...younger than you,  
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,  
Are made already mothers: by my count,  
I was your mother much upon these years  
That you are now a maid.*

Ironing out the Shakespearean kinks, Lady Capulet is saying: "Here in Verona, upstanding women are already mothers when they're younger than you," and, by the way, "I had you when I was your age." She then tries to interest Juliet in an attractive suitor named Paris.

Why has no one ever made a film or cast a play in which Romeo and Juliet are played by actors of the correct ages? (Shakespeare is never entirely clear about Romeo's age, but it's unlikely that he was beyond his mid teens.)

The same question can be raised about the movie version of Nabokov's infamous *Lolita*, as well as about *West Side Story*, the 1960s version of *Romeo and Juliet*. In Nabokov's book, *Lolita*, the sexy young siren who is the object of her stepfather's obsession, is twelve years old. In the 1962 movie version, she's played by a sixteen-year-old actress, Sue Lyon; in the 1997 version, she's played by seventeen-year-old Dominique Swain. And *West Side Story*'s Maria was played by twenty-three-year-old Natalie Wood.

The question is all too easy to answer: we're somewhat willing in principle to acknowledge that young people can be sensual, sexual, romantic, seductive, and loving, but we would never put a real thirteen-year-old "girl" or "boy" in bed with someone for entertainment purposes in a mainstream film. In fact, under modern law, producers who made such a film could be prosecuted as child pornographers. Even Louis Malle's controversial 1977 film, *Pretty Baby*, in which twelve-year-old

Brooke Shields starred as a young prostitute, was careful to avoid having Shields do anything remotely sexual.

There's something very absurd—and perhaps even dissociative—going on here. We recognize, and sometimes even celebrate, young love and young sexuality, *but we will not allow it to occur with real young people.*

So on stage and on film, for the time being, anyway, we're stuck with more than our fair share of arthritic Romeos and Juliets. As the distinguished Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen said about his own stint as Romeo, "I remember at thirty-seven trying far too hard to look, run, leap, climb and dance like a teenager."<sup>2</sup> Of course, the real problem here is not our tendency to miscast actors. The real tragedy is our tendency to dismiss all young love as mere "puppy" love.

### **Are Teens Really Just Puppies?**

And we call it puppy love—or "calf" love, in some countries. Literally, it's a love between two pre-pubescent animals. When we dismiss the love between two human teenagers or between a teenager and an adult as illusory—that is, when we compare young people who have mature sexual organs to "puppies"—we are admitting undeniably that we still consider them to be children. We are also demonstrating an extreme form of wishful thinking.

Teens are not puppies. Girls generally begin puberty between the ages of eight and thirteen, with first menstruation (menarche)—an event that indicates the ability to conceive—occurring two or three years later. The median age of menarche for young women is about 12.5. Boys begin puberty between nine and fourteen. A number of experts agree that the onset of puberty has been occurring earlier and earlier in recent decades, perhaps because of improved nutrition and medical care. Let's not panic, though. Although signs of puberty—pubic hairs and breasts—are appearing earlier, the median age at which menarche occurs has stayed fairly steady for decades, and possibly even for many centuries.<sup>3</sup> In any case, by the time most young people reach thirteen or fourteen, they are almost fully mature sexually. Young males are shaving, young females are menstruating, and most young teens are capable of procreating.

Young people are also capable of experiencing romantic love, and no one, to my knowledge, has ever come up with a legitimate way of differentiating the kind of romantic love teens experience from the kind of romantic love adults experience. On the contrary, as I noted in Chapter Six, when Diane Dumas and I looked at love and romance from a competency perspective we found virtually no difference between the competency scores of teens and those of adults (also see Appendix 2).

## Can Teens Really Love?

Dismayed over the lack of attention scholars and scientists have paid to teenage love in recent decades, Wyndol Furman of the University of Denver, B. Bradford Brown of the University of Wisconsin Madison, and Candice Feiring of the University of Medicine and Dentistry New Jersey assembled an impressive team of scholars a few years ago to take a serious look at what modern Romeos and Juliets are really experiencing. The result was a weighty collection of papers called *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*, published by the Cambridge University Press.<sup>4</sup>

Here are some of the conclusions reached by Furman and his colleagues about teen love:

***Romance as Central.*** Teens in much of the Western world are obsessed with romantic love. In the United States, it's the subject of 73 percent of rock music songs, and no other topic comes close in popularity. It's also the most common topic of television series featuring teens. According to one recent study, romance is also by far the most common topic on teens' minds—ahead of family, peers, and school.

***Major Theories Are Ignored.*** A number of major theories of psychological development—most notably the neo-Freudian theories of Erik Erikson and Harry Stack Sullivan—emphasize the important role that romantic love plays in teen behavior and development. Sullivan argued, for example, that a teen's interest in romantic love is the inevitable outcome of his or her struggle to reconcile changing intimacy needs with lustful feelings—in other words, that friendship and emotional intimacy are the teen's primary needs. But researchers have largely ignored such theories, according to Furman and his colleagues, possibly because “teenagers' romantic ventures do not fit well within the basic constructs or foci of dominant theories of social or interpersonal development.”<sup>5</sup>

***Dismissed as Frivolous.*** Even though during much of human history teens often entered into successful marriages, researchers have fallen victim to the same shoddy idea that dominates most of Western thinking today—namely, that teen love is just puppy love. Until very recently researchers have simply dismissed it. According to the authors, “this perspective seems shortsighted.”<sup>6</sup>

***The Possible Primacy of Love Over Sex.*** There is a “vast” literature on teen sexuality, but researchers virtually never consider “the idea that romantic liaisons or relationships are primary contexts for adolescent sexual activity.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, our biased perspective leads us to believe—and leads even serious researchers to believe—that sex comes first for teens, and romance second. But it's possible and in fact

likely, say Furman and others (consistent with Sullivan's perspective), that intimacy needs are actually the primary ones for most teens—that love leads to sex and not vice versa. After all, only about half of United States teens actually experience intercourse itself. If teens were simply lustful animals overcome with lust, the proportion would be much higher. There's more going on in teens than animal lust.<sup>8</sup>

*High Turnover.* Nowhere in the Furman volume does teen love ever get dismissed as illusory or frivolous. In fact, the romantic relationships of teens seem to differ from those of adults mainly in one respect. Teens move in and out of relationships extremely fast. But is this a sign of immaturity or just another manifestation of the artificial extension of childhood? After all, we make it difficult or impossible for young people to marry, so it's unrealistic for them to think of entering into long-term relationships. We isolate them from potentially more mature, more settled partners; it's unlawful, after all, for a minor to have sex with an adult, although minors can generally have sex with each other with impunity. And we loudly dismiss their feelings as half-baked, so teens themselves probably have doubts about the validity of what they're experiencing. To top things off, we also corral large groups of young people, often against their will, into crowded pens nine or ten months a year. It should surprise no one that teens shift partners frequently.

But the issue we need to keep addressing is *potential*. Just because teens in the United States, subjected to bizarre restrictions and absurd messages, isolated from adults, and warehoused under unnatural conditions, usually don't form lasting relationships, does that mean they *can't*? What if teens were raised to believe that the love they feel is valid and real? What if they were allowed, and perhaps even encouraged, to marry or to form long-term relationships? What if they were allowed to develop romantic relationships with older, more mature partners who could help accelerate their emotional development? What if their lives were more family or work based, rather than school based? Is it at least *possible* that teens would form relationships as healthy and successful as the relationships formed by adults?

## OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES

If you consult your television or newspaper for answers to these questions, you'll probably find wrong ones. But if, as I noted in the early chapters of this book, you look at our evolutionary history, at our own not-so-distant past, and at other cultures, clear and correct answers emerge. There is simply no question that many or most teens are capable of feeling and expressing romantic love, and many are also capable of entering into successful long-term relationships.

## Teen Marriage in the Distant Past

Earlier in this book I looked at the very different way that society viewed young people before the Industrial Revolution. I focused on labor, education, and justice issues, but romance and love follow similar patterns. From Biblical times (see Chapter Twelve) until the Industrial Revolution, it was common for young people, especially young women, to marry. In ancient Egypt and Rome, for example, historians believe that it was common for brides to have been as young as twelve, and some brides were as young as eight or nine. Because the burden of supporting a family fell on the male, young men had to be working before they could marry, and hence they were typically fifteen or older.

This pattern had probably been in place for thousands of years before Rome was built, and it continued to some degree until about a hundred years ago. In Europe in the Middle Ages, for example, it was common for women to be married by fourteen. Men married later, again because they needed to be able to support their families.

At least three American first ladies married when they were still “children” (by current standards): Elizabeth Monroe married president-to-be James Monroe in 1785 when she was seventeen; their marriage lasted until her death in 1830.<sup>9</sup> Rachel Jackson, eventually the wife of President Andrew Jackson, was first married to Lewis Robards; they married when she was seventeen and divorced when she was in her early twenties, apparently because she couldn’t tolerate Robards’ extreme jealousy.<sup>10\*</sup> And Eliza Johnson married future president Andrew Johnson in 1827 when she was sixteen and he was eighteen. They were married for nearly fifty years and died within six months of each other.<sup>11</sup>

Even in modern times, first ladies sometimes married fairly young. Rosalynn Carter started dating Jimmy when she was seventeen and married him in 1946 at age nineteen, and Barbara Bush started dating the elder George when she was sixteen, got engaged to him at seventeen, and married him in 1945 at age nineteen.<sup>12</sup> Both marriages have lasted lifetimes.

## Teen Marriage in Other Cultures

Around the world, it’s still common for people to marry young, although pressures from Western culture, especially from American culture, are challenging the ancient patterns (Chapter Three). This is especially ironic given that our

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\*At least she thought they were divorced. When she married Jackson in 1791, her divorce wasn’t really final, and Robards sued her for adultery. The Jacksons remarried in 1794 but were haunted thereafter by rumors of bigamy and adultery.

own system of marriage is the least successful in the world: 50 percent of first marriages here end in divorce, as do more than 60 percent of second marriages.<sup>13</sup> Divorce can damage children for a lifetime, and it's economically devastating to many families, especially to ex-wives. Unfortunately, as other countries adopt our practices, their divorce rates—and the devastation divorce brings with it—are increasing rapidly.

I can't overemphasize the importance—and ugliness—of this inexorable trend. Every aspect of our culture, propelled by syndicated TV sitcoms, fast-food chains, and glitzy Hollywood movies, is being spread worldwide, no matter how trivial the cultural phenomenon and no matter how harmful the effect. Anorexia—unheard of until recently in countries like South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines—is now becoming a serious problem, and healthy diets, like the fish-and-rice regimen of the Japanese, are rapidly being replaced by french fries and Big Macs.<sup>14</sup>

One of the things we're exporting is our distorted picture of young people. Through movies like *Clueless* and *American Pie* and television series like *Beverly Hills 90210*—seen by more than two hundred million people worldwide—we tell the world in vivid terms what we believe about teens: that they're overgrown children, that they're inherently wild and irresponsible, that their love is just puppy love, that their relationships are fleeting and superficial, and that they need adult protection. A movie like *Clueless* is typically translated into twenty languages and shown around the world within months of its original release. No religious zealots on earth have ever proselytized as vehemently as Corporate America.

Meanwhile, many of the old marriage practices remain. In Afghanistan, Niger, and the Congo, for example, the percentages of young women ages fifteen to nineteen who are already married are, respectively, fifty-four, seventy, and seventy-four.<sup>15</sup> In some cultures, one reason for early marriage is to protect young women from the risk of becoming pregnant out of wedlock. According to one survey, in Niger nearly half of the women who married before age fifteen married for this reason.

### Traditional Marriage Practices in India

In India, the law requires that a woman be eighteen before she can marry and that a man be twenty-one. But upwards of 450 million people—about 40 percent of India's population—simply ignore the law. It's not only common for teens to marry; true child marriages are commonly performed, sometimes en masse.<sup>16</sup>

One recent article describes a ceremony in Madhogarth, a small village in Rajasthan, in which Hansa, the youngest of six sisters who were being married to boys from another village, was married to Sitaram. He was twelve, and Hansa was four. An account of another masse ceremony—this one in Rajanawagaon—gives some of the reasons villagers have for flaunting the law. A Ms. Bunkbai,

whose three grandsons were married that day, explained that she had recently been ill and that she wanted to see the faces of her grand daughters-in-law before she died. Her husband added that it was risky to let young men get too old without marrying; he spoke of a young man of eighteen who had recently eloped with a married woman. Another villager commented, “What if the girl is not beautiful when she grows up? No one will want to marry her.” In this particular village, the elders explained that only children over ten were being married these days; years ago, they said, even infants were sometimes married off.<sup>17</sup>

Ms. Bunkbai, by the way, had attended one of the “sensitization camps” run by the national government’s Department of Women and Children Development. These camps familiarize people with the marriage laws and even get potential offenders to recite “pledges” that they won’t violate the laws. But the old practices are dying hard, perhaps because *Clueless* hasn’t yet made it to the rural areas.

Through Western eyes rural Indian marriage practices seem immoral. Obviously a four-year-old can’t make a reasonable decision about marriage, and how could any civilized culture contemplate putting defenseless children into relationships that require sex?

But when you set aside your preconceptions and try to understand what’s really happening when very young people are married in India, Indian practices don’t look so crazy. K. Santhaa Reddy, a member of India’s National Commission for Women, sheds light on India’s child marriages in a recent essay:

*A marriage in rural India is not just a relationship between two individuals. Marriages form the backbone of the networking that is essential for survival in a world where the idea of state providing protection seems an alien concept. Urban mind tends to ignore this concept of marriage and looks at marriage in its western form. In Europe and America, marriage is a license to have sex and procreate. In all communities where child marriages are prevalent, the sexual aspect of marriage is absent at the time of marriage.*

*In fact a child marriage is so essentially different from a normal marriage, that it should be called an engagement rather than a marriage. After such a marriage, the girl does not go with her husband. She continues to live with her parents. The marriage is not consummated for many years. When the girl and the boy attain maturity, another ceremony (called “Gauna” in North India) is held. It is only after Gauna that the girl can meet her husband. The marriage is consummated only after Gauna.*

*The custom of Gauna has not been recognized by Indian lawmakers who treat marriage as a one-step process while in many communities of India, it is a three-step process. The first step is primary fixing up of the marriage. At this stage some token gifts are engaged between the two families. The second stage is marriage where the rituals of *sapta-padi* and seven*

*circles of holy fire are performed by the bride and bridegroom. The third step is Gauna or Bidaii when the bride is sent to the bridegroom's house. In urban India, the second and the third steps are held in quick succession say within a few hours time. But in rural India, the three stages are distinct and often have a time gap between them.*

*Almost all problems that one mentions about child marriages seem to be a result of the inability of the law to come to terms with the customs prevailing in society.<sup>18</sup>*

As odd as this system may sound, it appears to serve a number of constructive purposes, and it's also not necessarily harmful. Bear in mind that this system of marriage is practiced by more people in India alone than there are people in the United States; one can hardly dismiss it, even if it doesn't fit our values. It's also notable that although divorce is legal in India, the country has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world—less than a fifth of the divorce rate in the United States.

Reddy also points out an absurd discrepancy that's surprisingly common in many cultures, as well as in some states in the United States (see below): in India, it's legal for women to consent to sex at age sixteen, and there's no minimum age of consent for males—but it's illegal for young people to marry for several more years. In effect, by discouraging marriage the culture condones and encourages pre-marital sex.

Meanwhile, government agencies in India, spurred by UNICEF and other Western-oriented NGOs, continue to discourage marriage by people under eighteen—and fail “to come to terms with the customs prevailing in society.” Again, we want everyone to walk our walk, even if we all end up stumbling.

### THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT TEEN MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

In *Everything You Need To Know About Teen Marriage*, writer Eleanor H. Ayer claims that “a girl [sic] married at seventeen is twice as likely to be divorced as a girl eighteen or nineteen. If a girl waits until she is twenty-five the chances that her marriage will last are four times better.”<sup>19</sup> You've probably heard something like this before, and indeed we now teach our young people that they should wait before marrying, in part because with greater maturity their marriages will be more likely to survive.

It's not clear, however, where Ayer got these numbers, and they don't necessarily tell us what we want to know, anyway. After all, if one out of ten eighteen year olds gets divorced, but *two* out of ten seventeen year olds get divorced, Ayer would technically be correct. But that would still leave *eight out of ten* seventeen year olds with successful marriages—hardly cause to discourage young people from tying the knot.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

## Anything to Get Away from Home

*I was doing anything I could to stay away from my house—hanging out with anyone of any age. I was eleven and fully developed; I could even get into bars sometimes without being carded. Mark was thirty-one, and I was using him to stay away from my mom. When I got pregnant, I knew I had to get rid of it because I had no way to support it. Mark wouldn't help, so I finally told my mom, and she helped me get the abortion. It was no big deal, even though I was already four months pregnant. It was ten days before my twelfth birthday.*

—Liz C., now age twenty-four

## Practice Doesn't Help

Marriage and divorce statistics compiled by the United States Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics paint a complex picture of the role that age plays in divorce. First of all, as I noted above, about 50 percent of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce and more than 60 percent of all second marriages end in divorce. The divorce rate for third marriages is higher still. Practice and advancing years are no guarantee of success when it comes to marriage.

There is also a curious similarity in the curves that describe the divorce rate in the United States and the median age at which people first marry. (See Figure 8.1.) Between 1950 and 1990, the divorce rate increased fairly steadily, and so did the median age of first marriage.<sup>20</sup> If the age at which people married played a significant role in the longevity of a marriage, we might have expected the divorce rate to *decrease* as the marrying age increased. Again, getting older doesn't necessarily help.

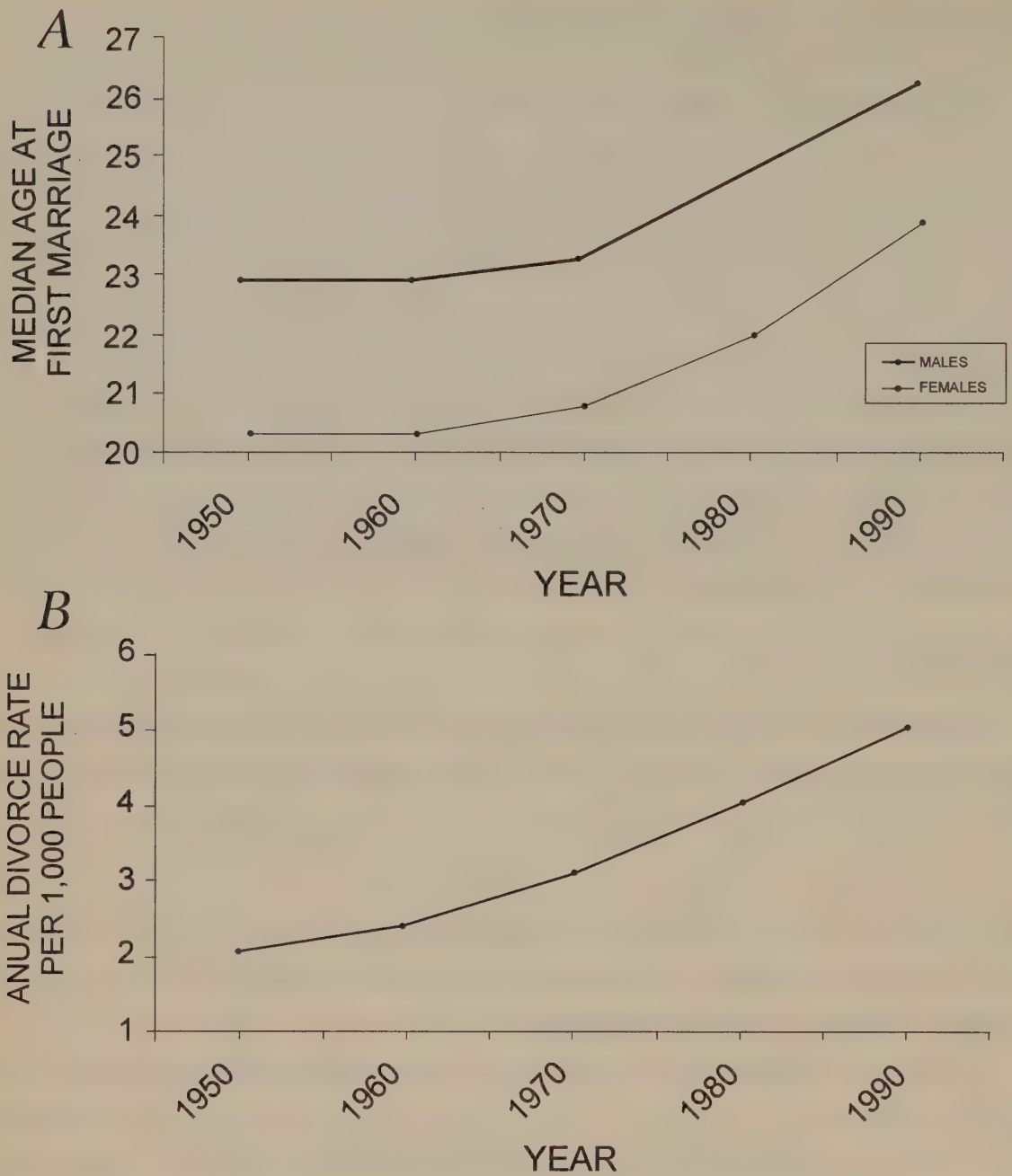


Figure 8.1. Age Versus Divorce Rate. If growing older helps people form stable relationships, then as the age of first marriage has increased over the past fifty years, we might expect the divorce rate to *decrease*, but the opposite has occurred. Source: U.S. Census Bureau data.

### Shouldn't We Let Them Try?

In addition, it turns out that *young males* have a relatively *low* divorce rate. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, among 580,000 divorces that took place in the United States in 1990, teenage males (nineteen and under) divorced at the rate of 32.8 per thousand couples, whereas males in their early twenties (twenty to twenty-four) had a much higher divorce rate: 50.2 per thousand couples. There was little difference in the divorce rate for females in these two age groups: about forty-eight per thousand couples.<sup>21</sup>

Fifty divorces per thousand couples is a high rate, for sure. If that rate were maintained for ten years, simple multiplication (ten times fifty) suggests that *half* of the couples would then be divorced. (In fact, the way the math works out, the proportion is actually lower.) It's this kind of logic that leads us to discourage or prohibit young people from marrying.

But this logic is seriously flawed. For one thing, if fifty young couples out of a thousand get divorced in a given year, that means that 950 couples don't. And even if half of young couples get divorced over a ten-year period, *how would that justify prohibiting young people from marrying?* After all, about half of all *adult* marriages end in divorce eventually. Does that mean we should prohibit *all* people from marrying? *Does the possibility of failure mean that no one should be allowed to try?* Should the 40 or 50 percent of teen couples who are capable of creating relatively permanent marriages be prevented or discouraged from marrying just because other teens fail?

The divorce rate among young people is certainly higher than among older people, but the relatively high divorce rate among young people is not necessarily driven by youth per se or even by a lack of experience. The fact is that young couples are subjected disproportionately to two powerful sources of stress—economic hardship and children—either one of which is enough to destroy a marriage. Given these stressors, one might even marvel at the relatively high success rate teen marriages have.

People also argue against teen marriage because they say it interferes with education and economic advancement, but that argument mistakenly assumes that education *must* occur when we're young. We've come to believe this because we've all been raised in a society in which education is required until age sixteen or eighteen, in which young people are largely prohibited from working, and in which many young people are taught that they *must* go to college immediately after high school. In fact, as many adults have discovered in recent decades, education can and probably should continue throughout one's life, and the education that has the greatest impact on us is the education we seek when we're truly ready.

## LOVE AND SEX INVOLVING MINORS

The more I've learned about the way our legal system deals with relationships between adults and minors, as well as between minors and other minors, the more concerned I've become. Remember the factual context, developed in this and previous chapters, in which I'm examining this issue: Teens, on the average,

are capable of exercising judgment every bit as sound as the judgment of adults; in other words, many teens are capable of excellent judgment. Many teens are capable of experiencing deep and mature feelings of love. Many teens are capable of entering into successful, long-term relationships; they've done so throughout human history, and they still do so in countries around the world. When teens are given real responsibility and authority, they sometimes mature virtually overnight. Teens differ one from the other, just as adults do; some are more capable than others.

Given that as our foundation—and I believe these points are indisputable—here are three cases that are especially disturbing. Each case shows a legal system applying general principals of questionable validity to situations in which these principals don't apply. Each shows legal authorities doing irreparable harm to innocent families. Each shows justice acting mindlessly, based merely on people's ages rather than on their abilities or motives.

### The Fonsecas

December 2002. Judge Kevin J. McGee of Ventura County, California, stating that this was “the most unusual [case] one can imagine,” sentenced twenty-three-year-old Andrew Fonseca to a year in jail for having sex with a fourteen-year-old student. Fonseca had been a wrestling coach at the Moorpark High School when he became involved with the student. Subsequently, the two got married and moved in with her parents. In court, the young woman's mother begged the judge to be lenient: “Andrew is living at our house, married to our daughter, and he works and supports her. *It's been the best thing that ever happened to her.*” The judge ignored her pleas.<sup>22</sup>

The sentence also required Fonseca to register as a sex offender, a designation that will stay with him the rest of his life and that will prevent him from ever teaching or coaching again. During the sentencing, the father-in-law, seated in the back of the courtroom, was overheard uttering “a stream of profanities.”<sup>23</sup>

### Fualaau and Letourneau

In the summer of 1996 Mary Kay Letourneau, a thirty-four-year-old teacher and married mother of four children, began having an affair with Vili Fualaau, a twelve-year-old student at the school where she taught, the Shorewood Elementary School in Burien, Washington.

Although some news reports suggest otherwise, it appears that he was not actually her student when the affair began. That summer, they each took the same classes at the Highline Community College and at a Seattle art store, and it appears that that's when things began. Vili—whom Mary called “Buddha”—was also unusually advanced for a male his age; he had reached puberty at age ten and was several inches taller than his married lover.

In February 1997 Mary's husband discovered his wife's notes and journal entries about Vili and had her arrested. She gave birth to Vili's child, Audrey, on May 23, 1997.<sup>24</sup>

In August of that year, Letourneau pleaded guilty to two counts of statutory rape. She later received a suspended sentence but had to serve eighty additional days in jail. She was also required to enroll in a sex-offender treatment program and was forbidden from seeing Fualaau for the rest of her life—a common restriction when adults have had sex with a minor.

Early in 1998, after having been released from jail for good behavior, she was found in a car with Fualaau and arrested for violating the terms of her suspended sentence. The suspension was subsequently revoked, and the original sentence—eighty-nine months in prison—was reinstated. In prison it was soon discovered that Letourneau was now pregnant again, and in October 1998 she gave birth to Georgia, her second child with Fualaau. Both children were raised by Fualaau and his mother.

It was difficult to judge from news reports exactly what was going on here. Was Vili really a “child” who had been corrupted and “raped” by his teacher, or was there more to the story?

When I saw a television interview with Vili in February of 1999, it became clear that the legal system simply couldn't handle the truth of the matter. Here is what Vili said:

*Mary didn't take away my childhood. I gave it away by consent. I knew what I was getting into. I don't feel in one bit of my body that she ever raped me. I don't love her because she's thirty years old, and she doesn't love me because I'm fifteen years old. We love each other for who we are.*<sup>25</sup>

From the tone and cadence of his speech, it was clear that this was a mature young man, not a child. Throughout most of human history, Vili would have been recognized for what he was: a young man who was deeply in love with an older woman. But in the modern Western world, and especially in the United States, we arbitrarily dismiss *all* people under a certain age—eighteen, or twenty-one, or even twenty-six—as emotionally incompetent children, no matter what their actual capabilities.

Don't get me wrong. Fualaau and Letourneau shouldn't win any awards for their behavior. A teacher-student relationship is objectionable, at least when it's exploitative, and adultery and the destruction of an intact family can hardly be defended. Nor can ignoring a court order, even if one doesn't agree with it.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Twelve-Year-Old “Predators”

*In February 2002 the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that people as young as twelve must be ordered to register as “sexual predators” for committing certain sexual crimes—a designation that will stay with them the rest of their lives. One of the dissenting justices, Thomas Kilbride thought that this was unfair considering that, under Illinois law, a sixteen-year-old sex offender convicted of murder need not be labeled in this way.<sup>26</sup>*

But Letourneau wasn't imprisoned because she slept with a former student or because she committed adultery. As a Boston judge told me years ago, “If we locked everyone up for committing adultery, there'd be no one left to turn the key.” Letourneau was condemned because she had had a serious relationship with someone society wrongly considers to be a helpless puppy. History, psychology, anthropology, and Vili himself say otherwise.

In 2002, when Fualaa and his mother were having financial difficulties (among other things, Vili had just been fired from his job at a McDonald's), he and his mother filed a frivolous and ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit against the Des Moines (Washington) Police Department and the Highline School District, claiming that they hadn't done enough to prevent his relationship with Letourneau.<sup>27</sup>

In defending itself the Highline School District presented only one witness, Dr. Csaba Hegyvary, a psychiatrist with twenty-two years of experience who had done evaluations of both Fualaa and Letourneau. According to a local news report, Hegyvary told the jury that “although it was legally rape, Letourneau is not a rapist, Fualaa is not a victim and the best outcome for everyone involved is for them to get married after Letourneau is released from prison.” This wasn't, he said, a case of sexual abuse; it was “a love story.”<sup>28</sup>

While in prison Mary Kay Letourneau was allowed almost no contact with any of her six children. She also spent time in solitary confinement, at least in part because of repeated attempts on her part to contact Vili.

After spending seven-and-a-half years in prison, Letourneau was released at age forty-two in August of 2004, prohibited from seeing Vili for the rest of her life, and required to register as a sex offender. Vili, then twenty-one, immediately asked the court to remove the contact restriction on the grounds that, as an adult, he should be able to “pick his friends.” The restriction was indeed removed (but not the sex offender designation), and the two subsequently married and appear to be doing well.<sup>29</sup>

## Healy and Kowalski

As you read about this next case, keep in mind where this chapter started—with the story of a prolific, highly honored, happily married couple—Mary and Paul Onesi—who married when she was thirteen and he was twenty-one.

Heather Kowalski, thirteen, and Dylan Healy, twenty-one, met over the Internet. That was their fatal mistake, or at least Dylan's. After all, everyone knows that the Internet is where perverts lurk and “children” are corrupted. Of course, the Internet also happens to be where millions of adults, both mature and immature, now go to find dates and spouses.

When Heather's parents found out about the relationship, about where it started, and about Dylan's age, they forbade Heather from seeing him, or at least her mom did (see below). Heather, after all, wasn't even allowed to date, and here she was carousing with a “man.” Heather ignored them and continued to contact and see Dylan frequently. Eventually the parents got a restraining order against Dylan, but by that time Dylan and Heather were madly in love with each other.

On March 25, 1997, Heather ran away with her lover, and they drove around New England for about three weeks until authorities picked them up. A massive hunt for the young couple had been set in motion by media appearances by her frantic parents, including a poignant call for help on *The Maury Povich Show*. Povich's hyperbolic theme was “Families Who've Been Torn Apart by the Internet,” and he referred to Heather repeatedly as a “child” who had been “manipulated and lured away from home” by a “predator.”<sup>30</sup>

Journalist Judith Levine reports on her investigation of this case in her recent book *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. Her take, which I find to be persuasive, is that Dylan and Heather were each at about the same maturity level, mainly because Dylan was fairly immature for his age, whereas Heather, like many young women, was somewhat advanced. There is no evidence that Dylan was a “pedophile” or predator, in spite of sensational news reports. As we saw in the Letourneau case, there is also no question that Heather was a willing participant in what occurred and that the two were happy together the entire time they dated. No evidence was ever presented suggesting any sort of coercion on Dylan's part. The coercion was entirely on the part of the parents, which is why Heather chose to run away with her attentive lover.<sup>31</sup>

In a letter Heather sent to Dylan after he was arrested, she wrote, “I think

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Love in Czechoslovakia

*After James Kirchner, a Detroit teacher, saw me talking about teens on a TV program, he sent me some illuminating emails about teen love in Czechoslovakia, where he had taught in the 1990s. Here is an excerpt: "Czechs did not consider teenagers to be children, and they did not believe that marrying in one's teens necessarily turned out badly.... When the girls in my Czech high school were fifteen or sixteen, if they had boyfriends, the boyfriend was often in his mid- to late twenties. I asked them why they didn't go out with guys their own age, and the response was, 'Guys our age only think about beer and getting into our pants. The older guys have something to talk about.' I asked them if their mothers knew about the relationships, and the girls replied that their mothers were fine with the whole thing.... The idea was evidently that a man that age has the maturity to keep her out of trouble and that if they became sexually active and conceived a child, he could handle his responsibilities, which a sixteen-year-old boy cannot."*

that the best time I ever had being with you was when we were gone, I would watch you sleep and think about the wonderful life we would someday have.... I love you."<sup>32</sup>

Before I tell you the very sad ending to this story, let's try to put the relationship in a historical context. In other eras—through most of human history, in fact—Heather would have been considered to be a young woman, not a child, just as Mary Onesi was considered to be a young woman when she married her husband of eighty years. That doesn't mean Heather's parents would have approved of Dylan as a mate for her; he was unemployed, for one thing, and living off a trust fund that had been established by his late father. They might not have liked him for any number of reasons. But given that he truly loved their daughter, they might have at least given him a chance to court her. It's certainly unlikely that they would have dismissed the relationship out of hand simply because of Heather's age—or Dylan's.

Even in the modern United States, if Dylan and Heather had met at a party or in a park, it's unlikely that he would have been punished as severely as he was. Fonseca was sentenced to a year in jail for having had sex with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, and Letourneau was hit with the maximum possible sentence the law allowed in her sensational case: seven-and-half years.

But in the fall of 1997, Dylan Healy was sentenced to *twelve to twenty-four*

years in prison for multiple counts of “felonious sexual assault with a minor,” as well as crossing state lines to have sex with a minor. That’s twelve to twenty-four years in prison for engaging in a mutually-satisfying relationship in which no coercion was ever shown and no emotional or physical harm was ever demonstrated.<sup>33</sup>

This draconian sentence was driven by our very mistaken notions about the capabilities of young people, further inflamed by our current fears of Internet predation. On the Povich show, Robert Kowalski said of his daughter, “She’s still a little girl. She needs to be taken care of like a little girl.”<sup>34</sup> The facts of the case shout otherwise, and he and his wife also failed to note that at the time of Heather’s disappearance, their own marriage was near its end. They had filed for divorce the previous year, and they were living apart. Even more disturbing, Pauline Kowalski’s court filings claimed that her husband had *encouraged* the relationship between Heather and Dylan.<sup>35</sup>

The stress of Dylan’s conviction helped destroy his own mother’s marriage of ten years. After his sentencing, he read a long statement in which he professed his love for Heather, a young woman who “made me feel happier than I had ever felt [and] who brought joy into my life.... I loved her beyond reason and fled with the one I loved.”<sup>36</sup>

## LOVE LAWS

I wish I could say that they exist—love laws, that is—if only so we could examine them. As far as I can determine, however, there aren’t any. In other words, there’s nothing illegal about a thirteen year old dating or having a love relationship with a forty year old. They can go to movies together, send letters and poetry to each other, and profess their love. But they can’t have sex, and they can’t marry in most states, even with the consent of the minor’s parents.

So the laws that govern the love lives of teens are all about sex and marriage, not about love. Perhaps that’s because we assume, as a culture, that romantic feelings can’t be controlled, and, of course, we also assume, mistakenly, that the romantic feelings of teens aren’t real.

### Laws Restricting Sex and Marriage

The laws that govern sex and marriage among teens are highly restrictive in some ways and surprisingly lax in others, not to mention confusing and inconsistent. In California, for example—a progressive and innovative state when it comes to legal matters—it’s okay for two thirteen-year-olds to have sex with each other.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Dissent About Consent

*Worldwide, there is enormous disagreement about when a young person should have the right to consent to sex, and there is no obvious pattern by religion, region, or affluence. In some poor third-world countries the age of consent is quite low: twelve in Mexico and fourteen in Chile, for example. But in Swaziland one must be eighteen to have sex and in Tunisia one must be twenty. There's even variation among Arab countries. In Syria, a young woman can consent to sex at age thirteen; in Egypt and Uganda the minimum age for both sexes is eighteen; and in Saudi Arabia, no one is allowed to have sex outside of marriage, period. In industrialized nations, the typical age of consent is sixteen, but in Japan, the second richest nation in the world, it's only thirteen.<sup>37</sup>*

It's also legal for two fourteen-year-olds to have sex with each other. But it's unlawful for a fourteen-year-old to have sex with a thirteen-year-old.

It's also legal for two seventeen-year-olds to have sex with each other and for two eighteen-year-olds to have sex with each other, but it's *strictly illegal* for anyone eighteen or older to have sex with *anyone* under eighteen, even if that person consents to engaging in the sexual act, even with parental consent. Unlike most other states, California doesn't have an "age of consent"—an age under eighteen at which a minor can consent to having sex.<sup>38</sup>

Please consider: Is a sixteen-year-old allowed to have sex with a fourteen-year-old in California? Are two fifteen-year-olds allowed to have sex? Are two eleven-year-olds allowed to have sex? Is a sixty-year-old allowed to have sex with an eighteen-year-old?

The answer to all of these questions is yes. But an eighteen-year-old is not allowed have sex with a seventeen-year-old, even if the two are exercising good judgment, and even if parents of the seventeen-year-old approve.

In Colorado, where young people under age eighteen can consent to having sex with adults, it's okay for two eleven-year-olds to have sex with each other, and it's even okay for a fifteen-year-old to have sex with a twenty-four-year-old. But if a seventeen-year-old has sex with a thirteen-year-old, he or she is guilty of committing a "Class 4 Felony."<sup>39</sup>

The marriage laws are equally quirky, especially when you compare the laws of different states. Without parental consent, all fifty states except Mississippi and Nebraska require both parties to be eighteen or over in order to marry. In Ne-

braska the minimum age is nineteen, and in Mississippi the minimum age is seventeen for males and fifteen for females. With parental consent, the landscape is quite varied. In California and Mississippi, for example, young people can marry *at any age* with the consent of parents. In Kansas and Massachusetts, females can marry at twelve with parental consent, and males can marry at fourteen. But in Delaware, Ohio, and Rhode Island—except in cases of pregnancy or when judges intervene—females can't marry until they're sixteen, and males can't marry until they're eighteen, even with the parents' blessing.<sup>40</sup>

These laws sometimes give rise to absurd situations. In 1997, for example, in California's Santa Clara County, twenty-two-year-old Juan Jiminez was charged with the statutory rape of his seventeen-year-old wife, Delia Lopez, after a medical doctor reported them to authorities for having had consensual sex before they were married. They were happily and legally married, living with Ms. Lopez's parents at the time of the arrest. The parents approved of and had granted permission for the marriage, and Delia and Juan were the proud parents of a baby boy. There was nothing coercive or even strange about this situation; the two were simply pursuing a loving relationship with each other. What's odd here is the law. If Delia and Juan had both been seventeen, they could have had sex with each other without penalty and then could have married with parental consent. But because Juan was considered an adult, they weren't allowed to have sex before marriage, even with parental consent.<sup>41</sup>

### Faulty Assumptions

The many laws that restrict the love and sex lives of teens, their inconsistencies and absurdities aside, are based on no fewer than eight faulty assumptions:

**Love.** Implicit in these laws is the assumption that *all* young people are incapable of experiencing the same kinds of loving feelings that adults do. As we've seen, that simply isn't true.

**Sex.** These laws assume that *no* young people are capable of engaging in sexual activities responsibly. Again, this is false. Teens and adults who took the *EDTA* had similar scores on the scale that looked at sex, suggesting that, on the average, basic knowledge about sex is the same for adults and teens. More important, teens would be more likely to engage in sex responsibly if they weren't in adversarial relationships with adults.

**Homogeneity.** The laws assume that all young people are the same—and, in effect, that all adults are too. But teens vary enormously in their abilities, just as adults do. To say that *all* teens should be restricted because *some* are incompetent makes no sense. Imagine if we used that logic for drivers licenses: There are incompetent drivers of every age (and race and gender); should we therefore allow *no one* to drive?

*Judgment.* The laws suggest that *no* young person is capable of making sensible decisions about matters of sex, love, or romance. Again, this simply isn't so.

*Relationships.* These laws suggest that *no* young person is capable of entering into a stable, successful relationship. As history and other cultures teach us, this is false.

*Magic.* These laws assume that magic happens when people turn eighteen (or twelve or fourteen or sixteen or whatever other arbitrary age is specified)—in other words, that capabilities change in a quantum fashion when the age boundary is crossed. But human development is actually gradual and continuous, and dramatic change certainly doesn't occur instantly on a birthday.

*Coercion.* These laws imply that the person who is over the age boundary is necessarily coercing the person who is underage. But, as we've seen, in many cases there simply is no coercion, and it is certainly possible in some cases that coercion or manipulation flows the other way.

*Harm.* Finally, these laws suggest that some or many or perhaps even *all* young people who have sex or marry young will necessarily be harmed in some way. But we've already seen that it's possible for very young spouses to form successful long-term relationships, and research reviewed recently by Judith Levine in *Harmful to Minors* suggests that forcing sex to occur in an atmosphere of ignorance and secrecy does far more harm than allowing it to occur in an atmosphere of knowledge and acceptance.

Young people can indeed love, and they appear to be able to do so in all the beautiful and crazy ways that adults do. There is simply no evidence that teen love differs in some fundamental way from adult love. Teens also are capable of entering into stable, long-term relationships. The array of laws that limit teen romance and sexuality are absurd and arbitrary, and they sometimes destroy legitimate relationships and cause innocent people and their families great harm.

**Q:** *Do you mean to imply that it's okay for my thirteen-year-old little girl to have sex—and perhaps even to have sex with a twenty-five-year-old man?*

**A:** Given the mind-set that is prevalent in modern America, it's almost impossible for me to give a reasonable answer to this question without sounding insensitive or insane. But the fact is that some, and perhaps even many, thirteen-year-olds are ready for sex, and even for deep love and marriage. Remember that throughout most of human history, our ancestors began having children shortly after puberty. Our brains and bodies are designed that way.

Is your daughter ready to take on this kind of responsibility? I have no idea, but would you be willing to find out? As for that twenty-five-year-old man, if he truly loved and respected your daughter, and if he wanted to marry her and support her and treat her with kindness for the rest of his life, and if your daughter also loved this man deeply, would you object to their union?

As I indicated in this chapter, one of the most successful marriages ever documented in America—a happy marriage for more than eighty years—was between Mary Corsaro and Paul Onesi, who married in 1917 when she was thirteen and he was twenty-one. They were honored on World Marriage Day in 1995 as the longest-married couple in the country.

It's common in other cultures for people of widely different ages to marry; only in America do we think that spouses need to be same age, even though research suggests that age difference is a poor predictor of success in a marriage. It's the person you marry that counts, not his or her age.



## Chapter 9

# Young People Are Tough

---

*...thanks for making me a fighter  
Made me learn a little bit faster  
Made my skin a little bit thicker  
Makes me that much smarter  
—Christina Aguilera, “Fighter”*

***Overview.** When they’re allowed or forced to do so, young people demonstrate extraordinary toughness and resilience, sometimes more than adults can muster. Teens excel in Olympic sports, for example, and some of the new “extreme” sports were developed by teens. Even though it might offend our sensibilities, from the time young David slew Goliath, young people have also made excellent soldiers—daring, disciplined, and deadly. In Myanmar recently, the charismatic Htoo twins, Luther and Johnny—age twelve—joined the ranks of Joan of Arc and other young leaders who have led armies to victory. Young victims of war, such as the twenty thousand “Lost Boys” who marched out of Sudan in the late 1980s, have also demonstrated great courage and self-reliance, as have hundreds of thousands of teens who have become caregivers for young siblings or disabled parents. We are reluctant to acknowledge the toughness of young people, just as, until recently, we were reluctant to acknowledge the toughness of women, but attitudes can and do change. Research on resilience suggests that exposure to great challenges may be essential for making young people as strong as adults.*

June 18, 2002, Jerusalem. Just another day in one of the holiest and most dangerous places on earth. It was morning, and two public buses full of students were near each other on the No. 32 bus route. Suddenly, one of the buses exploded with such force that the entire vehicle was lifted off the ground. In the midst of the smoke and the screams and the confusion, the other bus stopped, and dozens of

riders, most in their early and mid-teens, streamed into the street to try to help. One unnamed fifteen-year-old, a student at the nearby Ort Spanyol school, rescued a little girl from the mangled remains of the other bus, and other teens managed to pull many other victims to safety before authorities arrived. There's no telling exactly how many lives were saved by these heroic young people. All we know for sure is that nineteen people died and more than seventy were injured in the blast.<sup>1</sup>

The small village where Ming Kipa lived in Nepal wasn't able to offer her more than a fourth-grade education, but that didn't stop her from subjecting herself to strenuous exercise, climbing small peaks, and mastering basic mountaineering techniques. On May 22nd, 2003, she joined her older brother and sister on a trek to the top of world, successfully scaling Mount Everest and setting a new world record along the way. The trek was brutal, she admitted. She couldn't sleep because of the numbing cold, and at one point, the beam of light fastened to her forehead found a disturbing target. "They were two men," said Ming. "The light fell on their eyes, and they shone like cat's eyes. I was going to say hello, but then I realized they were dead men." But she made it, and she broke a record previously held by Temba Tsheri, a Nepalese student who had climbed Everest at age sixteen. Ming was fifteen.<sup>2</sup>

Again, the obvious questions: we treat teens like children (and even in Nepal, it's now illegal for people under sixteen to climb Everest, which forced Ming to climb from the Tibetan side), but what are their actual capabilities? Are teens really fragile creatures who need our protection? Or do many, or perhaps most of them, have the potential of those young heroes in Israel, or perhaps even of the indefatigable Ming Kipa?

## TOUGHNESS IN SPORTS

I saw it live on television, as did tens of millions of other viewers around the world: Kerri Strug's gold medal vault at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Eighteen-year-old Strug had been training in gymnastics since she was four, never missing a day, training until "my back is sore, my stomach has pulled a muscle, my heel is bruised, and my legs are really sore." She qualified for the 1992 Olympic games at age fourteen, and her efforts there helped the United States team win the bronze, but she wanted more, and she went all out in '96.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, she landed badly on her first vault during the team competition. Her ankle was fractured, and she was in intense pain, but she needed to make one more outstanding run for her team to take the gold.

*I knew the entire nation wanted to see me hit my second vault. I knew we needed that second vault. I knew how long I had waited to be in the position I was in.... By the time I managed to get back to the start of the runway, my leg was numb.... I reached down and twisted my left foot with my hand, trying to work out the pain, but all I felt was a crackling.... I began my run and honestly could not feel my leg.... It felt like my ankle was swinging loosely from the rest of my leg, like it was hanging by a string.<sup>4</sup>*

Her second vault was picture perfect, a strong, precise combination that got the United States team the gold. And her landing was unforgettable.

*I did it standing on just my right foot, like a flamingo.... Tears were already filling my eyes and the heat inside my leg was incredible..... The pain knocked me to the mat, a pulsating, pull-your-hair-out, you're-going-to-die pain. I knew for sure I was going to at least faint. There was such a hot rush up my leg. You know how sometimes a pain is so intense, you feel you're on the verge of going crazy? That's how I felt.<sup>5</sup>*

## Courage or Child Abuse?

I was visiting my parents' house in Connecticut at the time, and I remember my mom being appalled by Strug's performance, which, to her, smelled of child abuse. I defended Strug, albeit weakly, saying something about her "obvious courage." But could a teen be "courageous," I wondered? Certainly, I had been taught to think otherwise.

The sports world is filled with tales like Strug's, in part because it's one of those rare domains (like the entertainment industry) where, on occasion, we set aside restrictions and let young people show their stuff.

Millions of young people play dozens of sports every day in this country, and hundreds of thousands participate regularly in organized "amateur" versions of various professional sports. Because sports are inherently risky, it's not surprising that injuries are common. According to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission, about 2 percent of the Americans, age six and over, who play football each year, suffer injuries; that's more than 370,000 injuries from football alone, most of them involving children and teens.<sup>7</sup> Nearly 600,000 Americans, many of them quite young, are injured playing basketball annually.<sup>8</sup> Are we "abusing" our young people by allowing them to participate in sports, or are we simply acknowledging their competence?

## Young Professionals

In professional sports—that is, sports in which people get paid—young people are also regular participants. With the creation of new media outlets like ESPN,

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### “100 Percent Worth It”

Professional inline skater Kelly Matthews has been skating since she was twelve. She pushes herself and the sport itself to every possible extreme. “All it takes to be extreme,” she says, “is the will to try new tricks. All that’s needed is a faith in yourself and the sport.” It’s a tough and risky enterprise, which has cost her twenty stitches over her right eye, a broken wrist, and more. Has she got what it takes? Says Kelly, “Every time I go to skate and every time I’ve had to face the pain, I know that it’s 100 percent worth it and wouldn’t give up my bumps, bruises, and broken bones for anything in the world.”<sup>6</sup>

ESPN2, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, the focus on young athletes has grown considerably in recent years. When eighteen-year-old Ohio high school basketball star LeBron James accepted some jerseys as a gift from a store owner, for example, the indiscretion was reported widely in sports magazines and on ESPN’s “Sports Center.”<sup>9</sup> The activities of golfer Michelle Wie, who at age thirteen stood five-feet-ten and could already drive a golf ball more than three hundred yards (farther than most men can), also make national news regularly, prompting one commentator to lament that amateurism is “all but gone from college, high school and even youth club sports.”<sup>10</sup>

Young people not only participate in and excel in many sports, lately they’ve played pivotal roles in creating whole new genres. A case in point is the domain called “extreme sports,” which occasionally fill the streets in tournaments in Southern California. The extremes include sports such as ice climbing, snow boarding, BMX bike racing, snow mountain biking, sky surfing, wake boarding, inline skating, and the most ubiquitous x-game of them all, skateboarding, which got off the ground in Southern California in the 1950s and was given a major boost by young people in the L.A. area in the 1960s.

In 1965, eight-year-old Tony Alva—later a skateboarding legend—and his “buds” hit the streets by attaching the wheels from roller skates to flat boards. Alva and the other boys of “Dogtown,” an area near the beach in Santa Monica, at first used the boards just to get around the neighborhood but ultimately learned to control them in ways that appeared to defy gravity. One of the strangest activities of early skateboarders was to prowl wealthy neighborhoods in search of empty concrete swimming pools to skate in; that was the beginning of “bowl riding,” which is now the centerpiece of whole parks and arenas.<sup>11</sup> Created largely by young people, skate-

## WOMEN IN ACTION

### Women Are “Different”

*The Queen is most anxious to enlist every one who can speak or write to join in checking this mad, wicked folly of “Woman’s Rights,” with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady [name withheld] ought to get a good whipping. It is a subject which makes the Queen so furious that she cannot contain herself. God created men and women different—then let them remain each in their own position.*

—Queen Victoria,

Letter to Sir Theodore Martin, 29 May 1870

boarding is now a \$5.2 billion industry.<sup>12</sup> (By the way, in 1996 my son’s high school—Justin, that is, the one I mentioned in the introduction to this book—became the first high school in the country to offer a for-credit course called “Skateboard”—P. E. course number 1692-42.)

## FRAILITY, THEY NAME IS...

Sweet, baby-faced Jessica Lynch will remain in America’s memory for many years. An unlikely hero, she may forever symbolize America’s might in our recent conflict in Iraq.

What Lynch actually did during the ninety-minute battle that led to her capture isn’t clear. Early reports from “unnamed U.S. officials” suggested that this twenty-year-old supply clerk, a private in an Army maintenance company, fought fiercely during the battle, but Army investigators later concluded that she was probably injured when her Humvee crashed into another vehicle after it was hit by a rocket. Lynch herself apparently can’t remember what happened. In any case, eleven of her fellow soldiers were killed during the battle, and she was held as a prisoner of war in a Nasiriyah hospital for about a week before being rescued by United States Special Forces in an unopposed operation.<sup>13</sup>

Lynch was welcomed as a hero upon her return to the United States and was awarded three medals for her service in Iraq: the Bronze Star (for meritorious combat service), the Purple Heart (for her wounds), and the Prisoner of War. It’s not clear that she deserved the Bronze Star or the enormous attention she received, but what is clear is that our attitude about women—and about women in

combat, in particular—has changed dramatically in recent decades. Lynch was consistently praised, after all, and no one hit the streets protesting the fact that she had been put at risk in the first place. The very idea that the United States would put a waif-like female, barely out of her teens, in harm's way during a major combat operation would have been completely unthinkable in the 1950s.

Sometimes, it seems, our attitudes change.

### Women Soldiers and Police

When it comes to females, the change has been enormous. A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* summarizes the extent of the change: Women are now “striking targets, taking fire, guarding Iraqi prisoners of war, and driving trucks laden with supplies amid ambushes and snipers.” They now comprise about 15 percent of the United States armed forces—double the percentage in 1980. That means more than two hundred thousand females in military garb.<sup>14</sup> Although still barred from front-line combat roles, they're firing weapons from helicopters and jets and killing with the best of them. A gun, after all, is the ultimate leveler. According to helicopter pilot Lt. Sarah Fritts, “Why should I not be allowed to do something I want to do because some guy lying on a couch watching TV feels uncomfortable seeing me dragged through the street?.... I don't see why a woman's life is so much more important than a man's life.... For a woman to gain full citizenship, she should be able to die for her country.”<sup>15</sup>

According to a recent essay by Captain Barbara A. Wilson (United States Air Force, retired), studies in the United States and Great Britain show unequivocally that “when a woman is correctly trained, she can be as tough as any man,” and “mixed units” are now performing cohesively and effectively, “even under fire.” According to Wilson, women are now eligible to serve in more than 90 percent of officer positions available in the United States Navy.<sup>16</sup>

You don't have to look farther than your local intersection to see how tough woman can be. A hundred years ago, when women were considered (by most Americans, anyway—including most American women) to be weak and feeble, there were only a handful of women police in the United States, and all had restricted duties, such as doing clerical work or guarding skating rinks and other places frequented by women and children. None wore uniforms or carried guns; none went on patrol. Now there are more than one hundred thousand full-time female law-enforcement officers in the United States, including 15 percent of the police officers in New York City; they're serving side-by-side with men in just about every dangerous job there is.<sup>17</sup>

We've fictionalized—and thus legitimized—the courageous female cop in dozens of recent films, most notably, *Fargo*, in which Frances McDormand played a

pregnant police officer who foiled a kidnap plot. Movies like *Charlie's Angels* and *Lara Croft* have further solidified our reverence for the female hero—a far, far cry from honoring Betsy Ross for sewing some stars on a flag.

The changing roles of women in our society demonstrate two important points that are relevant to the perspective I've been developing in this book: first, people whom we universally consider to be weak, incompetent, feeble, and desperately in need of our protection might actually have the potential to be strong, heroic, courageous, tough, and independent. Second, as a society, we are sometimes capable of changing our perspective quite radically .

Which brings me, finally, to “child” soldiers.

### G. I. JOHNNY

I don't think there should be any soldiers. I find the very concept of war to be repugnant. I'm also opposed to all forms of exploitation and abuse—of workers, children, women, blacks, soldiers, or anyone else. But this is a book about human potential and competence, and so, once again, I ask that you put aside your preconceptions about young people and look with fresh eyes at a controversial topic.

UNICEF estimates that there are approximately 250,000 “child soldiers” in the world, mostly in developing nations such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Burma.<sup>18</sup> I have “child” in quotes because UNICEF defines “child” as anyone under eighteen, no matter how mature, large, strong, competent, motivated, informed, or experienced that person might be. If we choose to define “child” as someone under thirteen—a defensible idea—the number of child soldiers drops considerably, to perhaps sixty thousand.<sup>19</sup>

Young males have fought in military battles through much of human history. We don't even flinch when we tell our children the story of how young David slew Goliath, an enormous Philistine soldier, with a sling and stone. According to the book of *Samuel*, King Saul gave David his own armor to wear in his battle with Goliath, but David was so small that he had to remove it because it was too heavy for him to carry. After Goliath fell, David took Goliath's sword and stabbed him with it. Then he cut the giant's head off. Call this excessive, if you like, but you certainly can't dispute David's competence as a soldier.

Some speculate that the minimum age of military service increased in stages as weapons and armor got heavier over a period of many centuries;

## WOMEN IN ACTION

### Constable on Ice

*Kate Wheatley, a thirty-four year old constable from South Yorkshire, England, was honored in 1999 for saving a young man from what would have been a horrible drowning in an ice cold lake the previous year. In what a fellow officer called "the most brave and selfless act that I have seen in my thirty years' police experience," Wheatley jumped into a near-frozen lake to swim out to a twenty-year-old man who was flailing his arms and sinking. After she towed him to shore and administered mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, he coughed up a large amount of water before finally starting to breath. Wheatley was given the Royal Humane Society Award for her efforts.<sup>20</sup> Take that, Queen Victoria.*

young people simply couldn't handle armor or a heavy sword. But today's relatively lightweight AK-47s and M16s have not only leveled the battlefield for men and women, they've also made it easy for very young people to be effective soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Quite simply, if you can follow orders, carry a weapon, aim it well and pull the trigger, you've got the right stuff. If, as a bonus, you're small, nimble, and fast, you might even survive to fight another day; the smaller and faster the target, the harder it is to hit.

### Young Soldiers Around the World

In countries where war has spanned generations, like Liberia or various countries in the Middle East, young people are groomed for war almost from birth. In some Arab countries, young children are indoctrinated about the glories of martyrdom, and as teenagers they sometimes serve, all too effectively, as human bombs. A recent Associated Press report from Saudi Arabia (where half the population is under eighteen) indicates that young people aren't just mindless walking bombs; they're also playing a key role in planning terrorist attacks. According to the report, of twelve people recently rounded up for planning a major attack on Mecca, six were under eighteen years old.<sup>22</sup>

And it isn't only third-world or Arab nations that create military-minded young people. As a United Nations website reports:

*...the United States Pentagon sponsors programs for approximately four hundred thousand high school boys and girls [sic] where children [sic] are taught to march, shoot, act and think like soldiers. More than half of all European States accept under eighteen-*

year-olds in their armed forces. The United Kingdom routinely sends seventeen-year-olds into combat. According to their official statistics from January 1999, there was a total of 6,676 male and female sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, and over 128,000 cadets from the ages of ten to sixteen in training schools around the country. Similarly, military schools are a common feature across Latin America, Asia, and Africa.<sup>23</sup>

Civil War historian James McPherson notes that some Southerners in the United States still celebrate the heroic actions of a Confederate battalion of two hundred young soldiers—ages fifteen to seventeen—that helped rout Union forces at the Battle of New Market in 1864.<sup>24</sup> The minimum age of conscription was set nationwide at eighteen at the outset of the Spanish-American War (1898) and has been raised and lowered several times since then;<sup>25</sup> the minimum age of service is typically lower than the conscription age and wasn't set at eighteen until World War I.<sup>26</sup>

According to Ilene Cohn and Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, authors of *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts*, modern young people, like adults, want to live meaningful lives, and the “ability to project a meaningful future for themselves is... powerfully and intimately tied up with their role in [military] conflict.” In 1990, recruiters in Liberia were reportedly “overwhelmed” by volunteer street children who wanted to “get up to Nimba County and do something for their country.”<sup>27</sup>

Young people can also adopt and defend political beliefs from a surprisingly early age.<sup>28</sup> Neil Boothby and John Humphrey, writing in a volume compiled by the United States Committee for Refugees, noted that:

*...even younger children...are capable of what psychologists refer to as intuitive political thinking, not only showing evidence of socialization, but of idiosyncratic yet imaginative political opinions as well. Through their endless series of why questions, children as young as three-year-old begin to make rudimentary inquiries into social inequities they spot outside the home, and in doing so, can challenge their own parents' complacent ways. This innate curiosity of children is heightened when they are uprooted from their home and communities. Everyday struggles for food, shelter and other basic necessities can make their need to comprehend—and, at times, to act—even more pressing.*<sup>29</sup>

Like David, young soldiers are often quite effective. According to one report, the young soldiers—under age sixteen—in the “liberating” forces that overthrew President Obote in Uganda in 1986 were “disciplined, reliable and trustworthy,” and a UNICEF representative in Uganda in 1985 described such soldiers as “highly motivated, reliable and dedicated.”<sup>30</sup> According to a report by the BBC World

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### English Army Routed by Teen

*By the early 1400s, during the Hundred Years' War, the English had occupied much of northern France (including Paris) for decades. In 1429, seventeen-year-old Joan of Arc (Jeanne d'Arc) commanded a French army that was sent to free the city of Orléans, which the English had held under siege for eight months. Joan's army lifted the siege in only eight days. Just a few weeks later, Joan's soldiers, joined by reinforcements, overwhelmed the English forces at Patay, and the following month, Joan, now known as the Maid of Orléans, gained control of Reims, the traditional coronation site of the French monarchy. This allowed the long-delayed crowning of King Charles VII to take place. The recovery of Orléans and coronation of King Charles greatly boosted French morale during this dark period in French history. Captured in battle in 1430, Joan was subjected to fourteen months of harsh imprisonment and interrogation before being burned at the stake in 1431.<sup>32</sup>*

Service, "The smallest boys are placed closest to the enemy. In war, they are said to be fearless."<sup>31</sup> Presumably, that's why young people are conscripted in the first place. No commander in his (or her) right mind would deliberately take on soldiers who are incapable of winning.

Two of the highest ranking soldiers in the world in 2003 were the notorious Htoo twins, Johnny and Luther, age twelve, the leaders for a while of the brutal and effective "God's Army" in Myanmar (formerly, and sometimes currently, known as Burma). It would take another whole chapter to lay out the complex politics of the situation properly, but here is a thumbnail: The junta that rules Myanmar has recently, and largely to make money, been obliterating troublesome members of a tribe of people in Myanmar called the Karen, many of whom have fled to Thailand. The Christian faction of the Karen have been fighting back using guerilla tactics, and one segment of their forces, "God's Army," was led, up until recently, by the Htoos, who, according to their largely-teenage followers, were "unbeaten in battle, immune to gunfire and can disarm landmines with their thoughts." After some of God's forces took two hundred people hostage at a Thai hospital to protest the Thai shelling of Karen citizens inside Myanmar's border, Thai forces reportedly stormed the hospital, stripped the Karen soldiers naked, and shot them all in cold blood. Luther and Johnny were not among the dead and eventually fled to India and then to Thailand.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the risks, armies like God's Army provide significant benefits to some young people. In Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s and early 1990s, young people by the thousands joined rebel forces in part because such enlistment was voluntary, whereas service in the government's army was mandatory. According to Cohn and Goodwin-Gill:

*We interviewed a sixteen-year-old ex-FMLN-combatant [from El Salvador] who had joined at age thirteen. His brother had joined years earlier but this boy's [sic] deciding moment came when he escaped forced recruitment into the [government] army. "I know that once the army recruits you, you are kept in by force, you need permission to visit your family and permission is rarely given. It's better to join a voluntary organization, where permission to visit your family is at least possible." The FMLN also provided a social support structure, validation, discipline, respect and protection to many kids [sic]...<sup>34</sup>*

### Abuse and Exaggeration

Armies have a deadly purpose; they're more than just a "support structure." UNICEF estimates that in the 1990s alone two million people under age eighteen were killed in armed conflicts, with four-to-five million disabled and ten million "psychologically traumatized" (not all were soldiers).<sup>35</sup> War's toll on adults is also devastating, of course.

Headlines also remind us of the ways in which young people in some countries are coerced into service—in some cases kidnapped, drugged, raped, and kept as virtual prisoners in military camps—sometimes with government forces and sometimes with the rebels (in some countries these forces swap places every few years).

One such soldier, China Keitetsi, who says she entered military service at age nine in Uganda in 1986, wrote about her brutal life as a young soldier in a book published in South Africa in 2002.<sup>36</sup> In recent years she has, through a website, lectures, and media appearances, made herself an icon of the abuse of "child soldiers."

Although there is no doubt that there are many abused young soldiers around the world, key aspects of Keitetsi's story have been credibly disputed by the Ugandan government. Her former commander says she never fought any battles, and there is considerable question about her age. There is evidence that she may have been seventeen when she joined the rebel forces (now Uganda's regular army), and it appears that she enlisted voluntarily. When she fled Uganda in the mid 1990s, she left behind a son she had with a rebel commander. After that, she lived in South Africa, where she had and subsequently abandoned a daughter she had with another man. She now lives in Denmark, protected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

In both South Africa and Denmark, Keitetsi claimed and was granted refu-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Saving Dad

*On a dark New England night in May 2004, Christopher Duarte and six members of his family were out boating, when the winds picked up suddenly and their small motor boat capsized. Fourteen-year-old Chris swam in fifty-degree water for between sixty and ninety minutes to reach the Rhode Island shore to find help. He had last seen his mom—with no life jacket on—clinging to a fender of the boat. He banged on the door of the first house he found and pleaded for help. His mom was found alive but died shortly after being rescued. The boy's aunt, her boyfriend, and one of Chris's cousins drowned. Chris's dad survived.<sup>37</sup>*

gee status, even though she admits to having fought for the forces that now rule Uganda; this is odd, given that refugees are normally the ones on the losing side. Meanwhile, UNICEF, which has been campaigning for years to forbid the use of “children” as soldiers—no matter how well they may perform, no matter what their motivations, and no matter how bleak their alternatives—is using Keitetsi for promotional purposes.<sup>38</sup>

### Gangs: Our Own “Child” Soldiers

Perhaps all of this seems remote and foreign; Liberia and Uganda and Myanmar are far away, after all, and have little in common with the United States, and it's been a long time since the Civil War. But there are young people serving in paramilitary organizations on our own cities' streets.

Gangs, after all, are military groups, complete with weapons, ranks, charismatic leaders, territories, spies, codes of behavior, insignia, and more (see Chapter Five). Gangs are typically led by an older, hardcore criminal and typically have between three and five levels of membership, each with different names and privileges. In Los Angeles County, it's believed that there are nearly 300 chapters of the Blood and Crip gangs alone, and these gangs are believed to have chapters in more than 100 United States cities. In 1998, there were about 150,000 gang members in Los Angeles County—more people than there are in the armies of many small countries. Gangs have strict codes of behavior; members must follow orders—even to kill—or face extreme punishments, including death. Gangs also take care of the needs of their members—mainly the need for safety and protection.<sup>39</sup>

Like it or not, “child soldiers” exist in very large numbers within our own borders.

## ON THEIR OWN

In William Golding's classic work of fiction, *The Lord of the Flies*, a group of boys ages twelve and under became brutal, savage, nearly mindless killers after being stranded on an island for several months. Toward the middle of the tale, in a scene straight out of the deep recesses of Sigmund Freud's psyche, boys surrounded a helpless, disoriented boy named Simon while chanting, "Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!" Then they "struck, bit, tore" with "teeth and claws" until Simon was dead.<sup>40</sup> At the end of the book, when the boys were finally rescued, Ralph, the nominal leader of the group, broke down crying, lamenting "the end of innocence" and "the darkness of man's heart," and his companions soon joined him in weeping.<sup>41</sup>

Two aspects of Golding's story are interesting in the present context. First, the story is an acknowledgment that young people can be both tough and self-sufficient, at least when adults aren't around to take care of them. And second, Golding's characters *never* broke down, no matter what crazy things were happening in their savage world, *until the adults showed up*. They behaved strangely or cruelly at times, but they were *never* childlike—until they were expected to be.

Other fictional examples like this come easily to mind: Gavroche and his siblings in *Les Misérables* lived for many months on the streets of Paris without any contact with their heartless parents, and Clint Eastwood's mesmerizing character in *Unforgiven* simply walked away from his farm, leaving his young children there with some general advice like "take care of things"; apparently they did. But what happens to real young people when they don't have access to adults?

### Young Heads of Households

The recent turmoil in Rwanda left many thousands of young people without parents and with few resources. Here are reports, from a radio broadcast, of three young people who ended up as reluctant heads of households:

Rose, thirteen years old: "After the genocide, our family fled to eastern Zaire.... My parents and two of my brothers got sick and they died. My older brother, my little sister and I ended up in Kisangani in Congo and we were repatriated by the UN in May 1997.... My older brother and I now farm our plot of land. No one helps us.... My little brother who's ten, goes to school. I used to go to school but I decided to stop. I was so hungry all the time that I couldn't study or concentrate, so I thought it would be better to work."

Claudine, sixteen years old: "I have four younger brothers and sisters. They are fifteen, thirteen, five and three years old. After my mother died, we went to live with my

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### He Can Do Anything

*Nine-year-old Semaj Booker didn't like living in Lakewood, Washington, and he was determined to get to Texas. According to reports in January 2007, including an interview with his mother on television's "Inside Edition," Semaj, a frequent runaway, first stole a car and led police on a high-speed chase. Just hours after he was returned to his home, he made his way to a local airport and used a false name to board two successive Southwest Airlines flights terminating in San Antonio, where he was taken into custody by local authorities. His mother said she was stunned but also proud: "He just showed me that, 'Mom, I'm going to achieve anything I want to do. I'm going to just do it.'"*

*grandmother. We are still with her but she's old and sick. So I have to support her and my four brothers and sisters. I worry a lot about tomorrow and whether I'll be able to feed my family."*

*Hawas, seventeen years old: "I had five brothers and sisters. Two of them died. The ones who are still alive are sixteen, fifteen, and eight years old. Our parents were beaten to death. All my aunts and uncles and other relatives were murdered too. So we're alone now. We manage to get by but we don't have enough money to eat more than once a day. The one-year-old you see here belongs to me. When we were in Zaire I was raped. I love the child despite how he was conceived. I can't abandon him."<sup>42</sup>*

In all, there are at least 65,000 households headed by teens in Rwanda, with an average of five people per household; that's more than 325,000 children and teens living on their own with minimal resources.<sup>43</sup> If they had access to more resources, they would presumably be living much better. But the point is that they are indeed living—and working and eating and, in some cases, even going to school.

### Surviving without Mom

Even pre-teens are somehow able to survive without adults. According to a news report, when Travis Butler's mother died in November 1999 in their East Memphis, Tennessee, apartment, he was afraid to tell anyone because he was sure he'd be put into foster care. So he continued for more than a month to dress himself and brush his hair, to go to school every day (he was never tardy), to cook frozen dinners, soup, and cereal, to do basic food shopping, and to do his homework. He even did a passable job of forging his mother's signature on school papers and on his report card.

After a month of this, a family friend stopped by, and Travis, under pressure,

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### A Very Deep Sleep

*Alerted by concerned school officials, police in a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan, recently searched an apartment and found the decomposed body of a young mother. A short time later, her six-year-old son trotted in, saying he had been outside playing. In fact, his mom had collapsed and died three weeks earlier. The boy, thinking his mom was asleep, simply carried on: eating breakfast cereal, going out to play, and tucking himself in bed. He was dirty and hungry when found but otherwise in good health and spirits.<sup>44</sup>*

spilled the beans. Before that, absolutely no one had suspected anything was wrong. Travis was sent to live with his mother's parents in Mississippi and apparently is still doing fine. Travis Butler was nine years old when all this took place.<sup>45</sup>

### The Lost Boys of Sudan

Travis' story isn't as unique as you might think. In the late 1980s when government troops attacked dozens of villages in Sudan, more than *twenty thousand boys*, as young as three or four and generally not much older than twelve, left their homes on foot on a quest to find the promised land: refugee camps in Ethiopia. Life turned out to be so harsh there that most of those who had made it to Ethiopia continued on to Kakuma, Kenya, which they reached in 1992 (by which time many of the marchers were in their teens).

Dubbed by the press the "Lost Boys of Sudan," the lucky ones walked several thousand miles with little food or water, living mainly off leaves and roots. It's believed that as many as eleven thousand of them died along the way—victims of starvation, drowning, crocodiles, snakes, lions, hyenas, bombs, or malaria.

In 2001, the United Nations flew forty-five hundred of the survivors to the United States, where they've been settled in roughly twenty-eight cities around the country, assisted by various U.N., government, and religious organizations. News reports since the 1980s have often spoken of the extraordinary optimism of these boys and young men, no matter what challenges they faced on their long journey to safety (see box, next page).<sup>46</sup>

Set aside the horror of this story, and think about how blatantly the Lost Boys challenge our preconceptions about young people. Nearly half of the Lost Boys survived years of unimaginable hardships with virtually no adult help, while exhibiting considerably more style, courage, and optimism than Golding envisioned in *Flies*. It's almost impossible for the modern American mind to conceive of such strength

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### “You Walk until Your Time Comes”

Mamer Ajak thinks he's now twenty-three or twenty-four. In 1987 when he was seven or eight he and other children from his village fled the violence that was killing their neighbors and family members in Sudan and joined a march of more than 20,000 boys who had come to believe that life would be better in Ethiopia. Here's what Mamer told me:

I had three siblings, but I was the only one left. I took off because I could run. It took three months to get to Ethiopia. Boys ahead of us would find a pool of water, and sometimes they would drink it all. We would eat the mud they left behind. For food, we ate dry roots and dry leaves—we knew which plants to eat. We generally stayed with groups from our villages, but there were some who were truly lost, walking with anybody. And some were grownup—maybe thirteen.

We didn't know where we were going exactly. But we were walking away from the bombs.

One time I hid myself in the brush, and an older boy found some water and brought it back to where I was hiding. I was going too slow, but he kept me going.

In Ethiopia, life was not much better because there was no community there to receive us or care for us. We were caring for ourselves. Each one of us was responsible for the other. When someone died, we took care of the burying. Back home, with five people digging, the graves were ten feet deep, but we couldn't do that. Sometimes it would rain, and the water would wash the tops off the graves and you could see the dead bodies. Some people didn't even get buried because everyone was so weak.

We built our own shelters and took turns cooking and looking for grass and getting water. We made schedules, and they needed to be followed. We organized ourselves into groups of twelve, and we took turns being the leaders and representing our group in the larger one. As people got older, they got more responsibilities. We did what needed to be done.

To American teens, I say: Don't look at the obstacles. Problems shape us to be better in our lives. If you are alive, you can do anything. You walk until your time comes.

Mamer was flown by the United Nations to the United States in 2001. He's now studying international affairs and business administration at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego.

in people so young. To us, even post-pubescent teens are still helpless children, and even twenty-year-olds aren't mature enough to make decisions about alcohol.

## PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE AGES

Teens are at or near the peak of perfection in many ways, and we spend much our lives from our twenties or thirties onward in a state of decline. I already reviewed data along these lines pertaining to memory, thinking, and judgment in Chapter Seven. Now let's look at some basic physical abilities.

As infants, we start life weak and helpless, but, as evolution demands, we grow rapidly and become highly capable beings shortly after puberty. As I noted in Chapter One, we *must* be highly capable by the time we're capable of producing children; if not, our children will have little chance of survival.

Our vision, hearing, and sense of smell are all extremely keen by our early teens; they peak by our mid teens and decline steadily and dramatically from our late teens until we die.<sup>47</sup> (See Figure 9.1.) The pattern of changes in our sense of touch is even more dramatic given that young children appear to be even more sensitive than teens; in other words, the decline seems fairly steady over the entire life span.<sup>48</sup>

Simple reaction time (SRT)—the speed with which we're able to react to simple stimuli—follows the same pattern as the major senses: it's slow in childhood, then speeds up as we near puberty, peaks in the late teens, and declines steadily thereafter. By age thirteen or so, SRT is within 10 percent or so of its peak value; from about age thirty on, we never again are capable of reacting as swiftly as we did at age thirteen.<sup>49</sup> In Chapter Seven we saw this same pattern in the speed with which people respond to more complex stimuli. These patterns of change in reaction time are especially notable when one considers that reaction time is correlated with intelligence (on some tests), and reaction time also helps us respond effectively to threats, emergencies, and so on.

As you might expect, when physiologists look for physical correlates of these patterns of change, they find them. For example, in a study conducted in the 1930s, researchers counted the number of nerve fibers present in various spinal nerves and found that the number of fibers was small in young children, peaked during the teens years, and declined thereafter (diagram G, Figure 9.1).<sup>50</sup> Body fat follows the opposite pattern: It's high when we're children and low when we're in our teens, and then it tends to increase gradually through most of our adult years.<sup>51</sup> Overall, teens are in enviably good physical condition, which is, sadly, one of the reasons we send them off to war.

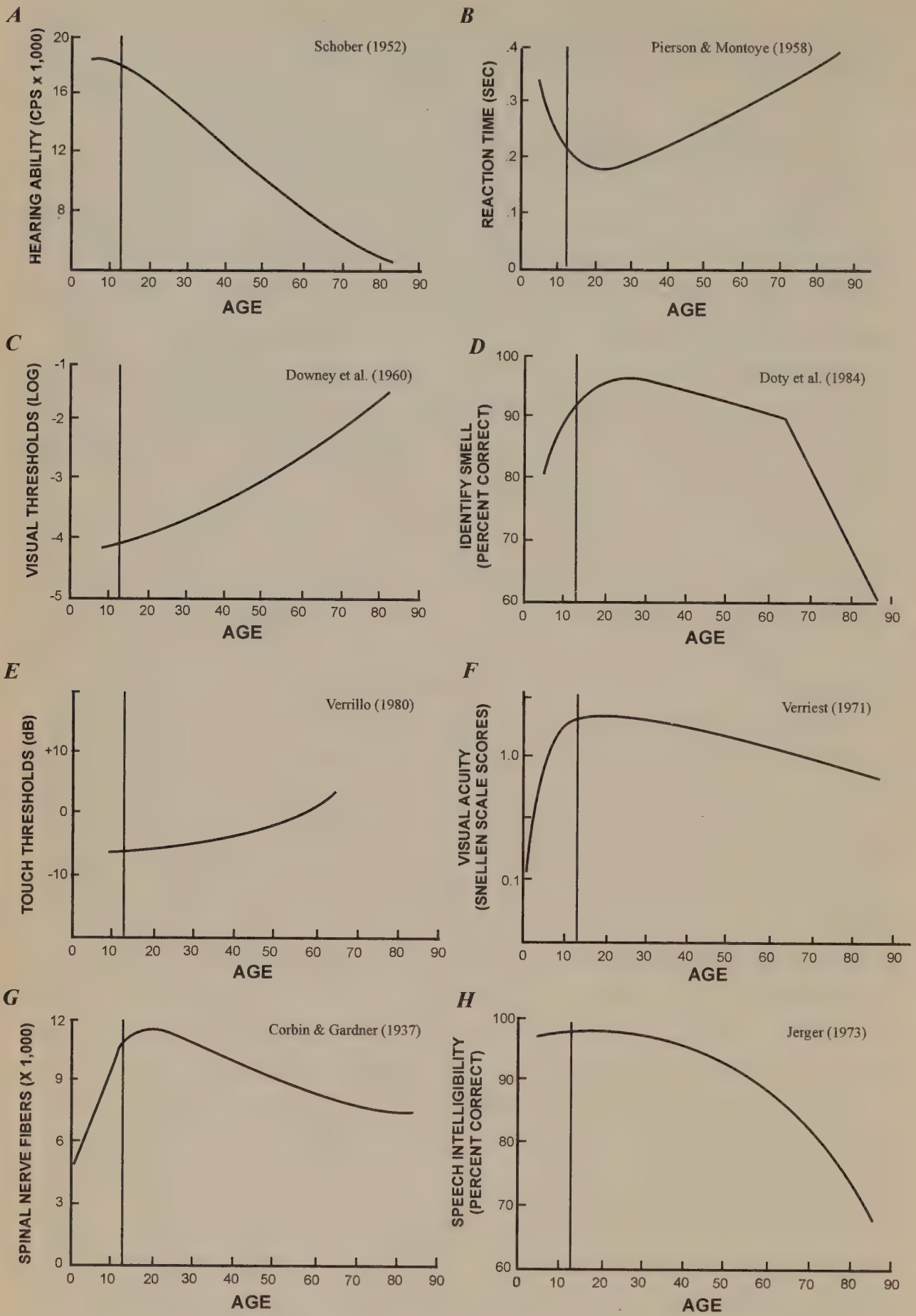


Figure 9.1. Physical Performance by Age. Each graph represents the findings of a study of some aspect of performance. The vertical line to the right of the y-axis marks the approximate onset age for puberty. Note that for each ability, young teens are either at or near the peak of possible performance and that once we're past age thirty or so, we never again perform as well as we did in our early teens.

The only significant exception to this rule is muscle mass. It's not until puberty that we're capable of accumulating significant amounts of muscle mass. Body builders can continue to bulk up into their twenties and thirties, but eventually, even muscle mass begins its inevitable decline.<sup>52</sup> Actor-politician Arnold Schwarzenegger shrunk to about half his muscular size between *Terminators* 1 and 3.

When you add the superior physical abilities of teens to their exceptional cognitive abilities, you should end up with a highly capable group of people. These capabilities exist even when they're not expressed.

### RESILIENCE

Anne Frank had just turned thirteen when she, her sister and parents, and several family friends went into hiding behind a factory in Amsterdam in July 1942. The Nazis had occupied Holland for two years by that time, and Jews were being "called up" in large numbers—stripped of their belongings and shipped off in cattle cars to almost certain death. Anne and her family and companions lived confined and in constant fear for more than two years, getting increasingly disturbing news about the fates of their former neighbors and friends and about the progress of the war. Anne's diary, left on the floor of her "Secret Annexe" after the police finally raided it on August 4, 1944, has become one of the most widely read books of all time.

In a series of "letters" to Kitty, a fictitious friend—mainly about day-to-day life in hiding—Anne reveals herself to be a remarkably perceptive, intelligent, and courageous young woman, determined to make her mark on the world. In perhaps the most moving part of the diary, written in April 1944, Anne recounts a terrifying two days after burglars broke open a large hole in the building in which she and her family were living. The burglars were scared off, but the commotion and hole attracted both neighbors and police. Officers walked through the building several times, just managing to miss the secret cupboard door that led to the rooms where Anne and her companions were huddling.

But Anne's record of this incident is not that of a frightened little girl. Quite the contrary. The stress of this incident makes her more thoughtful and determined than ever:

*Who has inflicted this upon us? Who has made us Jews different from all other people? Who has allowed us to suffer so terribly up till now? It is God that has made us as we are, but it will be God, too, who will raise us up again. If we bear all this suffering and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held*

*up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and for that reason only do we have to suffer now....*

*Be Brave! Let us remain aware of our task and not grumble, a solution will come, God has never deserted our people. Right through the ages there have been Jews, through all the ages they have had to suffer, but it has made them strong too; the weak fall, but the strong will remain and never go under!*<sup>53</sup>

Anne emerges through her diary as the strongest and most mature of her companions in hiding—stronger emotionally than any of the adults. She ends her description of the burglar incident by comparing herself to her mother:

*I am becoming still more independent of my parents, young as I am, I face life with more courage than Mummy; my feeling for justice is immovable, and truer than hers. I know what I want, I have a goal, an opinion, I have a religion and love. Let me be myself and then I am satisfied. I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage.*

*If God lets me live, I shall attain more than Mummy ever has done, I shall not remain insignificant, I shall work in the world and for mankind!*<sup>54</sup>

Anne did make her mark, but it was not by following through on her plans. She was sent by the Gestapo to the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen, where she was put to death in March, 1945, just two months before Holland was liberated by Allied forces.<sup>55</sup>

### Strength through Adversity

For several decades now, mental health professionals have been fascinated by people like Anne Frank—people who are nearly unfazed by adversity, or who overcome it to become stronger people. Though media reports would suggest otherwise, “child abuse” doesn’t always ruin people’s lives. In many cases, children who suffer great adversity are somehow able to overcome it, sometimes even emerging as especially strong, independent, highly-functioning individuals. Some of the most successful people in the world—President Bill Clinton, talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, and actress Suzanne Somers come immediately to mind—appear to have been strengthened by the adversity they faced in childhood. Some experts believe that exposure to severe stressors when we’re young might have a kind of “inoculating effect,” protecting us from stressors in the future.<sup>56</sup>

In recent years, mental health professionals have settled on the term “resilient” to describe people who flourish after experiencing great difficulties. Sports fans might say they have “heart,” a term my son Julian introduced me to years ago when he was taking boxing lessons. “Heart,” he explained, “is what you have if someone beats the crap out of you and knocks you down, but that just makes you get up again and fight harder.” You don’t just get up and wobble; you’re somehow made stronger by your fall.

There are two distinct camps of resilience experts. One camp, exemplified by psychologists such as Norman Garmezy of the University of Minnesota, believes that resilience is a relatively fixed personality trait, and the other, exemplified by Frederic Flach of Cornell University, believes that resilience can be learned. These aren’t necessarily incompatible viewpoints. Our genes predispose us to react in somewhat fixed ways to the world (these are, roughly, our “traits”), and our predispositions are, over the course of our lives, fine-tuned in varying degrees by our experiences (that’s the role that learning plays in making us who we are). There’s no question that resilience can be learned, but it’s not yet clear how to teach it or to what extent it can be taught.

For now, we can put the nature-nurture debate aside. Some children and teens—and, for that matter, some adults—are incredibly resilient; that we know for sure. In recent decades researchers have studied Holocaust survivors, people who were sexually or physically assaulted as children, children of mentally ill parents, children who have endured great poverty, children who lost one or both parents, and children who have survived severe physical traumas, deformities, or diseases. Investigators watch for the resilient survivors and trying to understand their success. At least three long-term studies of resilience have been underway for many years: the Kauai Longitudinal Study, Project Competence, and the Rochester Child Resilience Project, together covering over a thousand people. The point of all this research is to find out what makes resilient people tick, and then, if possible, to find ways of helping at-risk children to become more resilient. Here are the findings of some major studies on resilient teens:

- In a 1988 study, William R. Beardslee and Donna Podorefsky of Children’s Hospital, Boston, conducted interviews with resilient teens who were the offspring of parents suffering from severe depression or bipolar disorder. Focusing on eighteen high-functioning teens, they found that these individuals tended to be “doers and problem-solvers” and to be highly self-aware. They didn’t blame themselves for their parents’ deficiencies, and they had no trouble distinguishing between their

parents' problems and their own. Of special note, as a group they tended to be highly independent, self-sufficient people, and, in some cases, the teens were even the caregivers for their parents.<sup>57</sup>

- In a 1991 report, Lily Hechtman of the Montreal Children's Hospital reviewed a number of studies of people who had been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as children. Hechtman found that many teens flourished after having suffered from this disorder (and, of course, having suffered from a diagnosis that many consider to be of questionable value). The resilient teens tended to have positive temperaments (like Anne Frank), above average intelligence, and good relationships with their peers and family members. They also tended, like the subjects in the Beardslee study, to be independent, self-sufficient people.<sup>58</sup>
- A number of recent studies of the offspring of divorce find that, although divorce is generally harmful for children and teens, perhaps as many as 65 to 75 percent of the offspring of divorce seem virtually unaffected by the experience; like Julian's boxer friends, in some cases those young people even seem strengthened by their fall. The data aren't all in on such people, but generally, the resilient young survivors of divorce seem to have many of the same characteristics as other resilient people: They "think positive"; they don't blame themselves for the breakup; they distinguish their parents' problems from their own; they have intact sources of social support; and they're relatively autonomous.<sup>59</sup>

### Learning to Be Resilient

We've seen resilient young people throughout this chapter: the Lost Boys of the Sudan, the "child" soldiers of Uganda, the resourceful nine-year-old who lived on his own after this mother died, the dedicated young athletes who ignore the pain and keep on trying. Resilience among the young is easy to find when you look for it.

But resilience is almost certainly more than just a fixed trait. Our environments and our learning experiences help make us resilient. Social support, the right role models, and so on, help make us strong. What's more, if theorists like Michael Rutter of Kings College, London, are right, resilience itself might be produced or at least strengthened by *stressors* introduced in our lives at just the right times and in just the right measures; in other words, resilience itself might be the result of a series of appropriate "stress inoculations."<sup>60</sup>

When it comes to today's teens, this worries me. The artificial extension of childhood is, after all, a *protective* mechanism. Those who engineered it, like the forceful Jane Addams, were trying to protect the young from harm; at first it was the harm of the factories, but over the decades, things have gotten out of hand. If we shelter our precious young from stress, from work, from criticism, from failure, and from life on their own—in short, from *adulthood*—aren't we making them less able to cope with the inevitable challenges of life? Aren't we making them less resilient?

The evidence for the “toughness” of teens is, in my view, overwhelming. Again, I need to emphasize that I'm not talking about your everyday teen in modern Brentwood. I'm talking, as I have throughout this volume, about human potential. I'm convinced that many or most teenagers are capable of facing the rigors of athletics, the atrocities of war, and the vicissitudes of life with as much or more determination as any adult. They're capable of feeling genuine patriotism, of showing great courage, and of exercising real leadership. When beaten down, they're capable of bouncing back with fortitude equal to that of any adult. When we infantilize our teens, we might not see these capabilities expressed, but they exist nonetheless.

As for the resilience of young people, I'll let fifteen-year-old Anne Frank have the last word:

*It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.*

*In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.*<sup>61</sup>

**Q:** *It's bad enough that we're allowing women to serve in combat roles in the military. Are you suggesting that we put fifteen-year-old boys and girls at risk on the battlefield?*

**A:** As women have rightly maintained for many decades, as competent individuals it should be up to them to decide what risks they want to take. Their opportunities shouldn't be limited just because someone mistakenly believes all women are frail. The military is a domain in which competency is routinely measured and highly valued. The Marines don't take just anyone; they take people who pass rigorous tests and who meet stringent criteria. If G. I. Jane can measure up, doesn't she deserve a chance to serve our country? And if a fifteen-year-old can also pass those tests, understands the risks and rewards of service, and in other respects is competent to make decisions, doesn't he or she also deserve a chance to serve our country?

## Chapter 10

# Young People Are Creative

---

*Cuz I flow  
Better when my colors show.  
—Avril Lavigne, “Nobody’s Fool”*

**Overview.** *Creative expression is common among pre-school children; it peaks again during the teen years and then tends to decline throughout adulthood. When teens have been allowed to express their creativity in meaningful ways, they have made extraordinary contributions. The Braille system of reading, the Colt revolver, and many other inventions were the offspring of young people. In literature, renowned writers such as Mary Shelley, William Blake, and Edgar Allan Poe started their careers in their teens, and many great composers—Felix Mendelssohn, George Bizet, and Franz Schubert, for example—also started young. Before the twentieth century, it was also not unusual for young people to make outstanding contributions in the field of mathematics. Although the modern world makes it extremely difficult for teens to contribute, a few—like choreographer Wade Robson and artist Alexandra Nechita—have managed to break through. Generally prohibited from operating in the business world, teens have also managed to create hundreds of non-profit organizations serving a wide variety of social needs. Allowing troubled teens to express their creativity has been shown to help put them back on productive tracks.*

I’ve been careful in this volume not to focus on prodigies, in part because most people find prodigies intimidating, but mainly because I’m uncomfortable with the concept. Most of the time, a prodigy is just a child with an obsession and an opportunity: an obsession, say, with art or music, and parents or other adults who are willing—or, in some case, determined—to nurture that obsession. Labels, as I’ve said earlier, are dangerous things, and one of many

problems with the “prodigy” label is that it obscures what’s really going on. It implies that the child’s performance is magical—beyond the ability of normal mortals to fathom or replicate. It turns us away from a search for the factors that might allow us to understand the extraordinary behavior we’re observing. The label itself creates the false impression that we understand, when in fact we usually don’t.

I’ve also shied away from prodigies because the case I’m building is about most or all teens, not about the rare exceptions. At least in some fields—music, art, sports, and chess, for example—the prodigy’s magical aura protects him or her from infantilization to some extent. When we recognize that a young person is exceptional, we sometimes relax the rules.

### **A Prodigious Young Artist**

Alexandra Nechita, a Romanian immigrant to the United States and one of the most celebrated young artists in the world today, fits this profile well. As a young child she was obsessed with drawing, often spending three or four hours a day filling every paper in sight. At age six, she shifted to oil paints and acrylics, again with obsessive passion. Her first exhibit, at a community library in Los Angeles, was held when she was eight, and by nine she had completed more than 250 paintings. By age ten, her abstract, Picasso-like works were sometimes fetching \$50,000 each.<sup>1</sup>

None of these achievements, needless to say, would have been possible without the full support and cooperation of her parents and other adults. Young people aren’t allowed to “pound the pavement” or make “cold calls” in our culture. There are probably more than a few Alexandras suffering through rudimentary arts-and-crafts classes because the adults just aren’t paying attention or are hesitant to inform the local art galleries about their latest “discovery.”

In a published interview at age ten, Ms. Nechita was asked to explain how she was able to paint so much better than her fellow fourth-graders. With both insight and modesty, she replied, “It’s not that my work is so much better than any other kid’s. It’s that I put so much time into it, like three hours a day.”<sup>2</sup> At an exhibit of her works recently, Nechita’s mother told me that one of the main reasons Alexandra spent so many hours a day with her art was because her English language skills were poor; for several years she was simply uncomfortable being around other children.

Fortunately, these are issues that don’t need to be resolved here. We don’t need to decide who is a “prodigy” and who isn’t, whether the label is justified,

or even what it means. The basic issue we need to address is a simpler one: Are teens in general more or less creative than adults? The answer, I believe, is clear, and it provides yet another reason for being concerned about the artificial extension of childhood.

## THE UNIVERSALITY OF CREATIVITY

Laboratory and field research I've been conducting for more than twenty-five years has convinced me that creative potential is universal.<sup>3</sup> The frequency with which people express creativity varies greatly, but the potential for creative expression seems more-or-less equal in everyone, at every age. If the potential is equal, why could Edison produce more than a thousand inventions whereas the rest of us can barely change a light bulb? How was Alexander Calder, the creator of the mobile, able to produce more than twenty thousand works of art over his life time, whereas the rest of us barely produce more than a few embarrassing doodles? And why does the rate of creative output vary so much over the life span?

A thorough answer to these questions could easily fill the pages of another book, but here is the gist: It's clear that creative potential is universal because there is considerable evidence that the neural mechanisms that underlie creative expression—mechanisms I call “generative”—are intact in all of us. We couldn't get through the day without them. We make our way through new environments easily, which requires us to do things we've never done before; we solve problems, large and small, repeatedly throughout the day; and we exhibit “novelty” in our behavior continuously. Virtually every sentence that we speak or write is new in some way, and, when you look closely enough, it's clear that we don't even brush our teeth the same way twice. We are “generative” organisms, from birth to death.

Then why don't we all invent and write and paint and compose? The culprit here is civilization itself. To make people “civil,” we need them to learn to conform to a wide variety of rules and practices, a process social scientists call “socialization.” The process starts at birth, and it shifts into high gear when we start school. As I noted in Chapter Six, studies typically show a high rate of creative expression in young children up through kindergarten age (roughly age five). Children are constantly imagining and playing and sculpting and building and drawing, and they seldom “copy”; copying, in fact, is a skill they need to be

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Diva at Eleven

*Charlotte Church signed her first record deal—with Sony Records, no less—in 1997 when she was eleven. Her first album, “Voice of an Angel,” a collection of hymns and folk songs, went double-platinum within a few weeks, and her first three albums have sold more than eight million copies. She has performed for United States presidents, the Pope, and the Queen of England. She had a professional manager at first; then her mom took over. According to recent reports, she has now dumped her mom and is running the show herself. She has also urged Prime Minister Tony Blair to support legislation now being considered by Parliament to lower the minimum voting age from eighteen to sixteen—her current age at this writing. Ironically, even if she gets to vote, she still won’t be able to control her own millions, which are being held in trust until she’s twenty-one.<sup>5</sup>*

taught. They even draw, literally, outside the lines; no one needs to teach a young child to think outside boxes. By the first grade, however, when elementary schools—now competing nationwide to get high “academic performance indices”—dramatically increase the academic load, the frequency of creative expression declines.<sup>4</sup> Daydreaming and silly questions are discouraged, and there just isn’t time any more for random play.

Although the frequency of creative expression declines after kindergarten, some studies show that the quality of creative expression actually increases. This is because the content of our creative output is influenced by the knowledge and skills we have; the broader our knowledge and the better our technical skills, the more interesting our creative output will be. That’s why significant creative contributions in science, engineering, and the arts often don’t occur until people are older; it can easily take a decade or more to master the knowledge and techniques available in any rich domain.

With powerful social forces bearing down, how do *any* of us end up being “creative”? Here’s where personality factors come into play—and where we can make an interesting prediction about teenagers. Generally speaking, the children and adults who continue to express creativity at a high rate are the *misfits*—the risk-takers and authority-defyers who resist socialization. The children and adults who refuse to sit at a desk all day and who have trouble following instructions also tend

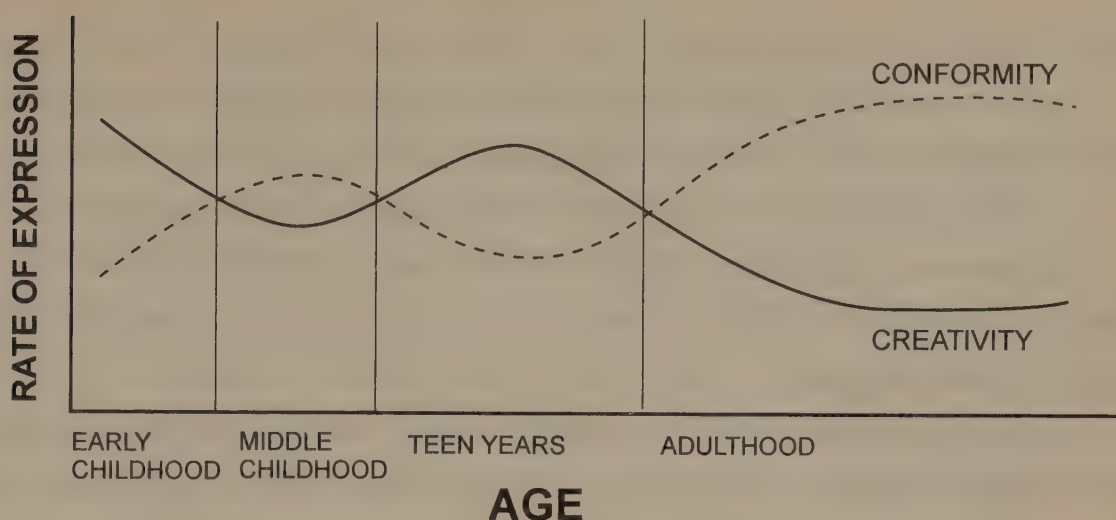


Figure 10.1. **Creativity Across the Life Span.** Idealized curves showing the course of conformity and creativity over the life span. Young children conform only minimally, and they spend much of their day in imaginative play. In middle childhood, the socialization process is in full swing, and the frequency of creative expression declines dramatically, especially during the so-called fourth-grade slump. During the teen years, conformity is low, and creative output increases. Finally, in adulthood, creativity subsides, on the average, to a fairly low level, and conformity is high.

to be the ones who express their creativity most often. This doesn't mean that they're inherently the most "creative" but rather that in a society that shuts down creative expression through socialization, those who resist socialization are most likely to continue to express their new and crazy ideas. Unfortunately, they're also most likely to end up in jail—or even tied to a stake and set on fire.

Which brings me back to teens. Because under today's outmoded system teenagers are made adversaries of adults, as a group they're all misfits in some sense. They're neither adults nor children, and they'd like to be treated like adults but aren't. They're out of place, and many feel angry about that. They often defy authority, take unusual risks, and so on. The prediction is straightforward: Teens should express *more* creativity on the average than adults do, because the less one conforms to society's rules, the more likely one is to live up to one's creative potential. When we look at teen creativity, that's exactly what we find.

## TEEN CREATIVITY: THE UPSIDE OF NONCONFORMITY

A study by Norma Trowbridge and Don C. Charles published in the 1960s is one of the few to compare artistic creativity in young people from ages three to eighteen. Even though very young children spend most of their waking hours

engaged in imaginative play, they don't always score high on tests of artistic creativity, because art is a domain that requires considerable technical skill. Not surprisingly, three-to-five-year olds didn't score quite as high as six-to-eight-year olds in this study, even though the younger children generally have much higher rates of "creative output." But the major finding in this study was the dramatic leap in creativity in the eldest group, young people in the fifteen-to-eighteen-year-old range.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, Trowbridge and Charles also found a dramatic drop in conformity scores in the eldest group. As another researcher, Kennon Sheldon has said, "creativity and conformity don't mix," which is good news for teens.<sup>7</sup> If this same study were conducted today, presumably the nonconformity would start years earlier, and so would the increase in creativity.

So teen rebelliousness does have an upside. It allows teens to ignore social conventions and express their new ideas, no matter what the people around them may think. Unfortunately, when teens start to cross the various lines we've established that separate them from adulthood, they typically start to conform again, and creative output decreases.

Idealized curves showing the inverse relationship between creativity and conformity are shown in Figure 10.1. Notice that creative output is still fairly high in early adulthood but that it declines rapidly. Just how much creativity we'll express and how long we'll continue to express it depends on many factors: how much our profession inhibits or encourages creative contributions (advertising, for example, demands more creativity than accounting does), how much free time we have to ponder and doodle, how skilled we are at stimulating our own creativity (that is, how strong our "creativity competencies" are), how much access we have to physical resources (it's hard to invent rocket ships in one's living room), and so on. Our creative *potential* probably remains constant throughout our lives, but we'll express different amounts and different types of creativity at different stages of life.

### World-Class Creativity

Felix Mendelssohn was seventeen when he composed his best-known work, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Mozart had composed four sonatas and a symphony by the time he was eight. According to Walter James Turner, one of Mozart's many biographers, by the time Mozart was ten, he was "an accomplished master of the contemporary craft of composition equal to any living composer of his time."<sup>8</sup> Picasso's first exhibit of paintings took place when he was sixteen. Franz

Schubert's first great work, "*Gretchen am Spinnrade*," was composed when he was seventeen, and the next year he composed a formidable 143 pieces.<sup>9</sup>

In classical music and art it's tempting to dismiss young contributors as "prodigies," but young people make exceptionally creative contributions in many different fields. The Muppets were created Jim Henson when he was a teen in the early 1950s. They were first broadcast on television in 1954 when Henson was eighteen, and the world-famous "Sesame Street" series began a few years later.<sup>10</sup> Stan Lee, creator of Spiderman, the X-Men, and The Incredible Hulk, among other comic-book legends, published his first comic-book story in an issue of *Captain America* in 1941 when he was seventeen.<sup>11</sup> The English poet, Alfred Tennyson, began writing poetry at age eight and composed a six thousand-line epic poem by age twelve.<sup>12</sup> Waylande Gregory, a major figure in the history of American ceramics, was already an accomplished ceramics maker by age eleven.<sup>13</sup>

Among contemporary people in music, rapper Tupac Shakur started composing when he was fifteen (he was also arrested eight times by the time he was twenty and was murdered a few years later). Vocalist/guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong wrote his first song at fourteen. So did singer Michelle Branch, who also recorded her first CD (on an independent label) when she was seventeen. Singer-songwriter Jewel had her own yodeling act and toured with her father from age six to thirteen; she started writing her own songs at fifteen and cut her first album at nineteen (which included songs she wrote at age seventeen). Stevie Wonder released his first two record albums at age twelve and began co-writing original hit songs by age fourteen. Dancer/choreographer Wade Robson had danced in three of Michael Jackson's music videos by the time he was seven and began directing and choreographing Britney Spears' lavish stage shows when he was sixteen.<sup>14</sup>

Especially notable are the accomplishments of Nikki Reed, who, at thirteen, co-wrote the screenplay of the movie *Thirteen* with director Catherine Hardwicke in only six days during Reed's winter break. *Thirteen*, as I noted earlier, is about the drug- and sex-filled lives of two thirteen-year-olds, based on the real experiences in Reed's life. Evie, Reed's character in the film, quickly corrupts her friend, while her friend's mother, played by Holly Hunter, looks on helplessly. In addition to making her screenwriting and acting debut at fourteen, Reed also moved out of her family home and began living on her own.

### Why Teen Creativity Is Especially Notable

The fact that young people sometimes show world-class creativity (in addi-

## Young Achievers in Art, Music, Literature, and Invention

Name	Field	Age	Description
Giambattista Della Porta (1543–1615)	Invention	15	Gave the first description of a <i>Camera Obscura</i>
Juan Perez de Montalvan (1602–1638)	Literature	17	Wrote <i>Morir y Disimilar</i>
John Milton (1608–1674)	Music	15	Wrote hymn, “Let us, with Gladsome Mind”
Antonio de Solis (1610–1686)	Theater	17	Became known with the play <i>Amor y Obligacion</i>
Abraham Cowley (1618–1667)	Poetry	15	First poems were published
Geotffried Wilhem von Leibnitz (1646–1716)	Philosophy	17	Wrote <i>De Principio Individui</i> on the constitution of individuality Alexander
Pope (1688–1744)	Poetry	17	Wrote his <i>Pastorals</i>
Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770)	Poetry	12	Began writing fake medieval poetry that many believed authentic
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)	Music	7	Composing at a regular pace
William Blake (1757–1827)	Poetry	12	Began writing poetry that appeared in his first book
William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878)	Poetry	13	Wrote a political satire, <i>Embargo</i>
Franz Peter Schubert (1797–1828)	Music	17	Composed the song “Gretchen am Spinnrade”
Mary Shelley (1797–1851)	Literature	10	Published her first poem; began <i>Frankenstein</i> at 18
Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)	Literature	18	Published first book of poems, included poems written at 12 and 13
Louis Braille (1809–1852)	Invention	12	Invented first version of Braille system of reading; completed at 16
Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847)	Music	17	Composed his famous <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)	Poetry	12	Wrote a 6,000-line epic poem
Samuel Colt (1814–1862)	Invention	16	Constructed model of multi-round pistol with a revolving barrel
Paul Charles Morphy (1837–1884)	Chess	12	Already recognized as “the best chess player in New Orleans”
George Bizet (1838–1875)	Music	17	Composed his <i>Symphony in C Major</i>
Walter Crane (1845–1915)	Art	17	His picture, “The Lady of Shalott,” was exhibited at the Royal Academy
George Parker (1867–1953)	Invention	16	Published his first board game; started Parker Brothers

## Young Achievers in Art, Music, Literature, and Invention (continued)

Name	Field	Age	Description
Miles Franklin (1879-1954)	Literature	16	Wrote her first novel <i>My Brilliant Career</i> , inspired movie by that name
Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)	Painting	16	Held his first exhibition in the <i>Café Els Quatre Gats</i>
Maureen Daly (1921- )	Literature	17	Wrote the teen novel <i>Seventeenth Summer</i>
Stan Lee (1922- )	Comics	17	Published "The Traitor's Revenge" in third issue of <i>Captain America</i>
Jim Henson (1936-1990)	Television	13	Began developing "Muppet" characters, first on TV when 18
S. E. Hinton (1948- )	Literature	16	Wrote <i>The Outsiders</i>
Stevie Wonder (1950- )	Music	14	Cowrote his first hit, "Uptight (Everything's Alright)"
Tupac Shakur (1971-1996)	Music	15	Started rapping under the name MC New York
Billie Joe Armstrong (1972- )	Music	14	Wrote "Why Do You Want Him?"; eventually recorded by Green Day Jewel
Kilcher (1974- )	Music	17	Wrote many songs, later on multi-platinum album <i>Pieces of You</i>
Wang Yani (1975- )	Painting	13	Her art appears in galleries worldwide
Isaac Hanson (1980- )	Music	16	Released best-selling album "Middle of Nowhere"; main songwriter
Wade Robson (1982- )	Choreography	16	Choreographed and directed Britney Spears' World Tour
Benjamin Lebert (1982- )	Literature	16	Wrote the autobiographical debut <i>Crazy</i>
Michelle Branch (1983- )	Music	17	Produced her first album <i>Broken Bracelet</i>
Ann Lai (1984- )	Chemistry	16	Developed sensor, monitors sulfur emitted by smokestacks
Julianne Michelle (1984- )	Painting	15	Donates celebrity portraits to charities, worth up to \$17,000 each
Alexandra Nechita (1985- )	Painting	8	First gallery exhibit of her paintings
Amelia Arwater-Rhodes (1984- )	Literature	14	Published her first book <i>In the Forests of the Night</i>
Esteban Cortazar (1984- )	Fashion	13	Designed his first clothing collection; official line released at 18
Nikki Reed (1988- )	Film	13	Cowrote and starred in <i>Thirteen</i>
Chaille Stovall (1989- )	Film	7	Directed first documentary <i>Boyz in Tights</i> ; other documentaries since
Olivia Bennett (1989- )	Painting	13	Published a collection of her works; recognized by President Bush

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Farsighted Twelve-Year-Old

*Louis Braille, accidentally blinded by an awl when he was three (he was trying to imitate his dad's use of tools), used a similar instrument when he was twelve to invent the modern system of raised dots used by blind people around the world to read. It took him until age fifteen to perfect the system. Unfortunately, he died (at age forty-one in 1852) too early to see his elegant system gain worldwide acceptance.<sup>15</sup>*

tion to showing a relatively high level of creativity in everyday activities), is especially significant for several reasons.

First, experts on creativity generally agree that it takes many years of study to master a domain well enough to be able to make a creative contribution in that domain. Teens are at a disadvantage here, yet they sometimes compensate for their lack of years and rise like stars.

Second, the lives of teens are highly regulated and constrained, which limits the ways in which they can develop and express their creativity.<sup>15</sup> For at least the last hundred years or so, the state has regulated how they spend most of their day and what they learn, and the schools have done little to encourage creative expression. In the modern era of standardized national testing, the schools are doing even less in this regard.

Third, young people have to shout extra loud to be heard. They have no obvious avenues for sharing their creative ideas or products with the rest of the world. It generally takes extraordinary initiative to bring the creations of a young person into the public arena. The Internet is creating new outlets, of course, but sometimes the Internet, in its vastness, allows work that is worthy of the mainstream to stay well hidden in the deep recesses of Cyberspace.

When it comes to the creativity of young people, I find myself asking: how much and what types of creativity would they express if they had more control over their lives? If they could own the fruits of their labor? If they were encouraged to express their creativity? If their lives were less regimented?

I'm particularly intrigued by these questions because, even with all the depression and frustration that's common during the teen years, many teens are also incredibly idealistic. They believe that everything is possible in their lives and in the world. Given that inherent idealism as a starting point, what kinds of

marvelous creativity would teens exhibit in a world that encouraged and rewarded such creativity?

## AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPRESSION OF TEEN IDEALISM

The idealism in young people finds expression where it can. Because teens cannot sign contracts or own property, they generally do not form for-profit corporations, but there are fewer roadblocks discouraging them from founding non-profit, charitable organizations, because these have no stock. (I'll look at for-profit endeavors by teens in the next chapter.)

The idealism of youth is expressed with great sensitivity in a recent film called *Pay It Forward*, starring Helen Hunt, Kevin Spacey, and the talented young actor, Haley Joel Osment, who plays eleven-year-old Trevor. Trevor's social studies teacher (played by Spacey) makes an intriguing suggestion to the class—one person can change the world—and then gives his students a daunting assignment: Make the world a better place. Trevor comes up with a simple but brilliant idea to satisfy the assignment: When someone does you a favor, don't "pay it back"; *pay it forward* to three more people. In other words, do something helpful for other people. The idea spreads quickly throughout his community and ultimately throughout the nation, and Trevor becomes a hero.

The movie, released in the fall of 2000, was based on a fictional book by Catherine Hyde, published in February of that year. A few months later, the author created a real organization, the Pay It Forward Foundation, to "inspire young students to realize that they can change the world." The foundation has provided seed money to more than three hundred schools in the United States, Australia, Canada and other countries to help young people tackle problems like illiteracy, pollution, and homelessness. Alas, although this worthy organization recognizes the special capabilities of young people, it also emphasizes that the Pay It Forward idea "requires adult supervision."<sup>16</sup>

### Promoting Charitable Work by Teens

Even more ambitious is an organization called Ashoka, which subsequently spawned an organization called Youth Venture, each founded by social reformer and former MacArthur Foundation Fellow Bill Drayton. Ashoka was founded in 1980 to spread "social entrepreneurship" around the world, and it has since trained more than 1,500 people in fifty-three countries to establish and run charitable organizations. At some point, Drayton noticed that about two-thirds

of the youth-oriented programs founded by Ashoka Fellows were run by or had significant participation by young people:

*For example, young people teaching one another and running school-based businesses in Bangladesh are the heart of a program that has increased enrollments 44 percent and cut the dropout rate in half. In Brazil, street children build and largely run their own schools, and in Indonesia they have created a chain of safe havens.<sup>17</sup>*

The next step was obvious: In 1997 Drayton founded Youth Venture, an organization that promotes non-profit entrepreneurship by young people themselves, one major goal being to help them “take greater responsibility for their lives and communities.” Drayton notes that hundreds or perhaps even thousands of young people have already founded socially-oriented groups and businesses; more important, he insists that many more would do so “if they could overcome attitudinal barriers and resource constraints.” The attitudinal barriers are, of course, flotsam from the artificial extension of childhood, and one might argue that the resource constraints are too. At this writing, Youth Venture has helped young people to create and run more than 150 organizations focusing on topics such as health care for the poor, minority services, urban cleanup, senior services, and autism. (See list on pages 264 and 265.)<sup>18</sup>

As Drayton notes, faced with fewer obstacles than they would encounter in the for-profit world, young people have been creating charitable organizations for a long time. Garrett M. Smith of Oak Park, California, founded one such organization, Kids Who Kare, when he was thirteen. Says Garrett:

*I got the idea to start Kids Who Kare one day when I went to the mall with my friends. I needed some new shoes, so I asked my mom if she would come with us so she could buy the shoes. She had things to do, but she told me that I could take her ATM card and buy the shoes myself. When I was at the register buying my new \$80 shoes, it hit me how fortunate I was and how there are kids only fifteen minutes away from where I live that didn't have the same opportunities.<sup>19</sup>*

With his mother's encouragement, plus free accounting services arranged through a nonprofit service called The Clearinghouse for Volunteer Accounting Services, Garrett established an organization that provides needy children in the

Los Angeles area with school supplies, clothing, or financial aid for tutors or sports camp. At this writing the organization has twenty-two “core members” and has enlisted the help of more than five hundred volunteers. When I last spoke with Garrett, he was preparing a proposal for President Bush, seeking an endorsement. None of this was easy:

*At first most adults didn't think we were serious and that we would never last. They probably thought that Kids Who Kare would be like the usual kids lemonade stand or car wash. But after a while they realized we were real and they did support us. We didn't get that much help from adults, though, mainly because we didn't want it; this organization is run by teens, and we don't want that to change. The only things that adults do is help us with legal papers and driving. Everything else—the fund raising, the ideas, and the day-to-day business activities—we do ourselves.*

Garrett told me that the way his parents raised him had a lot to do with his organizational success: They “expect more than the other parents where I live.” He has had his own bank account since he was eight and got his first part-time job when he was twelve. Not surprisingly, Smith said he was pretty sure he could run a for-profit corporation, given the chance.

## CREATIVITY AS A THERAPEUTIC TOOL

In a promising report published a few years ago entitled “Better Than Dope,” Denver psychology professor Harvey A. Milkman described an innovative approach to helping teens get back on track.<sup>20</sup> They’ve got energy and talent, he said. Why let them waste their potential on the streets? Why let them resort to drugs to get high? Why not expose them to “natural highs,” and what better way to do that than through the arts?

In 1992, with support from the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Milkman, with dance theater director Cleo Parker Robinson, founded Project Self-Discovery (PSD), a treatment program with a twist. The main “treatment” is self-expression through visual art, dance, and music. At-risk teens, according to Milkman, “experience traditional talk therapies as invasive and persecutory,” whereas “dance connects us to sensuality, music provides a safe vehicle for the expression of emotional unrest,” and painting and drawing “provide an opportunity to visualize

## Nonprofit Organizations Founded by Young People with Support by Youth Venture

<i>Founder(s)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Description</i>
Alexandra Sonia	Fullerton, CA Springfield, VA	14 17	Assisting AIDS Orphans Ayudemonos	Provides food, clothing, and books to AIDS orphans in Africa Promotes organ donation awareness among Hispanics
Don, Christina, & Vanessa Joseph	New Hampshire Pacifica, CA	16-17 16	Bohemian Sun Caring for the Coastal Environment	A coffee shop that serves as an outlet for artistic expression Spreads awareness of environmental problems and organizes beach cleanup activities
Haewon & Edmond	New York, NY	17	Child Healthcare for Low Income Minorities	Informs people of their eligibility for free or low-cost healthcare
Conn, Paul, & George Nancy	Pittsburgh, PA New York, NY	15-16 17	Digital Youth Earth, Wind, Water, and Fire Awareness with Friends	Teaches other students how to film and edit their own video productions Promotes environmental awareness in their community
Hydie	Little Neck, NY	17	English as a Second Language	Assists non-English speaking young adults in their language development
Hana	Poway, CA	17	Extended Support for Elementary School ESL Students	A mentor program for elementary school students taking English-as-a-Second-Language
Ijah	Bronx, NY	17	Filling the Generation Gap	Links active teens with senior citizens in need of care & companionship
Chioke	Seattle, WA	17	Franklin Youth Incentive Project	Provides students with community service opportunities
Shannon	Richmond, VA	17	Girl To Girl	Produces a journal written by young women for young women
Azatuhi	Lynn, MA	17	Giving a Helping Hand	Provides tutoring for minority and immigrant students in the third & fourth grade
Alicia	Flint, MI	17	Grant Outreach Program	Informs high school students of financial aid opportunities
Jessica, Rachel, & Ngiste	Highland Park, IL	15	Kids who K.A.R.E. (Kids Autism Research Effort)	Promotes awareness and tolerance of autism and other neurological disorders
Yi	Abescon, NJ	17	LymAware	Educates the public about Lyme disease
Felipe	Long Beach, CA	17	Milestone to Grow	Organizes cleanup of the shores at Long Beach, CA
Tai	Costa Mesa, CA	17	Neighborhood Cleanup Campaign	Organizes trash pickup and recycling in his community
Joshua	New York, NY	17	Outreach Community Program	Tutors fifth and sixth grade students in need of assistance
Cassandra	Marina, CA	17	Pesticide Awareness	Educates the community on the dangers of pesticides

## Nonprofit Organizations Founded by Young People with Support by Youth Venture (Continued)

<i>Founder(s)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Organization</i>	<i>Description</i>
Shannon	Florida	14	Pets Awareness With Seniors (PAWS)	Provides support for seniors caring for pets
Henry Taylor	Boston, MA Baldwin, NY	17 17	Project Outreach Respect Our Seniors Everyday (ROSE)	Assists low-income families with affordable daycare Assists seniors living on fixed incomes
Mohammad	Rowland Heights, CA	16	Rowland Elementary After-School Learning (REAL)	A tutoring and mentor program for elementary school students
Melissa	Westfield, MA	17	SANE Project Expansion	Increases community involvement on environmental issues
Justin	New York, NY	17	Scholarship Search Service	Informs college-bound students about financial aid opportunities
Sophia	Hopewell Junction, NY	17	Seeds of Goodness	Provides seasonal aid to children of migrant workers
Immanuel	Berkeley, CA	16	Select Willard Environmental Education Team (SWEET)	Increases environmental awareness among teens
Peggy	Orange County, CA	17	Sock 'N Sole	Donates socks and shoes to local charities, rescue missions and homeless shelters
Jasmine	Detroit, MI	16	Spic and Span Clean Streets	Organizes weekly cleanups of Detroit streets
Samir	Arlington, VA	17	Street Souljahwear	A clothing line that promotes the artwork and activism of local teens
Teresa	Corona, CA	16	Teens Assisting Youth Outlets	Provides recreational and athletic opportunities for low-income youth
Ben	Diamond Bar, CA	17	The Cultural Education Project	Educates youth on the diversities of cultures
Cheuk	Oakland, CA	17	The Right Track	Provides mentor and tutors to middle school students
Leo	Stigler, OK	17	The Senior Citizen Connection	Links high school students with local nursing homes
Minh	San Gabriel, CA	17	Tutoring for Immigrant Children	Provides tutoring for immigrant families
Rogette	Boston, MA	17	Twenty-First Century Scholars Program	Works to increase the number of minority and immigrant students in exam schools
Jabari	Durham, NC	14	Urban Angels Social Programs, Inc.	Provides positive and healthy activities for inner-city youth
Liqian	Kingston, PA	17	Wyoming Valley Environmental Video Documentary	Provides environmental education to the Wyoming Valley community

topics initially too difficult for words.” The therapeutic value of art has long been known, and some of the greatest artists in history have used their art as a salve or as a vehicle for the expression of their pain.

An after-school program like PSD allows young people to engage in fun yet meaningful, *adult-like* activities during hours that would otherwise be unsupervised. As Milkman notes, it also allows young people to feel the natural joy that creative expression fosters—a constructive form of self-medication. In addition, Milkman is tapping beautifully into the inverse relationship that exists between creative expression and conformity (discussed a few pages back). Troubled teens should be especially inclined to express their creativity, according to this view.

With more than 1,200 Denver-area young people having completed his program, Milkman found lower drug and alcohol use, better mental health, less vulnerability to peer pressure, and better family functioning among many of his graduates. So not only are teens creative, but encouraging them to express their creativity might actually undo some of the damage our society has done to teens through the artificial extension of childhood.

**Q:** *My son wants to quit school to join a rock band. Are you saying that's okay?*

**A:** I don't know enough about your son to give you a specific answer, but please consider: perhaps education should be spread over a lifetime, not crammed into the early years—especially with young people who aren't ready to learn. Also, is your son competent enough to make a reasonable decision about such matters? Does he have basic reasoning skills? Does he understand the risks associated with the different options he's considering? Finally, give some thought to the nature of your relationship with your son. What course of action on your part will strengthen that relationship, and what course of action might weaken it? Generally—assuming that your son shows signs of appropriate competence—offering your trust and respect is the wisest course.

## Chapter 11

# Young People Can Handle Responsibility

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*My mind got mixed with ramblin'  
When I was all so young,  
And I left home the first time  
When I was twelve and one.  
—Bob Dylan, “Long Time Gone”*

***Overview.** Contrary to popular belief, young people are excellent workers, with absenteeism rates substantially lower than those of people in their twenties. Because minors can't sign contracts in the United States, it's difficult for them to start businesses, but a handful of teen entrepreneurs have nevertheless managed to generate millions of dollars in revenues each year. Unfortunately, labor laws and cultural practices developed over the last century generally restrict young people to holding jobs as babysitters and fast-food workers. On the bright side, the success of the new teen-run peer courts—now more than 1,100—strong in the United States—suggests that at least in this narrow domain we're beginning to appreciate the value of giving teens more responsibility. Research on unwed teenage mothers shows them to be surprisingly competent; this research also suggests that one of the main reasons teens get pregnant is to escape controlling adults—in other words, to attain a kind of instant adulthood. Teens need to be given more responsibility, as well as the training and authority that will allow them to meet their new obligations.*

I first saw an article about “ten-somethings” in *U.S. News & World Report* in 1997, right about the time I began formulating the ideas for this book. The article was entitled “Mini Computer Moguls: Forget Paper Routes, Kids Run Tech Outfits Today,” and it was about very young people doing very adult things.<sup>1</sup> Trent Eisenberg was a ten-something who was giving first-rate technical advice online. As a result, an executive at Compaq contacted him with an offer of a full-time job at

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Driven to Save

*A few years ago in a remote area of Nevada, David and Tammyla Hanna and their daughter Krystallyn were camping when disaster struck. Mom poured gasoline on a fire in a barbecue grill, which then exploded, setting her head and hair on fire. Mom needed help, but David was prone to seizures and legally blind, and Krystallyn, age fourteen, had only once steered a vehicle (very briefly on a dirt road). As Tammyla screamed "I'm dying! I'm dying!" David rolled her in the dirt and smothered the flames, then hustled his wife and daughter into their car. Ninety-four pound Krystallyn sat on Dad's lap while the two of them coordinated efforts to drive the car—she doing most of the steering and the seeing and he handling the pedals. After what seemed like "forever," Krystallyn finally spotted an oncoming car, and Dad helped her turn and block the road. The motorist helped them get to a fire station, where Mom was helicoptered to a hospital.<sup>2</sup>*

Compaq's headquarters in Houston. The offer was withdrawn when the executive learned that Trent was fourteen years old. Trent subsequently created his own technical support company, F1 Computer, named after the F1 key on the keyboard—often the key one presses to get help with a program.

Greg Miller began work as a computer consultant for Claris Software at age ten and also subsequently worked for Apple. By twelve, he had also created a company called Tenadar, which produced kids' game software. Danny Kalmick started disassembling and repairing computers at age eleven and by fourteen was president of Kalmick & Co. Computing in Seal Beach, California. He had to get to most of his customers by bicycle, of course. He was able to charge \$20 an hour for his computer repair and consulting services, considerably more than he might have earned delivering newspapers—if, that is, he had been allowed to get a paper route. As we saw in Chapter Two, you need to be eighteen to deliver papers for major newspapers in California.

### Great Potential

Ten-somethings, it seems, have the potential to become a formidable force, especially in high-tech industries. That's assuming we let them do their thing, of course. In Chapter Two I noted that some of the existing child labor laws were brought about by extensive lobbying from labor unions wanting to protect adult jobs, and similar forces are at work today.

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, by 1996, 58,000 young people between ages sixteen and nineteen held part-time computer-related jobs, a figure that's only somewhat higher today.<sup>3</sup> And according to the United States Department of Labor, there were six million workers in this age group in 2005, about 4.2 percent of the total labor force of 141.7 million, down from 4.6 percent of the work force in 2002.<sup>4</sup> The Department of Labor doesn't track employment of young people under age sixteen very closely, so it's hard to say exactly how many are working, but it's obvious—especially in the high-tech area—that hundreds of thousands of them have the capacity to become first-rate workers and entrepreneurs.

So young people can and do work—even, it seems, some very young people. But just how well do they work, and just how responsibly? In what other respects do young people show that they can handle responsibility? I've answered these questions to some extent in other chapters, but the responsibility issue is so central to this book that it deserves some further attention. After all, if I'm suggesting that we give our young people more responsibility, I certainly need to show that they can handle it.

## THEY CAN WORK IT OUT

Although young people can and do work, it's difficult to evaluate them as workers for several reasons: First of all, they don't have the same incentives adults have. Because young people only rarely need to support themselves, their family, or dependents, and because they're often supported themselves by parents or guardians, their income is almost entirely discretionary and disposable. People work hardest when they really *need* to work—especially when they need to support loved ones; if they're simply after more play money, they're not likely to work as hard or to persevere at work they find objectionable.

Second, teens under eighteen have very limited control over their income and property. Why work hard when the fruits of your labor are controlled by other people?

Third, teens are forced to attend school, and school officials and parents typically insist that school work is more important than employment; federal and state law says so too.

Finally, teens under certain ages aren't allowed to work in certain industries, and where, technically, they're allowed to work, no one will hire them. The vast majority of teens who work are employed in fast-food restaurants and supermarkets working at minimum wage or below—hardly the settings to inspire peak work performance.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Jimmy Carter on Business:

*“My first business as an investor and property owner was launched in 1932, when I was eight years old. From the sale of boiled peanuts on the streets of Plains for three years, I had accumulated enough savings to go to the warehouse with Daddy and buy five bales [of low priced cotton], which we brought home and stored in a shed. Several years later, when the local undertaker died, I sold my cotton for eighteen cents a pound and bought five tenant houses from his estate, which I rented by the month.”<sup>6</sup>*

### How Good Are Young Workers?

Putting these concerns aside for the moment, is there any evidence that teens are capable of working responsibly? One of the simplest and most indicative measures of worker performance is absenteeism. You’ve probably heard that teens are notoriously unreliable workers, but that’s not what the data say.

According to a recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, teens sixteen to nineteen-years-old, in full-time jobs have an “absence rate” (the percentage of workers who are likely to be absent on any given day) of 2.8, compared with 3.1 for people from twenty to twenty-four and 3.4 for people twenty-five and older.<sup>5</sup> The older the worker, the more frequent the absences, mainly because of higher rates of illness and injury. Young people are healthy, strong, and resilient, and they also recover quickly from illness or injury. (The government doesn’t track absenteeism in young people under sixteen, mainly because they’re generally not allowed to work. It’s conceivable that younger workers have even lower rates of absenteeism.)

### Setting Up Profitable Businesses

In Chapter Ten we looked at some young people who started nonprofit service organizations, many of which have been quite successful. The way our laws are structured, it makes little sense for a minor to develop a *for-profit* business; minors are under enormous pressure to attend school, for one thing, and they can’t sign contracts or own stock.

Even so, in recent years hundreds of young Americans—some as young as ten—have created thriving, profitable businesses, and several organizations have turned up to cater to their needs. One, called YoungBiz, Inc., was created a few years ago by Steve Morris, a former investment banker who thinks young people deserve “hands-on business education.”<sup>7</sup> At this writing YoungBiz has an upbeat Website and a magazine (called *YE*, for “young entrepreneur”) edited by two adult

professionals, author Bonnie Drew and Dr. Marilyn Kourilsky, a professor who directs a program on entrepreneurship at UCLA. The site and magazine showcase the entrepreneurial successes of people under twenty—people they call “Treps” (from the middle of the word “entrepreneur”).

Originally founded in 1994 (as KidsWay) to “empower young people,” for a couple of years YoungBiz named the top 100 young entrepreneurs of the year. In 2001 *the top ten people on this list netted total profits of \$5.5 million*—not bad considering the obstacles, especially given that their average age was about fifteen. The stories these young go-getters tell are impressive. Consider:

- Matt Chaifetz of Manhasset, New York, started Innovative Travel Concepts when he was thirteen. By age seventeen he had 500 customers and a million dollars in annual revenues. He started the business when he was ill, spending lots of time at home—and away from school.
- Elise and Evan Macmillan of Denver, Colorado started The Chocolate Farm when she was ten and he was thirteen. In 1999 they received an Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year award, and in 2001 their business was rated the top youth food business in the United States by *Young Biz* magazine.<sup>8</sup> They sell a variety of chocolates, as well as kits for making your own, and they also sell chocolates at Denver Broncos football games.
- Pankaj Arora of Rochester, Minnesota started his first software company at fourteen and at sixteen turned down a six-figure salary offer from a computer consulting firm. In 1999 *PC Computing* magazine gave a five-star rating to one of Arora’s programs—a Windows associations manager utility—written when he was fifteen. His idol is Bill Gates, and he also admires Star Trek’s Jean-Luc Picard because “he’s stubborn, he breaks rules, and he takes risks.”<sup>9</sup>
- Melody Moher of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, created Beautiful Braids and Beads by Melody when she was ten. She started by making the rounds at local crafts fairs, offering to braid hair for a small fee; she made \$80 at her first fair. By age sixteen she had four employees and regular pool-side spots at two Florida resorts. In 2002 the Guardian Life Insurance Company recognized her entrepreneurial skills with a \$2,000 scholarship.<sup>10</sup>

Young American tycoons have also formed their own service organization, called, appropriately, the Young Entrepreneur's Organization, which claims to have over 6,000 members worldwide, and young entrepreneurs have been supported to some extent by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, a private organization devoted to promoting entrepreneurship. Several guidebooks for young entrepreneurs have also appeared in recent years, including *Better Than a Lemonade Stand: Small Business Ideas for Kids* by fifteen-year-old Daryl Bernstein, Bonnie and Noel Drew's *Kid Biz*, and *The Young Entrepreneur's Guide to Starting and Running a Business* by entrepreneurship guru Steve Mariotti (with Debra Desalvo and Tony Towle).<sup>11</sup>

### Mixed Messages from Government Agencies

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) is the one of few federal agencies that occasionally recognizes and nurtures the talents of young people. You may have followed the recent success of the two Mars landers that have found evidence that water once existed there. But you probably didn't know that some of the data from these two missions has been analyzed by fifty-four Mars Exploration Student Data Teams, consisting mainly of high school juniors and seniors from around the country.

They're conducting geographical studies, studying Martian weather patterns, developing three-dimensional animations, and making topographical maps of the planet. The goal of the project, according to NASA officials, is to inspire talented young people to think about working for NASA someday—and to get more data analyzed, of course.<sup>12</sup>

Which brings me, sadly, to the U. S. Department of Labor (DOL), the federal agency that oversees all labor-related matters in this country. In 2000 the DOL released a study called "Report on the Youth Labor Force," its first and only comprehensive report on youth labor in the United States.<sup>13</sup> It begins with an inspirational message from then Secretary of Labor Alexis M. Herman:

*I remember my first job—I worked as a summer camp counselor and taught young campers how to tap dance. It was a lot of fun. I worked most summers in my teen years and through college. I still use what I learned from those jobs every day as Secretary of Labor. I truly value those experiences and I'm an avid supporter of jobs for young workers. I know that parents also understand how important early work experiences are. They know intuitively what this report suggests—that teenagers who deliver newspapers, bag groceries, or serve hamburgers in their after school jobs are often more likely to go to college and have better lifelong careers. And make more money, too.<sup>14</sup>*

So far, so good. The report correctly notes that in colonial America young people were encouraged to work and that, with the exploitation of workers that took place during the late 1800s, child labor laws and mandatory education laws greatly restricted work opportunities for children and teens. So where does that put young people today?

According to the report, on family-owned farms young people can still work without restriction, and more than 100,000 young Americans do so every year *without suffering any ill effects*. Among the tens of millions of young people in the cities, about half of those ages twelve and thirteen and about 60 percent of those ages fourteen and fifteen work to some extent.<sup>15</sup> This appears to be great news—until, that is, you see where they work and how much they’re paid.

Twelve- and thirteen-year-olds work almost entirely doing *yard work and babysitting*, and fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds work mainly in *fast food restaurants or as cashiers, baggers, and janitors*, typically working *below* minimum wage.<sup>16</sup>

Even more illuminating is a 2003 report about child labor around the world, prepared by a division of the DOL called the Bureau of International Labor Affairs.<sup>17</sup> The report aptly notes that “not all work is detrimental to children” and that what we really need to be concerned about is “exploitative work,” such as work that “endangers health and development.”

But the overall tone and message of the report are strongly anti-work. We’re reminded repeatedly of children in foreign countries who are forced into the “nightmare of prostitution” or exposed to “dangerous pesticides” or forced to crawl through “unlit and unventilated passageways” in mines or are forced to work “in excess of ten hours a day.” More telling, we’re told that “even when working children are not forced to endure harsh conditions, *child labor entails sacrifice because children give up the opportunity to be engaged in other activities*. The principal activity that children *could and should be doing* instead of working is going to school” (my italics).<sup>18</sup>

This is, of course, the agenda of the social reformers of America in the late 1800s, and we’re going to push it on everyone, everywhere, no matter how outmoded or inappropriate it might be. The fact that most young people in developing nations work *with pride* in order to help support their families is irrelevant. The fact that the vast majority of young people who work (mainly in agriculture) do *not* experience “harsh conditions” is irrelevant. That fact that Western-style schooling segregates young people from adults is irrelevant. The fact that Western practices create a new and dysfunctional stage of life—adolescence—is irrelevant. The fact that prolonged schooling teaches a great deal that the vast majority of people don’t want or need to know is irrelevant.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Freud at Work

*No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community. The possibility it offers of displacing a large amount of libidinal components, whether narcissistic, aggressive or even erotic, on to professional work and on to the human relations connected with it lends it a value by no means second to what it enjoys as something indispensable to the preservation and justification of existence in society.*

—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930)

### Silly Restrictions and Monotonous Jobs

In 2002 the DOL launched an organization called YouthRules with partners such as the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (unions, as we've seen, consistently try to keep young workers out of their industries) and the Child Labor Coalition.<sup>19</sup> The mission: "to increase public awareness of federal and state rules concerning young workers"—in other words, to remind the public that young people are allowed to work very few hours and in very few jobs, *no matter how benign or beneficial the work experience and no matter how competent and motivated the young person.*

A recent article in the *Christian Science Monitor* called "Beyond Babysitting" begins with inspirational stories about young entrepreneurs and then jars the reader with disturbing tidbits about the Department of Labor. For example:

*In Illinois, the Darien Youth Club was facing a possible penalty of over \$500 thousand for hiring twelve- and thirteen-year-olds as umpires for children's pony baseball games, failing to collect work permits for fourteen- and fifteen-year olds, and making some accounting glitches. The Department of Labor and the youth club are now in settlement proceedings.<sup>20</sup>*

In other words, in spite of the hype from Secretary Herman about "how important early work experiences are," the DOL is actually the principal enforcer of a wide body of outmoded and sometimes absurd laws that restrict labor by young people. Radical journalist and author James Bovard drives the point home in a recent essay called "The Folly of Protecting Teens from Work." The thrust of the piece is that teens are much safer in jobs than on the street:

*The Associated Press reported that seventy-three teens were killed on the job in 2000. This is far fewer than were killed and wounded in the narcotics business. Most drug dealers do not abide by the federal regulations for youth labor. Insofar as the government drives kids out of legitimate jobs, they could end up in tasks that are far more dangerous.*<sup>21</sup>

Federal summer job programs, says Bovard, provide “largely a ‘feel-good’ experience” rather than giving young people any real challenges or responsibility. Prominent civil rights activist Bob Woodson echoes Bovard’s concerns: “The programs instill a false sense of work in kids and make it more difficult for them when they go out and try to get a real job.”<sup>22</sup> According to Bovard, “The General Accounting Office noted as early as 1969 that some kids hired in the government summer programs ‘regressed in their conception of what should reasonably be required in return for wages paid.’”<sup>23</sup>

Bovard’s main concern is with the enforcement of laws that mainly serve “labor unions who profit either from having kids confined to classrooms or blocked from competing with their members.” Consider:

*In the Washington, D.C. area one pizza shop operator was found guilty because he allowed seventeen-year-olds to deliver pizza, which the Labor Department considers a “hazardous job” for young people.*

*The Labor Department launched a highly publicized investigation of the Food Lion grocery chain in 1992 for child-labor violations; Food Lion representatives claimed that Labor Department officials had told them that “90 percent of the violations relating to hazardous conditions involved workers under the age of eighteen—putting cardboard into nonoperating balers.”*<sup>24</sup>

He also describes a shameful incident involving the Savannah Cardinals baseball team. In 1993 a DOL official told the team to fire fourteen-year-old bat boy Tommy McCoy because of laws prohibiting young people from working after 7 P.M. when school is in session and after 9 P.M. during vacations. Outraged fans forced the DOL to back down, and Labor Secretary Robert Reich admitted that the policy—at least applied to bat boys—was “silly.” “It is not the intent of the law,” said Reich, “to deny young teenagers employment opportunities, so long as their health and well-being are not impaired.”<sup>25</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Consulting a Teen

*In July of 1998, Phillip Paulwell, Minister of Commerce and Technology for Jamaica, announced the appointment of thirteen-year-old Makonnen David Blake Hannah as a computer consultant to the Jamaican government. His job: “to keep the ministry abreast of Web sites and software to help the government make computers and computer-based education available to Jamaican children.” The size of his salary was not disclosed.<sup>26</sup>*

### Young Nuclear Engineers

Why are young people allowed to do little more than baby-sit, bag groceries, and clean floors at McDonald's? We've seen overwhelming evidence that young people are capable of performing competently in a wide variety of contexts. Do we keep them sweeping floors because, as Thomas Hine suggests in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, we're afraid that in a changing world our own skills and knowledge are fast becoming obsolete.<sup>27</sup> Are we afraid of the competition? Could this be another form of “ephebiphobia”?

A recent five-year study of more than 1,000 teens across America by “flow” guru Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University and Barbara Schneider of The University of Chicago notes, among other things, that the “monotonous” jobs teens have today “are not usually the kind around which vocations are built.” “Actual work experience related to a future career,” they say, “is extremely rare.”<sup>28</sup> We've seen in this volume how, when, and why the work activities of young people were curtailed. Is there any compelling reason the old restrictions should be maintained? Say Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider:

*In principle there is no reason why young people should not have the chance to learn directly, hands-on, what it means to be a nuclear engineer, oceanographer, plumber, or physician. But in practice adolescents have become extremely sheltered from adult work. In the nineteenth century they needed to be protected by child labor laws against exploitation by owners of mines, factories, and sweatshops, but it seems that now we have gone too far in separating children from work.<sup>29</sup>*

## THE PROMISE OF TEEN-RUN COURTS

No, they're not “juvenile” courts, they're “teen courts,” and there's a world of difference. The former are run entirely by adults; the latter—also called “youth”

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

## Identity Crisis

*In general it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily identify with the heroes of cliques and crowds to the point of an apparently complete loss of individuality.*

—Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968)

or “peer” courts—are run in varying degrees by teens themselves. They are, perhaps, the very best example I can give today of a shift *away from* infantilization.

The first teen courts in the United States appear to have been established in the late 1970s, both in Texas (Grand Prairie) and in upstate New York (Ithaca and Horseheads). At least that’s what the American Bar Association, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA), and other organizations would have you believe.<sup>30</sup> As you may recall from Chapter Four, however, teen courts—run *exclusively* by teens—were already going strong in the early 1900s at both the George Junior Republics (founded in 1895) and Boys Town (founded in 1917). (It’s just a coincidence, I believe, that the original Junior Republic was founded just outside of Ithaca, New York, where the teen court would be reinvented seventy years later.) In those peer-run communities virtually *all* community positions—from mayor to police officer to judge to garbage collector—were held by the young residents. The rationale was that the very worst offenders would be set straight if given real responsibility and control over their lives, and the programs, by all accounts, worked far better than today’s “treatment” centers.

## The Odessa Model

The model for most of today’s teen courts was founded in 1983 in Odessa, Texas—a town of 90,000 in the western part of the state—by Judge Natalie Rothstein with the help of City of Odessa and the local Junior League. Rothstein, who died in 1993, believed strongly that young people should be held accountable for their actions and that the best way to get them on track was through peer pressure, peer power, and peer-driven restitution.<sup>31</sup>

Here’s how the Odessa Teen Court works: After a minor is arrested for certain minor offenses (“Class C” misdemeanors such as traffic violations, theft, or minor drug and alcohol offenses), they’re booked and then brought before a regular judge, who explains the options. One option is to *plead guilty* and then to participate in a peer-run hearing in the town’s Teen Court, which is held every

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Giving Away Her Birthday

*On Saturday visits to her aunt's restaurant in San Diego, ten-year-old Gidget Schultz was shaken by the sight of homeless people, especially children. She wanted to volunteer to work in a homeless shelter but was told she was too young. Then she thought of giving her birthday away—literally holding her birthday party in a shelter and celebrating her good fortune by giving gifts to homeless children. That was the beginning of Gidget's Way, now an official California charity with branches in New Jersey and Tennessee. Gidget's Way distributes school supplies, back packs, and teddy bears to homeless children year-round. It even provides local police with teddy bears to carry around in their trunks; never can tell when a furry friend might help keep the peace. Gidget attributes her success to the strong support of her mom. As for her peers, "Some kids have the talent," she says, "but they don't have the will, and they don't have anyone to support their ideas."<sup>34</sup>*

Tuesday evening from 5:30 to 8:00. At the teen court a teen defense attorney and teen district attorney present the case to an all-teen jury, which then recommends appropriate punishment to an adult judge. The recommendation must be unanimous before it can be submitted to the judge, who generally rubber stamps it.

The punishment almost always consists of a number of hours of community service plus, in many cases, required service as a juror in the teen court. Once the terms of the punishment have been met, the offender's record is cleared. All of the personnel in the teen court are volunteers, including the judge.<sup>32</sup>

You can watch a video of an actual proceeding in the Odessa Teen Court online.<sup>33</sup> It's quite impressive. Teen pseudo-attorneys make succinct, jargon-y statements to the jury, and the jury renders an even more succinct, somewhat harsh decision. Everyone is polite and respectful, perhaps even more so than in a conventional court. After all, almost all of the key players are peers, and all of the jurors are former defendants. In a world that has almost completely separated teens from adults, teens respect each other far more than they respect adults. At one point an Odessa police officer reveals that he had been a defendant in the teen court years before and that the experience convinced him both to go straight and to enter the field of law enforcement.

Other teen courts have departed from the Odessa model in one respect or another. In some the teen jury members question the defendant directly; there are no attorneys. In others, a teen serves as judge, typically having first served a number of times as a teen-court attorney.

## Evaluating Teen Courts

Do teen courts work? Initial indications are that they work remarkably well. As I noted in Chapter Two, recidivism rates in juvenile courts are typically 60 percent or so—pretty awful. The Odessa Teen Court reports recidivism rates of 10 to 15 percent for traffic violations and 0 percent for minor drug offenses. In Arizona the Gila County Teen Court reports a recidivism rate of 12.5 percent.<sup>35</sup>

As far as I've been able to determine, a comprehensive evaluation of teen courts hasn't yet been completed, but the rapid growth of the teen court system suggests that it's doing something right. Teen courts work, presumably, because (a) the community service and jury duty meted out to defendants are somewhat punishing, (b) teens are more likely to respect the judgments of their peers than the judgments of adults, and (c) according to an APPA report, teen courts "build *competencies* in youth by providing instruction to youth in areas such as how the legal system functions, and how to communicate and resolve problems with their peers more effectively" (my italics).<sup>36</sup>

Of course it's possible that recidivism for offenders who are brought to peer courts is low because only the most minor offenses are handled there. Remember, too, that offenders must plead guilty before they can even enter peer courts; perhaps they're more savvy and remorseful than the usual offenders (who virtually always plead not guilty).

## Not Far Enough

In my view teen courts have taken a significant step in the right direction, but they don't go far enough. It troubles me that they handle only minor offenses, that they don't judge guilt or innocence (because the offenders have already pleaded guilty), and that the judges are often adults. The Odessa video also makes it clear that defendants are carefully monitored by "four to six adults" at all times. This is definitely not Boys Town. On the bright side, the teen courts do provide meaningful contact with adults in a setting that's considerably less patronizing than juvenile or adult courts.

Teen courts are spreading rapidly, created and administered by juvenile courts, law enforcement agencies, probation departments, schools, and nonprofit organizations. In 1983 there were probably two or three such courts. As of mid 2006 there are 1,109 teen courts in forty-nine states and the District of Columbia.<sup>37</sup> At the moment, Connecticut is the only state without one.

As imperfect as they are, the rapid spread of teen courts is a good sign. It signifies that public policy makers are beginning to rediscover an age-old truth: *When you give young people responsibility, they "possess" it and act accordingly.*

## TEEN MOMS

At sixteen, her life seemed over—at least that’s what some people said. Tykesha Govan of Arizona, had given birth to a beautiful little girl. It hadn’t been her plan, exactly, but she also didn’t like the idea of getting an abortion. So there she was.

She didn’t have much time for high school anymore, and she hadn’t been happy there anyway. She focused her efforts on being a good mom. Less than a year after her daughter was born, though, she heard about a program at the local community college, Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale, that would allow her to continue her education in an environment with flexible hours—outside of the highly regimented halls of the high school. At eighteen, she not only earned her high school diploma (through the community college), she also had about half the credits she needed for her college associates degree. And her daughter is flourishing.

“I got into [the college program],” says Tykesha, “so my schedule could revolve around my daughter. She changed me. She gave me reasons to want to live and be happy.” Her main interests: nursing and mortuary science. She’d even like to own a mortuary some day. “I want to make sure people get good care,” she says. “I want to counsel the families and be someone who cares.”<sup>38</sup>

Lateefah Simon got pregnant two months after she finished high school. At nineteen, she was working, going to school at San Francisco State College, and raising an infant daughter on her own. After a frustrating stint at Taco Bell—that’s about the only job a young person can get, after all—she talked her way into a position at San Francisco’s Center for Young Women’s Development (CYWD). After three years there she was named its executive director, overseeing a \$400,000 budget and a staff of fifteen. Her mission: to help troubled teens, including many very young moms, to make their way in the world. When she was twenty-six, Lateefah’s efforts were recognized with the ultimate plum: an unrestricted \$500,000 gift (paid out over five years) from the MacArthur Foundation.<sup>39</sup>

But perhaps these are just the rare success stories. Maybe most young moms are drinking, doing drugs, and dangling their babies over the railings of high balconies. Just how good are teen moms?

### Evaluating Teen Mothers

Both common sense and research studies suggest that young moms generally do quite well. As we’ve seen, motherhood began soon after puberty during most of human history, and it still does in some parts of the world. Those facts alone should reassure us.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### One Young Mom

*Her first child, Scott, was born when she was fourteen. As of 2005, he was a straight-A student in the ninth grade. At twenty-nine, mom had been married for six years, and was the mother of three. Recently Angela Giles Klocke created a Website called OneYoungParent to help other young moms and dads, and she's working on creating a related magazine called Empowered! Age, she says, has very little to do with the ability to parent:*

*It is always with great joy that I mention my age. I enjoy watching the mental math going on inside of people's heads as they try to figure out exactly how old I was when I had my first son. Once a teacher or parent realizes that everything they may have ever thought about teenage moms might be wrong, they are quick to point out that I am probably an exception to the rule. But I beg to differ. Though there may be many teenage moms who are not raising their children as I am mine, there are just as many moms of the "right age" who aren't also. Being a teenage mom does not mean one cannot raise a good, intelligent child. And it isn't right to assume that one's age has anything to do with it. So the next time you think about the teenage moms you know, remember that there are more of us that do a wonderful job than not. And also keep in mind that age doesn't always mean a thing.<sup>40</sup>*

Research on young motherhood generally confirms the capabilities of teen moms. Are some teen moms neglectful or abusive? Of course, but so are many adult moms. Our concern here, as always, needs to be with human potential. Are teen moms *capable* of raising happy, healthy children? Is it possible that young motherhood is even *advantageous* to some young moms and their children?

Before I address these questions directly, we need to bear in the mind the pathetic context in which most teenage pregnancies occur in the United States. About four in five of our teenage pregnancies occur out of wedlock, and most of teen moms in America are from low-income families.<sup>41</sup> What's more, because of the way we've extended childhood over the last century, teen pregnancy and parenting are now considered *shameful* in our society—history be damned. In short, most teen moms generally have at least three strikes against them before they even get to the batter's box.

Even so, when you look closely at teen moms—even some at the bottom of the heap—success stories like Tykesha Govan's are not uncommon. No matter what the obstacles, young women typically rise to the challenge of parenthood.

A small study published in 1999 by Jean B. Ivey of the University of Texas is illuminating. Ivey found some common characteristics among the eight pregnant teens she interviewed (four black and four white): generally, they considered their own mothers to be controlling and authoritarian, and motherhood was “the equivalent of *instant adulthood*” for them; it meant “they would be treated as adults in the future.”<sup>42</sup> As we saw in Chapter Eight, under the law teen moms *do* become adults to some extent, at least to the degree that they are now legally responsible for the care and support of their own offspring. For some, pregnancy also brings marriage, which in most states triggers immediate legal emancipation from parents. (Two of Ivey’s subjects were married to the young men who had impregnated them.)\*

Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles presents interviews with thirty caring teen parents in his 1997 book *The Youngest Parents*.<sup>43</sup> Among other findings: some young moms saw pregnancy as a way out; as one woman put it, “I wasn’t getting anyplace any other way, and so this was the way for me.”<sup>44</sup> Their children became the primary focus of their love and their energy, and all gained some degree of independence because of their motherhood. Since most were poor, some of that independence came, unfortunately, from welfare payments. For some young parents, a child was powerful motivator; it gave them a concrete reason to want to better themselves. (Meaningful responsibility and authority tend to have that effect.) Coles’ study and others also show that various kinds of training and support programs can help improve the parenting skills of young parents (and, of course, of older parents, too).<sup>45</sup>

These themes—the instant adulthood that pregnancy brings, the competency of young mothers, the value of support systems, and the mixed blessings of the welfare system—are explored in dozens of books published since the 1980s, including a recent volume by Deborah Davis which tells the stories of more than thirty teen moms who have been able to create successful, fulfilling lives for themselves while also being good parents.<sup>46</sup> Several teen moms have also created upbeat guidebooks for those who follow in their footsteps, such as Ariel Gore’s irreverent *Hip Mama Survival Guide*, which appeared in 1998.<sup>47</sup>

Although most studies of teen pregnancy and parenting are largely anecdotal, one large-scale quantitative study published in the 1980s turned up some interesting findings about the factors that lead to teen pregnancy in the first place.

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\*Ivey also found that some of the teens “had responsibilities beyond those commonly expected of teenagers today, which often began between the ages of ten and twelve years” (p. 96). With significant responsibility in their lives, shouldn’t these young women have had the good sense to avoid pregnancy? Ivey also indicates, however, that the parents of these teens were strict and controlling: “Restrictions such as not being allowed to see or telephone the young men were common,” she says. That’s where the problem lies. Giving people responsibility without also giving them authority creates a stressful environment from which they’re anxious to escape.

Based on an analysis of survey information obtained from ten thousand teen moms nationwide, Sandra L. Hanson of the Catholic University of America and her colleagues concluded that mere *knowledge* about sex and birth control does little to prevent pregnancy.<sup>48</sup> The teens who are best able to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancies have two characteristics: first, they've been taught "a strong sense of self-discipline and responsibility" in their homes, and, second, they've developed "strong feelings of control over their lives."<sup>49</sup>

The lessons of such studies are clear. Young women are capable of being caring and competent mothers, even when circumstances aren't favorable. Those who are raised in homes where personal responsibility is stressed *and* where they feel "in control" rather than controlled are best equipped to avoid early pregnancy. And the hundreds of thousands of young women who seek or stumble into early pregnancy every year are, more than anything else, *seeking the independence of adulthood*, which pregnancy can bring about instantly. Finally, parenthood sometimes gives young people the determination and focus they need to succeed in life— "reasons to want to live and be happy," as Tykesha Govan put it.

## HOW RESPONSIBILITY HELPS US GROW

In Chapter Four I posed the question, "Why does responsibility work?," and I offered two possible answers. First, according to what I've called "Role Playing Theory," when we give competent young people adult responsibilities, they simply step into the role of adulthood, just as we step into the role of parent or teacher or police officer when life requires us to do so. Our alternative was Restoration Theory, which suggests that when we give teens adult challenges, their adult capabilities—normally inhibited through infantilization—are simply restored. But what impact, in general, does responsibility have? What outcomes does it produce? And can someone be given *too much* responsibility? Let's tackle the last question first.

### When Have We Given Too Much Responsibility?

There are two ways in which we sometimes give people too much responsibility—or in which we're sometimes given too much responsibility ourselves.

***Insufficient Competencies and Resources.*** First, if we lack either the competencies or the resources to handle our new responsibilities, we'll face enormous frustration, and we might even fail. If your dad says, "From now on you're in charge of the lawn," you'll have a hard time following through if (a) you've never taken care of a lawn before or (b) Dad doesn't own a lawnmower. If you're a new mom you may end up harming your child if (a) you don't know how to change a diaper, (b) you

don't know the proper procedures for breast-feeding or using formula, or (c) you don't have money for diapers or baby food. When either competencies or resources are lacking, responsibility is an enormous burden, and the stage is set for failure.

This is because of what responsibility actually is. When you're given responsibility, your behavior is now linked to *consequences*—mainly negative ones. If you're handed responsibility for a yard or a child or a platoon of troops, this means that from now on *you're the one who will be punished if something goes wrong*—if the yard isn't mowed or the child is injured or the platoon loses battles or suffers casualties. On the upside, if the yard looks great or the child flourishes or the platoon wins a battle, you might also get some credit, but that's not what “responsibility” means. When you're “responsible,” you're the one who pays the piper.

*Insufficient Authority.* We also overwhelm people when we give them responsibility but fail to give them the *authority* they need to get the job done. We say, “You're *responsible* for that baby, but you'd better check with *me* before you feed her, give her any medication, or take her to the doctor,” or, “You're *responsible* for that platoon, but they're taking all their orders from *me*.” Responsibility without authority is not only meaningless, it's often immobilizing and frustrating, and it usually sets up a conflict situation: For one thing, you'll often be in conflict with the person holding the real authority, because he or she may be constantly questioning your judgment or overriding your decisions. If you have subordinates, you'll also be in conflict with them; they'll often ignore what you have to say and defer to the real authority figure. I'll revisit this issue in Chapter Thirteen.

### Why Is Responsibility so Important?

Responsibility is burdensome—there's no question about it. It's something we learn to “handle,” like a bucking bronco or a hot iron. It's something that “responsible” parents try to teach their children, who don't always welcome the lessons. It is indeed tied to punishing consequences, and the more responsibility we get, the more punishment we risk. Most of us tend to have relatively few responsibilities when we're young and to accumulate many responsibilities as we approach middle age: dependents, mortgages, credit card obligations, college tuition payments, and so on. With every responsibility comes the possibility of punishment for failure to meet that responsibility.

*Then what's so good about it?* Why is it so important that our children have real responsibility in their lives? Why do most adults seek it and accumulate so much of it? Why do we frown upon people who can't handle responsibility or who choose to avoid it?

In a word, it's because responsibility brings out our best. Responsibility is a powerful motivator. It makes us push ourselves harder, perform better, and care more. Without responsibility, most people turn to jelly.

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

## Calling Forth Courage

*Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed, they create our courage and our wisdom. It is only because of problems that we've grown mentally and spiritually.*

—M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (1978)

An old friend of mine—now a psychology professor in Florida—once told me about the “worst two years” of his life. He was living on welfare in a Scandinavian country. He had no responsibilities whatsoever. He slept late every day, watched television, smoked marijuana, and read a few books. That’s about it, he said. For *two years*. Perhaps you know a “trust fund baby” who lives this way. It’s not pretty.

Precisely because it’s tied to the possibility of negative consequences, responsibility gets us moving, and most of us would prefer to be productive than slothful. So one reason we *seek* responsibility is to keep ourselves moving forward in our lives.

For the vast majority of us, taking on responsibility is also the only way we have of improving our lifestyles, supporting our families, and acquiring the material goods we want. Unless you’ve been lucky enough to find the perfect sinecure, people will pay you only if you’re willing to assume and meet responsibilities. Generally speaking (and there are many exceptions), the more responsibility you can handle, the more pay you’ll receive. That’s why medical doctors get the big bucks; they’re responsible for preserving life itself.

Studies confirm what you knew all along: Young people can be taught to handle responsibility, and young people who have learned to handle responsibility are more effective in their lives. Linda and Richard Eyre’s 1994 book *Teaching Your Children Responsibility* is one of several that contain tips and exercises to help parents create a responsibility-generating environment at home.<sup>50</sup> We’ve already seen that responsible young females are better able to stay in control of their reproductive lives. A study with eighth graders by Jane Newhall also suggests that young people who have learned how to handle responsible at home are less selfish and more cooperative in their interactions with peers.<sup>51</sup>

A recent study comparing attitudes about responsibility in six countries suggests that the younger we are when we learn to handle responsibility, the greater the sense of social responsibility we have as teens.<sup>52</sup> If there is a down side to learning how to handle responsibility, I’m not aware of it.

## THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY

We've looked at the responsibility issue from a number of different perspectives in this book: historical (Chapter Two), multicultural (Chapter Three), rehabilitative (Chapter Four), competencies (Chapter Six), and even military (Chapter Nine). The success of the peer courts, the competency of teen moms, the solid performance of many young workers and significant accomplishments of young entrepreneurs—all are further reminders of just how much we're underestimating our young people. When you push aside preconceptions, and when you focus not on what American teens usually do but on what teens in general are capable of doing, you can draw, I believe, only one reasonable conclusion: *Many or most teens are capable of handling enormous levels of responsibility—every bit as much as adults and perhaps even more in some cases.* We'll never see this, of course, unless we give them responsibilities to handle. If teens are sheltered from real challenges, they'll continue to perform relatively poorly; as Shakespeare put it in *King John II*, "Courage mounteth with *occasion*."

We've also seen evidence (mainly in Chapter Four) that responsibility is essential for bringing meaning to people's lives, and in this chapter we looked at evidence that suggests that giving people responsibility produces a number of positive outcomes that perhaps can't otherwise be achieved.

Let's take another at responsibility—this time, from a Biblical perspective.

**Q:** *My sixteen-year-old daughter refuses to help with the dishes and can't even keep her room clean. What makes you think she can handle real responsibility?*

**A:** Maybe your daughter can't, but many young people can. Is it fair to restrict the options of millions of young people because your daughter has a messy room? My guess is that even your daughter has enormous potential that she's not expressing. Media icons and her peers are telling her that parents are the enemy and that it's cool to be unkempt and oppositional. And she probably resents the fact that her every move, both in and out of school, is observed, controlled, and restricted. If you and her dad were severely injured in a car accident one day, it is possible that you would see a very different, very strong side of your daughter emerge—perhaps overnight?

## Chapter 12

# What Does the Bible Say?

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*Children take up the torch and we will follow  
Bring some light into this world.  
—Starship, “The Children”*

**Overview.** *Young people in the Bible often function fully as adults: as parents, heroes, prophets, soldiers, and even kings. It’s likely that Mary gave birth to Jesus by age thirteen, and at age twelve Jesus held his own in discussions with wise men at the temple in Jerusalem. The New Testament does not restrict any activities because of someone’s age. The age at which young people are held accountable for their actions varies from one religious group to another: for Catholics the age is seven; for Mormons the age is eight; for Jews the age is thirteen for males and twelve for females. In general, the world’s religions recognize that young people have enormous capabilities—spiritual, intellectual, parental, and inspirational. In the Bible, respect and reverence flow strongly from young to old, but with the creation of the child-centered family a century ago, parents started to serve their children in ways that have done many children more harm than good.*

How old was Mary when she gave birth to Jesus? The Bible doesn’t say exactly—in part, perhaps, because, as we’ve seen in other chapters, exact age didn’t matter very much until recent times—but it does give at least two clues. First, Mary wasn’t married to Joseph before Jesus was conceived, and second, Jesus was her first child. Given the marriage practices of the day, this almost certainly means that Mary was no older than twelve or thirteen when she conceived.

The apocryphal (from the Greek *ἀπόκρυφος*, for “hidden” or “spurious”) book of *James*, written in the second century C.E., claims that Mary was a few years older when she gave birth to Jesus, but this book is generally not taken seriously because it’s unlikely that James, Jesus’ brother, could have written anything

well over 100 years after Jesus was born.<sup>1</sup> Historians are pretty sure that Mary had just entered puberty when Jesus was conceived. As a peasant in Nazareth she almost certainly would have been married off around the time puberty.<sup>2</sup>

As for the age of puberty two thousand years ago, although it's fashionable to say that the onset of puberty used to come at a much higher age than it does now, credible historical and medical evidence says otherwise. For example, according to a volume of the Mishnah (the rabbinical commentary on the Old Testament) that was completed around 200 C.E., puberty onset occurred at about age twelve-and-a-half in Jesus' day<sup>3</sup>—still the average age of menarche in America today. And Roman law designated twelve as the age at which females attained puberty (*pubertas*) rights.<sup>4</sup> Bear in mind that out-of-wedlock pregnancy in those days could bring about excommunication or even death by stoning, so there was enormous pressure to marry young, and we also know that it was common in Greek and Roman cultures for females to marry by age twelve or thirteen.<sup>5</sup> In short, there is every reason to believe that the Virgin Mary—the mother of one of the world's major religions—was a young mother indeed.

We've already seen that young females have been responsible wives and mothers through much of human history, that they are still so today in many countries, and that many of the teen moms in America today are competent and caring, but Mary's young motherhood raises a new set of questions: What was the status of young people in the Judeo-Christian Bible? Were teens infantilized? How much responsibility were they given? What kinds of age restrictions, if any, do we find in the Bible? At what age did young people enter into adult society? Finally, in general, how do the major religions view young people?

It's especially important these days that we add the religious perspective to those of the social and behavioral sciences in trying to understand and evaluate modern adolescence. Religion is playing an increasingly important role in the modern world. I can't imagine today's *TIME* magazine running a cover that reads "Is God Dead?," as it did in 1966. As tensions among the world's great religions continue to increase, I suspect that religion will become even more powerful a force in our society in coming decades. Just what does religion say about young people?

## THE LACK OF AGE RESTRICTIONS IN THE BIBLE

The New Testament contains no age restrictions whatsoever. The Old Testament does have some age requirements, but unless you're a Biblical scholar, they might surprise you. When I began to scour the Old Testament for age restrictions, I assumed that thirteen—the age of the modern Jewish Bar Mitzvah—would be fea-

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

## The Magical Age Twenty

*Here are some of the twenty-eight verses that contain twenty as an age marker in the Old Testament (New International Version). Many of the verses repeat one another; only five restrictions are unique.*

Exodus 30:14: *“All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the Lord.”*

Leviticus 27:3-5: *“Set the [taxation] value of a male between the ages of twenty and sixty at fifty shekels of silver.... If it is a person between the ages of five and twenty, set the value of a male at twenty shekels and of a female at ten shekels.”*

Numbers 26:4: *“Take a census of the men twenty years old or more, as the Lord commanded Moses.”*

1 Chronicles 23:24: *“These were the descendants of Levi by their families... the workers twenty years old or more who served in the temple of the Lord.”*

2 Chronicles 25:5: *“Amaziah... mustered those twenty years old or more and found that there were three hundred thousand men ready for military service, able to handle the spear and shield.”*

tured prominently, but it's not there. I also conjectured that other magical age markers that we find in the Western world—eighteen and twenty-one, for example—had Biblical roots, but those ages are also absent from the Bible.

The one age marker that we do find in the Old Testament is twenty, which turns out to be, at least in some contexts, the age of military conscription (but not the minimum age of military *service*), the age at which people are counted in a census, the age at which Levites (the tribe of priests) were obligated to work in the Temple, the age at which people were required to make offerings to God, and the age at which the tax rate increased.

In one lone verse—*Numbers 8:24*—we find an even higher age requirement: only priests (Levites) age twenty-five and older could participate “in the work at the Tent of Meeting.” Other than that lone twenty-five, twenty is the only age marker one finds in the Old Testament, and it marks eligibility for very few things.

Age requirements are lacking for just about every other activity or right or

penalty one can imagine: ruling, marrying, having children, working, being punished for breaking a law, owning property, making binding agreements, drinking alcohol, leaving home, traveling, studying, riding chariots, and so on. Young people in the Bible did it all.

## HOW THE BIBLE VIEWS YOUNG PEOPLE

The Bible contains several references to “youth” as a time of sin, but the age boundaries of youth aren’t specified, and sometimes, as we’ll see, very young people are given enormous responsibility and treated with great respect.

Perhaps the most famous verse that connects sin to young people comes from the Book of Psalms. “Do not remember,” King David pleads to God, “the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions” (*Psalms 25:7*). It’s clear, however, given the very personal nature of David’s writings, that he was referring merely to his own transgressions, not to the transgressions of all young people.

In one passage in the Old Testament, Elisha, the named successor to the prophet Elijah, is accosted by a large group of youths—called a “gang” in some translations and “little children” in others—and responds by cursing them. As a result, two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the young people, whose ages aren’t given.<sup>6</sup> Was this the equivalent of the modern teen gang? If so, it was judged rather harshly, to be sure.

Generally speaking, young people in the Bible are judged on their individual merits. The wise King Solomon sums up this viewpoint nicely, suggesting that both foolishness and wisdom can come at any age: “Better a poor and wise youth,” says Solomon, “than an old and foolish king...” (*Ecclesiastes 4:13*).

### When Does Adulthood Begin

The Bible never says when childhood ends and adulthood begins, and it also doesn’t delineate a period of life akin to what we now call adolescence. Some English translations of the Bible use the word “youth” where others use the word “childhood,” and the few verses that seem to differentiate the two typically read very differently from one translation to another.<sup>7</sup> For example, the New King James Version of *Ecclesiastes 11:10* reads “Therefore, remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, *for childhood and youth are vanity*,” but the New International Version (NIV) of this verse reads, “So then, banish anxiety from your heart, and cast off the troubles of your body, *for youth and vigor are meaningless*.”

In my view, the last few words of the original Hebrew version of this verse—

ילדות והשחרות (pronounced *yal-DOOT v'ha-sha-cha-ROOT*)—should probably be translated “childhood and youthfulness,” where the second term (שחרות, pronounced *sha-cha-ROOT*) literally means “blackness” of the sort one sees just before dawn.\* One sees the same sort of blackness in the hair of young people—at least in the Middle East; hence the metaphorical foundation of the word. In any case, this verse comes nowhere near singling out teens for special consideration.

More typically we find verses like “He who pampers his servant *from childhood* will have him as a son in the end”—that’s *Proverbs 29* in the New King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. In the NIV, this same verse is translated “If a man pampers his servant *from youth*, he will bring grief in the end.” It’s nearly impossible from such verses to figure out how old people are. (By the way, note the warning in this verse about the dangers of infantilization.)

### Origins of the Jewish Rite of Puberty: The Bar Mitzvah

As we’ll see shortly, young people in the Bible often played important roles in adult society, with their ability or birthright carrying far more weight than their age. Specific age requirements for a wide variety of rights, responsibilities, and activities didn’t emerge until long after the Bible was completed.

According to scholars, for example, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony didn’t appear until medieval times, when thirteen officially became the age at which young Jewish males assumed full adult responsibilities in the Jewish community. Before this time, thirteen may have had some vague significance to Jews but not because of specific Biblical commandments.

The earliest reference to age thirteen seems to be in the ancient Jewish text known as *Pirkei Avot* (the English title is usually *Ethics of the Fathers*, although the book is also sometimes called the *Book of Principles*). It’s part of the Talmud, the ancient rabbinical commentary on the Bible. In one lone verse in *Pirkei Avot*, which appeared around 180 C.E., Rabbi Judah ben Teima listed twelve different ages between five and one hundred which he felt were significant in the life of the Jewish male. Boys should start studying the Scriptures, he suggested, at age five, and at thirteen males should study Scriptures “for the commandments,” which suggests that that’s when they might become responsible for following them.<sup>8</sup>

In the sixth century C.E., another rabbinical commentary on the Bible describes a fictional coming-of-age feast held by the patriarch Abraham for his son Isaac, but the actual Bar Mitzvah ceremony apparently wasn’t put into practice for hundreds of years and wasn’t named until the fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

\*A similar term—שחרית—usually pronounced SHA-cha-reet, is used to denote the Jewish morning prayer service.

## Other Puberty Rites

The Bar Mitzvah is a type of puberty rite, of which hundreds exist in various cultures around the world. Some are fairly simple: in the Jewish ceremony, the young male simply chants, with witnesses present, some or all of that week's Torah portion directly from a Hebrew scroll. It's not the easiest thing to do, but other than the fact that in some congregations people pelt the young scholar with candy after the reading is complete, it also doesn't place life or limb at risk.

In contrast, many puberty rituals are complex and even dangerous, like stunts on the modern television show "Fear Factor." In some Australian Aboriginal tribes, for example, pain is required for passage: a young male in transition to manhood is required to strike his penis with a rock until the penis is bloody and bruised. Afterwards, the men who will instruct him in his new obligations as an adult member of the village knock out several of his teeth.<sup>10</sup> In other groups, a painful genital procedure known as "subincision"—cutting a slit in the penis—is performed.<sup>11</sup> In some Islamic communities, after they've mastered the Koran males near puberty are publicly circumcised as a loud celebration drowns out their screams.<sup>12</sup>

Many societies, including indigenous communities throughout Africa and Australia, mark the coming of age of a female with painful genital surgery. This can involve cutting off all or part of the clitoris and sometimes the labia, as well as closing off the vaginal opening.<sup>13</sup> The Arapesh girls of New Guinea must live without food or water in a sweat hut for six days, thrusting nettles into their vulvas.<sup>14</sup>

In most cultures, once the ordeal is over the individual's status in the community is changed dramatically, with most or all of the rights and responsibilities of adults conferred. The elaborateness and complexity of the rituals vary significantly from one culture to another.<sup>15</sup>

## THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Religions are often concerned with another kind of age threshold—the age at which one is obligated to start following commandments, a matter that has long been hotly debated in religious circles. Sometimes called "the age of accountability," this is the first age at which one is said to be capable of committing a sin, or, in some views, the first age at which one can be held responsible for one's sins. Before that age, no matter what the crime or violation, the wrongdoer isn't held responsible for his or her actions, mainly because it's assumed that he or she can't fully understand the significance of those actions.

Note the similarity between the age of accountability and some aspects of the modern age of majority. Before the age of majority, our legal system presumes that you're still a child, incapable of fully understanding the difference between right and wrong; as we've seen, in its modern legal form that presumption has only been around a little more than a century, and courts and legislatures have been backing away from this presumption in recent years.

### Are We Accountable at Birth?

According to religious authorities, at precisely what age *do* young people become accountable for their actions? That depends on what you read or whom you ask. At one extreme are people who believe that children are conceived in sin. This is the doctrine known as "original sin," held by Lutherans, Baptists, Anglicans, and others. Verses like *Proverbs 20:11* ("Even a child is known by his doings, whether his work be pure, and whether it be right") and *Psalms 51:5* ("Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me") are cited to support this view. The Elisha story (about the young people mauled by the bears) is also sometimes cited in this context, but the fact that the text gives no clue about the ages of the youths makes it difficult to interpret.

Although modern Catholic doctrine departs from this view, early Catholic theologians defended variants on the original-sin doctrine. St. Augustine, for example, insisted that baptism was necessary to save infants from eternal damnation, although he felt that unbaptized infants wouldn't be made to suffer as much as adults who had committed real sins.<sup>16</sup> Other theologians suggested that unbaptized infants will stay in a state of "limbo" for all time, suffering no pain but denied salvation, and still others rejected the idea of original sin but insisted that all children are accountable for their actions, even if they're very young and don't understand the significance of those actions.<sup>17</sup>

### The Age of Reason, and Beyond

Judaism, modern Catholicism, and other contemporary branches of Christianity say accountability begins a higher age, when the understanding of sin first becomes possible. As I mentioned, for Jews young males become fully-accountable adults at thirteen; for females, the age of accountability is twelve. The Roman Catholic church, the oldest and largest of the Christian churches (with about a billion members worldwide), teaches that children reach the "age of reason" at seven. Under age seven, children are said to be incapable of understanding sin, but from seven on they're considered to be accountable for their actions.<sup>18</sup> At seven, they also become obligated to participate in various church rituals, such as commun-

ion. And here's a surprise: According to Catholic Canon Law, a child as young as seven can acquire "a quasi-domicile of his or her own and, if lawfully emancipated in accordance with the civil law, a domicile also."<sup>19</sup>

Seven was a holy number to the ancient Hebrews. It's the number of days in the week, the day of the Sabbath, the number of animals in each group Noah led to the ark, and so on, but that hardly seems like a valid reason for picking it as the age of accountability. In any case, the Bible does seem to exempt small children from accountability in several verses that appear to contradict the original sin doctrine. In *Deuteronomy*, for example, God says, "And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the land" (*Deuteronomy 1:39*), and in the book of *Matthew*, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (*Matthew 19:14*).

The implication of such verses is that young children are free from sin—both original and deliberate—or at least that they shouldn't be punished for their sins. The age-seven cutoff used by Catholics seems unique to that church, but another Christian offshoot, Mormonism, comes close. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* indicates that children "younger than eight" are considered to be incapable of committing sin because "Satan" lacks the power to "tempt" them.<sup>20</sup>

Even for Catholics, however, many rights are withheld from young people until they're considerably older than seven. According the most recent *Code of Canon Law*, where official Roman Catholic doctrines are catalogued, at age seven children are considered to be capable of "personal responsibility" and "reason," but it's not until they're fourteen that they're allowed to choose the church for their baptism.

Until 1917, Canon Law allowed anyone thirteen and over to marry, but at that point the minimum age for marriage was raised to fourteen for females and sixteen for males, and these are still the minimum marriage ages today for Catholics.<sup>21</sup> In 1983 the Catholic church adjusted its "age of majority"—the age at which young people are no longer subject to the will of their parents—downward from twenty-one to eighteen.\* One can't be ordained in the priesthood until age twenty-five.<sup>22</sup>

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\*It's no coincidence that these age adjustments follow general secular social patterns: the Catholic church raised its minimum marriage age right about the time that child savers in Europe and the United States were fighting hard to extend childhood past puberty, and the church lowered its own age of majority not long after the United States and other countries did so. The Catholic Canon—like the official doctrines of many modern churches—states clearly that its rules generally yield to civil laws (e.g., Canons 22, 98§2, 105§1, 110, etc.), and church officials are, after all, products of the society in which they live.

## Looking at the Individual, Not the Age

Many modern Christian churches, such as the Baptist and Pentecostal churches, avoid assigning accountability to a specific age but instead focus on the individual. In a representative essay published in *Faith for the Family* magazine in 1980, pastor Daniel P. Olinger, a faculty member at fundamentalist Bob Jones University, writes that the age of accountability “varies with the individual child” and that “it is a very early age, probably much earlier than most people believe”—perhaps, he suggests, just as soon as the child is capable of lying or disobeying. “When a child is old enough to be concerned about salvation and to respond clearly to questions about the... gospel, he is old enough to be saved,” says Olinger.<sup>23</sup>

For present purposes, let’s rename the age of accountability the “Age of Responsibility”—the age at which young people become responsible for their actions, presumably because they can then *handle* responsibility in some sense. In the theological writings of Judaism and Christianity, different ages are given for this threshold, but none is over thirteen. Let’s keep this in mind as we take a look at just how well some young people actually perform in the Bible.

## SCHOLARS, SOLDIERS, AND KINGS

According to the book of *Luke* in the New Testament, when Jesus was twelve he and his family made their annual trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Passover. When the festival was over, his family left town, and somehow they managed to travel a full day before they realized that Jesus wasn’t with them. That alone suggests that young people weren’t shepherded quite so closely in ancient times as they are now; I can’t imagine leaving any of my children behind in Disneyland and not noticing it for a day or two.

Even more important, while Jesus was on his own in the big city he spent much of his time with “teachers” in the great temple, “both listening to them and asking them questions.” “And all who heard Him,” says Luke, “were astonished at His understanding and answers.”<sup>24</sup>

When his parents finally found him there after a three-day search of the city (he had been apart from them a total of five days), they were “amazed” at how expertly he conversed with the scholars. Granted that Jesus was no ordinary young man, but it’s still significant that just about the only story the Bible tells about Jesus’ youth extols him not for physical ability or appearance or even for his kindness but for his maturity and reasoning ability. He’s able to survive on this own,

and he's able to hold his own in exchanges with temple elders. In other words, at twelve he was able to function like an adult in significant ways. Presumably, like other young men his age, by twelve he was also trained to work in his father's craft—in this case, carpentry.

### Calling Young Prophets and Kings

The Bible is filled with examples of young people holding their own. For one thing, people are often “called” when quite young. The future prophet Samuel, for example, was probably in his childhood or at most his early teens when God spoke to him in a series of dreams. He was so young, anyway, that he was unable to recognize the divine nature of his first two dreams. He kept thinking that Eli, a nearby priest, was calling to him while he was sleeping until Eli finally told him what to say should God call him again (“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening”<sup>25</sup>).

The future King Solomon, too, was shaken when first called by God, protesting, “I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties.”<sup>26</sup> When the prophet Jeremiah was called as a young boy, God quickly dismissed his fears and then informed him of his modest mission: “Today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”<sup>27</sup> It's hard to imagine a taller order than that; God, it seems, did not confuse age with ability.

### Young Soldiers and Leaders

In my chapter on toughness (Chapter Nine), I recounted the Biblical tale of David and Goliath in which young David triumphed in a one-on-one confrontation with a large Philistine soldier. David was apparently so young that he couldn't carry the coat of armor and bronze helmet he was offered for the battle, and he was identified as a “boy”. He convinced King Saul to let him fight by telling him about his fierceness as a shepherd: “When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear.”<sup>28</sup> Even though the Old Testament gives twenty as the age of military *conscription*, it appears to have been common for young people to serve in battle in Biblical times, and even young children were fair game when victorious armies disposed of their enemies.<sup>29</sup>

According to L.R. Wiley's *Children and Youths of the Bible*, “Among the kings of Judah were several who were mere children or youths when they began to reign: Joash, seven; Uzziah, sixteen; Ahaz, twenty; Manasseh, twelve; Josiah, eight; Jehoiachin, eight or eighteen, given both ways; Zedekiah, twenty-one. Of the

nineteen kings of the northern kingdom, some may have been children or youths, but their ages are not given.”<sup>30</sup>

It’s not easy, given the modern mind-set, to imagine leaders so young—or at least to imagine competent ones. Throughout this book, however, we’ve seen strong evidence that many young people are capable of great courage and fortitude, of superlative reasoning abilities, and even of genuine patriotism. As I noted in Chapter Nine, Joan of Arc was only seventeen when she led a French army to multiple victories against the English in 1429, and two contemporary young leaders, Johnny and Luther Htoo, were twelve when they led a group of rebels called God’s Army in Myanmar in 2003.

I no longer have any doubt about the capability of young people to lead; the catch is that their elders might not be so willing to follow. In ancient Israel, young kings appear to have been able to lead effectively for several reasons: First, they ruled in a very young society in which well over half of the population was under eighteen and the average life span was probably not much over thirty-five (a population distribution similar to that of many developing nations today). Second, they came from a charismatic bloodline. Joash was the eighth king of Judah and a direct descendant of King David; Joash was Uzziah’s grandfather, who was, in turn, Ahaz’ grandfather, who was, in turn, Manasseh’s grandfather. Third, they had the imprimatur of the prophets or Temple priests—in effect, a divine mandate to rule.

The young kings seem, on the average, to have been no better or worse than those who assumed power later in life. Joash, who came to power at age seven in about 836 B.C.E., reigned for forty years and generally “did what was right in the sight of the Lord”—at least until his final days. Uzziah, who assumed power at sixteen, was a highly celebrated king who reigned for thirty-two years—until, that is, he angered the temple priests and was struck with leprosy. His grandson Ahaz, it seems, angered the prophet Isaiah—not a good idea—and Ahaz’s grandson Manasseh, whose reign began at age twelve in about 697 B.C.E., encouraged idol worship and persecuted his people. Even though he “did evil in the sight of the Lord,” he managed to reign for fifty-five years.

Perhaps the greatest of the young kings of the Bible was Josiah, who became king at age eight in about 640 B.C.E. and ruled for thirty-one years. When still quite young he began to purge Judah of idols, and he also restored the observance of Passover to the country, which “had not been observed like this in Israel since the days of the prophet Samuel.”<sup>31</sup>

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Hinduism Sans Adolescence

*According to Hindu teachings one's goal is to pursue one's dharma (right path) on the way to moksha (spiritual liberation). Ancient scriptures that delineate the ashramadharma (life cycle of the dharma, or, in Western terms, the stages of human development) omit a stage that fits the Western concept of adolescence. After childhood, the next period is one of apprenticeship (brahmacharya), characterized by "industry and acquisition of competence."<sup>32</sup> Following that is a period when one is head of a household (garhasthya), and then a period of old age (sannyasa), when one attains higher knowledge. As I noted in Chapter Two, adolescence is also missing from Shakespeare's list of life stages.*

## TALES OF WISDOM AND COURAGE

In the Bible young people do just about every impressive thing that adults do—lead righteous lives, make prophecies, show great courage, muster armies, work hard, protect their families, talk with God, and so on. Consider a few additional examples:

### Daniel: Master of Dreams and Diets

In the book of *Daniel*, the prophet's experience as a young child (דניֵל, pronounced "YEH-led") in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is described in some detail. He and his three young companions are recognized by the king as exceptionally bright: "In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom,"<sup>33</sup> and the king comes to depend on Daniel especially for his uncanny ability to interpret dreams.

To avoid having himself and his companions "defiled" by eating meat from the king's table, young Daniel convinces a guard to try an experiment: "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."<sup>34</sup> After ten days Daniel and his friends look "healthier and better nourished" than young men at the king's table, so Daniel's wishes are granted.<sup>35</sup> Not only does this incident show young Daniel to be remarkably perceptive and persuasive—for a person of *any* age—it also identifies him as an early vegetarian!

## Saving Paul

Chapter 23 of the book of Acts describes a dramatic scene in which Paul provokes a heated debate among different factions in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body. Roman soldiers spirit him away to a barracks to prevent him from being hurt. When Paul's young nephew (who isn't named) learns of a plot to kill him, he warns Paul, who sends him to the Roman commander. The commander takes the young man "by the hand"—suggesting that he is very young indeed—and the young man proceeds to persuade the commander to bring Paul out of the city immediately with an armed escort.<sup>36</sup> Here's a young man—perhaps even a boy—who is courageous, who is taken seriously by adults, and who ultimately saves his uncle's life.

## Young Esther Saves the Jews

The book of *Esther*, inspiration for the Jewish festival of Purim, tells the story of great courage by a young Jewish female—probably not much past puberty. The new queen of King Xerxes of Persia, Esther is informed by Mordecai, her uncle, of an edict the king has issued to exterminate the Jewish people. Mordecai entreats her to ask the king to cancel the edict, but she's afraid to do so, because approaching the king without being summoned is punishable by death.

Ultimately she throws a banquet in the king's honor, and there she pleads, with remarkable agility, as follows: "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my request. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."<sup>37</sup> Esther's petition is granted.

## Young Abraham's Cleverness—and Disrespect

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention one of my favorite tales about a Biblical character, even though it's not, strictly speaking, from the Bible. Rabbinical commentators on the Old Testament often wrote stories to clarify passages in the Bible; many were collected in volumes collectively called the "Midrash," composed over six centuries or more. One of the earliest of the Midrashim, *Genesis Rabbah*,<sup>38</sup> completed in the sixth century, contained stories inspired by the Biblical book of Genesis, including a famous one in which young Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, ridiculed his father and others because of their belief in idols.

To make his point, Abraham smashed all of the idols in his father's shop, except for the largest, and he put a stick in the hand of the remaining idol. When his father

expressed outrage over the damage, Abraham told him that the largest idol had smashed the others in a fight over an offering. When his father acknowledged that this was impossible, Abraham interpreted this as evidence that the idols are not really gods. The story, like others we have seen, shows a young person acting with courage, cleverness, and insight—and, in this case, even some brazen but justifiable disrespect.

### The Bible's Respect for Youth

The Bible also reveres youth itself in surprising ways. Job, for example, mourns for his youth—“for the days when God watched over me”—after he has suffered great misfortune as an adult.<sup>39</sup> As we age, great losses and the stresses and strains of daily living do indeed take their toll, chipping away at our energy, idealism, and faith, religious or otherwise. Perhaps that's why we find verses in the Bible that promise the greatest rewards not to the old, wise, and powerful but to children and “the meek.” The meek will, we're told, “inherit the land and enjoy great peace” (*Psalms 37:11*). “Blessed are the meek,” says *Matthew 5:5*, “for they will inherit the earth.”

Isaiah's stirring prophecy about the perfect world to come—and a “child” who will lead—is especially relevant to the theme of this book:

*The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.*<sup>40</sup>

Isaiah paints one of the Bible's most powerful and inspirational images, one that has disappeared from the modern consciousness but that we need to consider carefully: perhaps young people have enormous potential that has been long forgotten—even the power to change the world in positive ways.

## YOUNG PEOPLE AS IDEAL RECIPIENTS OF DIVINE MESSAGES

The Bible also suggests that the innocence of young people is somehow essential for receiving divine rewards or messages. The ancient Hebrews had to stay in the Sinai Desert for decades before entering the Promised Land so that those who had been slaves in Egypt could die off. Only those who hadn't been tainted by suffering were pure enough to receive the great reward.

In the New Testament, Jesus states this idea as a general principal that applies particularly well to children: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (*Mark 10:14*).<sup>41</sup> Jesus also suggests that young people are especially well suited to hearing or understanding God's words: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because,” says

Jesus in *Matthew 11:25*, “you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.”<sup>42</sup>

## Young Marchers

When I was reading about one of the thirteenth-century Children’s Crusades, I ran across one of those self-proclaimed Internet experts who dismissed it as entirely impossible, insisting that 30,000 boys and young men couldn’t possibly have banded together on their own and then marched away from their homes in Europe on a quest to free Jerusalem. It just *couldn’t* have happened, he said, and therefore it *didn’t* happen, even if some medieval writers (including a priest) said it did.

We can never be certain about what really happened, but this we do know: As I mentioned in Chapter Nine, just two decades ago more than 30,000 boys and young men marched on foot out of Sudan in search of a better life—the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan. Many died, but thousands eventually found that better life, including one young man I interviewed for this book.

The Internet expert made the same mistake that so many of us make today: underestimating the potential of young people based on the helpless, troubled, irresponsible teens our own society so often manufactures and maintains.

In fact, historians are fairly confident that two separate Children’s Crusades took place, each in the year 1212. In one march, originating in France, about thirty thousand young people were led by a twelve-year-old shepherd called Stephen of Cloyes, who insisted that he had been instructed by Jesus to lead a crusade of children to Jerusalem. He promised his followers that when they reached the Mediterranean Sea (at Marseilles), it would part for them, but apparently it didn’t.

Many years later a priest who had spent time in North Africa claimed that he had met young Frenchmen who had been sold into slavery there years before. Many of Stephen’s followers, it seems, boarded boats in Marseilles hoping to make their way to the Promised Land; some boats sank, and others were captured by pirates who subsequently sold the young passengers.<sup>43</sup>

A second march, led by a boy named Nicholas, was organized in Germany with perhaps 20,000 young people and adults. This group made it to Rome, where it was apparently turned back by the Vatican.

## Small Recipients, Big Revelations

Nicholas and Stephen—both effective and inspirational leaders—are among many young people who have claimed over the centuries to have experienced divine revelations, and some of these revelations have been taken seriously by the Catholic church.<sup>44</sup>

In 1858, for example, the Virgin Mary supposedly appeared to a fourteen-

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### World Leader at Fifteen

*The Dalai Lama, whose beatific smile and hopeful message have made him one of the most admired people in the world, was officially recognized by Buddhist priests as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion, when he was two years old and was officially “enthroned” before he turned five. On November 17, 1950, after his native Tibet was invaded by 80,000 troops from the newly-formed Peoples Republic of China, he assumed full political power as the leader of Tibet. He was fifteen. Four years later, at age nineteen, he participated in peace talks in Beijing with Mao Tse-tung, China’s chief of state. China has had complete control over Tibet since 1950, and the Dalai Lama has lived in lived in exile in India since 1960.<sup>48</sup>*

year-old named Bernadette Soubirous in a grotto in Lourdes, France, and Mary reappeared eighteen times over the next few months.<sup>45</sup> In 1917 three small shepherd children—Lucia Santo, age ten, Francisco Marto, age nine, and Jacinta Marto, age seven—supposedly witnessed several appearances of Mary in a field near Fatima, a small Portugese village.<sup>46</sup>

Incidents of this sort have been occurring since 40 C.E., but the Lourdes and Fatima incidents are unique in that they were later “authenticated” by the Catholic church, which means that after extensive investigations the Pope himself declared that the incidents actually occurred.

Although not yet authenticated, a fairly recent series of visions by four young Spanish females has been taken seriously by church authorities. Beginning in 1961 in Garabandal, Spain, when the girls were between eleven and twelve years old, they apparently saw more than two thousand visions of St. Michael and the Virgin Mary over a five-year period.<sup>47</sup> Similar incidents have been reported in recent decades in Mexico, Egypt, Spain, Venezuela, Bosnia, and elsewhere. Whatever one believes about the validity of such claims, it’s clear that many of the young people who have made them have been treated with great respect by adult authorities.

### Very Young Saints

Sometimes young people who perform great deeds or report seeing apparitions receive the ultimate honor from the Catholic church: sainthood. Jacinta Marto, who died in 1920 at age nine, and her brother Francisco, who died in 1919 at age ten, were beatified by Pope John Paul II in the year 2000.

In 1854 at age twelve, the Italian Dominic Savio organized a group called the Company of the Immaculate Conception to help support the local home for boys. In 1857 at age fifteen he contracted tuberculosis and died shortly after. His sainthood was declared in 1954.

Joan of Arc started hearing voices of three saints in 1425 at age thirteen and, as I mentioned earlier, was leading armies by seventeen; perhaps even more remarkable, she was supposedly successful in getting her soldiers to stop swearing and to attend church and confession. The voices told her that it was her destiny to lift the siege at Orléans, guide the Dauphin of France to Reims to be crowned, and liberate France from the English. After her capture, she was convicted of heresy for refusing to renounce her claims of divine revelation—and for insisting that the saints spoke to her in French rather than English. She was canonized by Pope Benedict XV in 1920.<sup>49</sup>

For present purposes it's notable (a) that many of the Catholic visionaries and saints have been very young, (b) that church officials have taken their experiences seriously, and (c) that *virtually all* of the young visionaries have been outside the United States.\*

### Why Don't We Have Saints?

Young people have often been taken seriously by the Catholic church for obvious reasons: First, as we've seen, they play important roles in the Bible. Second, many Catholic countries (such as Mexico, which is more than 95 percent Catholic) are poor, and young people in such countries become part of adult society early on. Third, because of verses like *Matthew 11:25*, many Catholics believe that the innocence of the young make them ideal vessels for receiving divine messages; grownups, it seems, are neither as worthy nor as trustworthy in such matters.

Why don't we have child visionaries in the United States? Perhaps it's because we just don't care much about what our young people say. Although it's true that we're devoted to our children in many respects, we have grave doubts about their credibility and judgment. As for teens, our society is structured so that they do almost all of their talking to each other—sometimes using dialects of their own creation. Remember, too, that minors here are relatively helpless. We don't have any choice about listening to the supernatural claims of an adult, but if a child or teen is seeing or hearing things, we're more likely to turn to a mental health professional than a priest, and a therapist is likely to prescribe Clozaril or Risperdal long before recommending sainthood.

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\*Individuals and groups that track apparitions around the world (see [www.apparitions.org](http://www.apparitions.org) and related Internet sites) list dozens of reports in the United States over the past century, very few of which have been taken seriously by church authorities and only one of which originated with a minor—a seventeen-year-old in Ohio.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Young Founder

*As an adult, Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Mormon church, wrote that he experienced his first religious visions at age fourteen (in 1820). He also recalled that in 1823, at age eighteen, the angel Moroni appeared to him at night and informed him about the existence of golden plates buried near his family's farm in New York. The plates contained an elaborate history of the Western hemisphere which today form part of the belief system of the Mormons. He was required to perform a four-year purification, he said, before he could take possession of the plates. He and five associates founded the church when he was twenty-four. At forty-four, Smith was shot dead by a mob in Illinois when he was campaigning for the presidency of the United States.<sup>50</sup>*

## RELIGION AS A REPOSITORY OF TRUTH ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

Religions around the world generally recognize that young people are competent in significant ways, at least in the sense that their minimum age markers tend to be well below those of civil law. It's not clear what this means, though. Because religions are tied to old or even ancient writings, and because those writings can't be altered, it's possible that the minimum ages specified in those writings are just meaningless relics, like the laws of the book of *Leviticus* that require animal sacrifice.

Even though the writings can't be altered, they can be interpreted or ignored to suit changing societal standards; that has clearly happened in some modern churches when it comes to teens. Young Jewish males might have been welcomed into the adult community at age thirteen during medieval times, but that isn't the case today, and the Catholic church occasionally alters its age requirements quite explicitly to conform with secular standards and laws.

So perhaps where the age markers of various religions are low, those religions are simply out of step with society. Religions are understandably sluggish, but we should expect that over time they will catch up to some extent—reinterpreting old verses and laws and stories and, when that doesn't work, ignoring them completely. In other words, no matter how much respect religions have paid to young people in the past, eventually they'll succumb to changing societal norms and come to view young people as helpless and incompetent. That's the message of modern society, after all.

But I hope not. Religions preserve important truths and values that modern

societies, caught up in the vicissitudes of the moment, sometimes tend to forget. With all their flaws, religions anchor us in eternity; they remind us of our past, help us to put the present in perspective, and give us hope for the future.

If you're trying to get fundamental insights about the nature of young people, which source will tell you more: the Bible or the 1989 film *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*? The Koran or the hit television series *Blind Date*? The Hindu Vedas or a sensational news report about the Columbine shootings? Alas, public policy is more often influenced by contemporary hype and stereotypes than by timeless historical writings—or, for that matter, by serious scientific research.

## Other Religions

Religions outside the Judeo-Christian tradition still integrate young people into adult society rapidly, sometimes in ways that some Christians and Jews might find offensive.

According to Islamic writings, for example, the prophet Mohammed was betrothed to his wife Aisha when she was six and he was fifty-three, and the marriage was consummated when she was nine.<sup>51</sup> To this day in some Islamic countries, there is no minimum age for female betrothal.<sup>52</sup>

Traditional Hinduism has somewhat similar practices: Females can be betrothed when very young, although consummation typically is delayed for many years.<sup>53</sup> As I indicated in Chapter Eight, even though civil law in India now prohibits child marriage, it is still widely practiced by hundreds of millions of people, mainly in rural areas. In some cultures, early marriage serves as a sure way to prevent premarital sex, and it also creates immediate ties between families and helps to stabilize communities.

For a tabulation of various age markers for some branches of Christianity, as well as for other major religions, see the table on the following page.

Perhaps because they were founded long ago or perhaps because they capture some essence of human nature (or perhaps both), the world's major religions allow and encourage young people to enter adulthood relatively early in life. As we saw in Chapter Three, however, modern American values are rapidly tearing down traditional social structures in many areas around the world, disrupting the child-adult continuum and creating dysfunctional variations on adolescence wherever American-style schools, movies, television programs, and marketing campaigns have been allowed to cross the threshold.

Minimum Age Requirements in Major Religions<sup>54</sup>

<i>Religion</i>	<i>Age of Accountability</i>	<i>Minimum Age for Marriage, Females</i>	<i>Minimum Age for Marriage, Males</i>
Baptist	individual basis, typically 6-7	maturity and preparedness	maturity and preparedness
Buddhism	no specific age <sup>a</sup>	none <sup>a</sup>	none <sup>a</sup>
Catholicism	7	14 <sup>b</sup>	16 <sup>b</sup>
Hinduism	no specific age	none <sup>c</sup>	none
Islam	puberty	none <sup>d</sup>	none
Judaism	13 <sup>e</sup>	12	13
Lutheran	individual basis, usually 12-14	state law <sup>f</sup>	state law <sup>f</sup>
Methodist	individual basis, usually 12	state law <sup>f</sup>	state law <sup>f</sup>
Mormon	8	state law <sup>f</sup>	state law <sup>f</sup>
Pentecostal	individual basis	state law <sup>f</sup>	state law <sup>f</sup>

a. Buddhism doesn't specify age markers for normal life-cycle events; to the extent that such markers exist, they are established by individual cultures where Buddhism is practiced.

b. Prior to 1917, the minimum age was thirteen.

c. Although betrothal can occur in childhood, consummation tends not to occur until well after puberty.

d. Although betrothal can occur in infancy, the minimum age for consummation is generally said to be nine. Civil laws in some countries establish higher ages.

e. Twelve for females

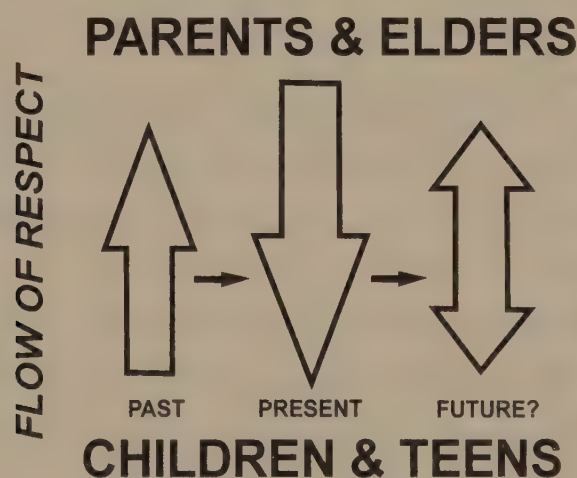
f. Although the age of majority is typically eighteen, in most states young people can marry when they are as young as thirteen or fourteen with parental permission, a court order, or if the woman is pregnant.

## TURNING RESPECT ON ITS HEAD

Through most of human history, respect in families has flowed upwards: from children to parents, from the young toward the old, from contemporaries toward ancestors. This is still true in much of the world today, although the spread of American culture is rapidly disrupting the old patterns.

In the Old Testament, the direction of respect is stated simply enough in the fifth commandment, “Honor thy father and thy mother,” as well as in other verses.<sup>55</sup> The general principle of respecting one’s elders is stated clearly in the New Testament: “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters...” (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

Although the Bible suggests that parents have an obligation to provide for their children<sup>56</sup> and although some Biblical parents certainly expressed love for one or more of their children,<sup>57</sup> nowhere in the Bible are parents commanded to “honor” their children. In the New Testament (but not in the Old), fathers are cautioned against “exasperating” or “embittering” their children—perhaps through parenting that’s too harsh—but the cautions are clearly not meant to offset the obligation that children have to “obey” and “honor” their parents. As for the specific obligations parents have toward their children, only one is stated clearly and repeatedly in the Bible: the obligation to teach them to lead good lives by following God’s commandments. Nowhere does the Bible instruct parents to prevent their children from working, to protect them from the realities of life, or to make sure they’re happy and fulfilled at all times.<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 12.1. Flow of Respect.** In the Bible and in traditional cultures, respect and reverence always flowed upward from young to old (left arrow). The Industrial Revolution reversed the flow of respect in some respects. In the child-centered family, reverence, attention, and service flow downward from parents to children (center arrow). If we once again begin to integrate young people into adult society at young ages—putting competency ahead of chronological age—we will build a society in which young and old view and treat each other with mutual respect (right arrow).

Some of the leading child savers of late nineteenth-century America had strong religious convictions, and it's likely that the only home life they knew was patriarchal and authoritarian. As flawed as that system was, if Jane Addams and her friends could peek at modern America, I think the thing that would frustrate them most about the way their legacy has taken shape is that it has turned respect on its head.

Today's parents may still *want* their children to respect them, but in the modern child-centered family, obligation and reverence often flow downward more than upward. Parents are often consumed with satisfying their children's needs, real and imagined, even while they're still in the womb. Moms and dads play Mozart CDs hoping to raise a fetus's IQ, pre-chew Baby's food rather than putting it in a blender, shuttle young children to a dozen activities every week to maximize their chances of getting into a good college, feel guilty when they haven't put in enough homework time, spend thousands of dollars on fashion clothing and high-tech toys for pre-teens, and exhaust their retirement funds or go into debt to pay for college.

Even more disturbing, not long after they learn how to dial a phone, some children now inform their parents that if they're too harsh, the children will call the police and send the parents to prison for "child abuse." Our modern system of protections for children are set up to err on the side of the child, which makes any style of parenting other than the permissive sort all but impossible to practice.

Our high divorce rate makes things even worse. Single parents go out of their way to please their offspring in order to prevent custody (and child-support funds) from shifting toward their ex-spouse, and the offspring of divorce, who inevitably discover this, often take advantage of their parents' powerlessness.

### Permissiveness

How can we be permissive parents at the same time that we're supposedly infantilizing our teens? After all, infantilization suggests that we're trying extra hard to protect our offspring from harm, perhaps by being extra *strict*—not by being permissive.

But there is no contradiction. We can be permissive while we also infantilize, and we indeed do both. We infantilize our young by keeping them isolated from the adult world and withholding adult rights and responsibilities from them—by trapping them in the meaningless world of youth culture. We continue to protect young people from that world until they're at least eighteen or twenty-one and sometimes considerably older.

Our permissiveness expresses itself in other ways: in our willingness to tolerate disrespectful language and manners that we would never tolerate from adults,

in our failure to set high standards of performance and integrity for our young, in our laxness in getting our offspring to make positive contributions to the household and family, and in our passive acceptance of the complete dominance of peers and peer culture over our offspring's lives.

Modern infantilization and modern permissiveness are, in effect, interlocking: If we allowed and encouraged competent young people to begin entering the adult world in their early teens (as they did through most of human history), the kind of permissiveness we now practice would be largely unnecessary. If a sixteen-year-old male cut back on school in order to set up a business, much of his energy would be devoted to understanding, working with, and pleasing adults. If a competent fifteen-year-old female decided to marry and start a family, she might also seek ways to make sure her new family could live independently of her old one. If a teenage male decided to move out of his parents' home and live with other family members or friends, he would likely be expected to make more contributions in the new household than he had had to with his parents.

In all of these situations the parents have less to be permissive about, because the offspring are moving in the direction of becoming self-sufficient adults. By definition, you can only be permissive with someone over whom you hold some power—with someone who can't act in certain ways without your "permission"; it would be tough to be "permissive" with a police officer or judge.

To a large degree, we're now permissive with our young because (a) they're completely dependent on us, (b) we love them (or at least we used to before they became unruly teens), (c) we can't get rid of them, and (d) we can't control them; if we weren't permissive in at least some respects, we'd soon go mad. If we just let our young grow up, however, they would soon be subject to the very real controls of adult life, which are far more powerful and persuasive than the artificial and ineffectual controls we're able to bring to bear as parents.

## Respect

As for respect, I'll offer a prediction: *If we stop infantilizing our teens, they'll start respecting us again.* Under the authoritarian system of parenting, respect was probably based largely on fear. Dad's message was, "You had better respect me—or at least *show* me respect—or I'll punish you severely." Most people will indeed at least "show" respect in such situations, but a more meaningful kind of respect is based on a mix of empathy and admiration. You might respect Grandma, for example, in a way you don't respect Mom or Dad, because you sense that Grandma has genuinely suffered or is suffering, because she has overcome many obstacles in her life, and, most important of all, because she treats *you* with respect. In the

working world, you might respect a boss or coworker for similar reasons: He or she has accomplished a great deal, he or she performs well, and he or she shows respect for *you*.

In the lingo of today's teens, infantilization might be considered the ultimate "*dis*"—that is, a sign of disrespect—and *dissing*, as you may know, is one of the harshest things teens do to each other. It's difficult for teens to respect their parents when, as far as the teens are concerned, the parents aren't showing the least bit of respect for *them*. Teens usually begin to show real respect for our parents only after they've been out in the real world for a while—when they learn just how hard it is to put food on the table. They start to see their parents through entirely new eyes—the eyes of adults. The parents, in turn, might finally begin to show their offspring the respect their offspring always wanted.

This process often takes many years in our culture, but there's no reason to continue to delay it as long as we do. If we can, once again, learn to recognize the competence of our young and to judge them based on that competence rather than on their age, I believe that they'll begin to show us the respect we deserve. More important, we'll create many parent-child and adult-youth relationships that are based on a genuine *mutual* respect, not just on coercion or fear.

Perhaps more than any other source that people take seriously in modern times, the Bible shows us a world in which young people were judged more often for their abilities than their age and in which children and teens were rapidly integrated into the adult world—one of the reasons, presumably, why they respected that world. Young females—and even Mary herself—became competent wives and mothers soon after puberty, and young males—David, Samuel, Isaiah, Joash, Daniel, Josiah, and many others—became warriors, heroes, prophets, and even kings just as soon as the challenges arose. Although gender restricted roles and opportunities in the Bible, age generally did not, and the child-adult continuum was nearly seamless.

The major religions have preserved clear images of mature and competent young people who were important members of their families, communities, and cultures. Religious texts and practices provide, in my view, another important piece in the puzzle I've attempted to assemble in this book. Anthropological and psychological studies say that many young people are highly capable individuals whom we should take seriously and treat with respect. Our religious heritage says the same.

**Q:** *Do you have any unstated political or religious agendas in advocating your unusual views on adolescence?*

**A:** None of which I'm aware. My politics have been moderate for decades, and I can see why people on both sides of the aisle might be appalled by my perspective—or might applaud it. I'm not out to please or offend anyone; I've simply become convinced of the rightness of my arguments based on research I've conducted, interviews with teens, and an examination of documents in the fields of history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on.

I'm a Jew by background, but I'm not aware of any religious basis for my position. Historically, at least as of the fifteenth century, Jews welcomed young men into adulthood shortly after puberty through the Bar Mitzvah ritual, but this practice was hardly unique to Jews; cultures around the world have developed rituals like the Bar Mitzvah to mark puberty. Moreover, the real meaning of the Bar Mitzvah seems to have been lost to Jews over the last century; industrialization changed religious practice just as it changed many other aspects of our lives. The capabilities of teens got buried under the ashes of the factories, and neither religious practices nor old traditions were sufficient to keep the true character of teens alive.



# Part 3

How We Must Change



## Chapter 13

# How Society Must Change

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*I wanna run through the halls of my high school  
I wanna scream at the top of my lungs  
I just found out there's no such thing as the real world  
Just a lie you've got to rise above.  
—John Mayer, “No Such Thing”*

***Overview.** Young people should be extended full adult rights and responsibilities in each of a number of different areas as soon as they can demonstrate appropriate competence in each area. Passing appropriate tests will allow competent young people to become emancipated, sign contracts, start businesses, work, marry, and so on, but I am not suggesting that young people be given more “freedom.” We need to start judging young people by their abilities, not by their age, just as we’re now doing increasingly with the elderly. The societal changes I’m proposing have the potential to reconnect young people with the adult world, to inspire young people to behave in responsible ways, and to eliminate much of the turmoil we now see during the teen years. Young people have always tended to resist the artificial extension of childhood, and there are a few signs in recent decades that this century-long phenomenon may be slowing or reversing.*

I worked on an outline for this chapter while sitting on the rear patio of a sandwich restaurant near my home. One of the things that kept me going was a conversation between two teenage males at the next table. They were sixteen or seventeen, I’d say, and dressed like black hip-hop artists: saggy, baggy pants held up by that mysterious Force from Star Wars; multi-colored boxer shorts showing prominently; black pullover “beanies” (even though it was eighty degrees outside and we were all sitting in bright sun). They both slouched so low it’s a wonder they didn’t slide off their chairs. Again, that mysterious Force at work.

They spent the entire forty minutes I was there talking about skateboarding, mainly repeating the same things over and over. The word “dude” was used frequently. The gist of the conversation was that they would, or possibly would not, be skateboarding with some friends at a certain place, or possibly another place, either later today, or perhaps tomorrow, or perhaps not at all—and they might, or might not, “get air,” which is a really good thing to get.

These are the teens we have created: mindless consumers, dressed from head to toe in the garb prescribed by specialized divisions of the music and fashion industries, isolated from their heritages and their elders, producing nothing of value for their families or their society, obsessed with non-issues fed to them by waxen heroes. The young men next to me seemed content in their ignorance, but many of their peers want more, and they often don’t know how to express their legitimate needs and desires. Based on my interviews with teens, my experience as a father and teacher, research I’ve conducted, and a wealth of data in several fields, I no longer have any doubt about what disenchanting American teens need, no matter how inappropriately they may sometimes choose to express what they want. They need to be reconnected with the adult world—the world they will inevitably join before that skateboard even reconnects with the ground.

## REVERSING THE ARTIFICIAL EXTENSION OF CHILDHOOD

The artificial extension of childhood needs to be reversed, and below I’ll present some ideas that I believe can set this reversal in motion. I’m not suggesting these changes because I have a personal stake in them or because they fit my credo, politics, or religion; in fact, as a father of four and as the flawed product of the flawed society about which I’m writing, I’m uncomfortable with a number of the items on my list. I’m including them—even the ones that make me uneasy—because all of them are, I believe, strongly suggested by the wealth of data I’ve presented in this book.

Please note that throughout this list I’m emphasizing the need for young people to demonstrate competence—a matter I’ll say more about later. Also note that I’m taking great pains to avoid making the blanket, often reckless recommendations that one finds in books like John Holt’s *Escape from Childhood* (see my Chapter One). Any steps we take, large or small, need to be both reasoned and reasonable. They need to be based whenever possible on empirical research rather than on anecdotes, folklore, sensationalistic headlines, or religious or political imperatives. And they need to be examined closely with the future in mind, taking into account the possible consequences, both positive and negative, of our actions in each area.

## Emancipation

Currently it's extremely difficult for a young person to become legally free of his or her parents; this makes emancipation quite rare—so rare that it often makes headlines. States specify minimum ages for emancipation (typically sixteen), and generally young people must demonstrate good cause for the action and also show that they can support themselves—tough to do in an ephibiphobic society that requires long hours of schooling and limits work opportunities.

One thing the courts don't require, of course, is evidence that the teen is competent to function as an adult. To me, the change to be made is apparent: A young person of any age who can pass a series of state-approved adult competency tests should be able, without court involvement, to receive a Certification of Emancipation from the state. There should be no minimum age requirement for taking the tests or for receiving the certification.

The key to a workable emancipation system is the battery of competency tests. As I've said earlier, it's remarkably easy to develop such tests, and we, the infallible ruling elite, will have complete control over their construction and administration—at least for a while! Moreover, we're the ones who will determine the score that is required to pass each test. The content can include basic adult competencies (such as the ones Diane Dumas and I included in the *EDTA*—see Chapter Six), and it can also include basic school content. In other words, we can set the emancipation bar quite high, if we choose. Personally, I'd lean toward requiring young people to achieve a score that is at least at the fiftieth percentile level for adults over twenty-one—meaning that on each test the applicant must score higher than half of the adults over twenty-one currently do. That's quite a safety margin.

But won't life be difficult with an emancipated young person under one's roof? Doesn't emancipation mean that Mom and Dad can't legally exercise control over their children? And doesn't it also mean that our precious offspring will no longer have the important protections that the state now offers young people? To put these questions into perspective, please consider that the fourteen million young people between ages eighteen and twenty-four who currently live with one or both parents are also “emancipated” and that they typically get along with their parents quite well, at least in part because the living arrangements are voluntary.<sup>1</sup> Parents are required by law to support their unemancipated offspring, but parents who *choose* to cohabit with their offspring and offspring who *choose* to cohabit with their parents are generally pretty content.

Because certain means of coercion (such as corporal punishment) are no longer available to the parent in this situation, he or she must deal with the son or daughter

with a certain degree of respect. On the other hand, the parent now has the option of turning the young person out onto the street, which gives the parent a legitimate reason to ask the son or daughter to help out with rent, chores, and so on. The young person, too, has more options: to move in with relatives or friends or lovers, to quit school (remember those rigorous competency tests), and to work long hours. If he or she stays with the parents, it's because doing so serves his or her legitimate needs.

Imagine that: *parents and their offspring, all under one roof, showing each other mutual respect and working together for their mutual benefit.*

Won't there be chaos in schools if administrators no longer have parental rights to control their students? It's true that some emancipated young people will choose to work instead of staying in school. Others will choose to stay in school, subject not to the pseudo-parental whims of high school staff but rather to the laws of adult society.

Imagine that: *young people in school voluntarily, perhaps because they want to learn something.*

An age-free, competency-based emancipation system will, I believe, cut the heart out of "adolescence." The incentives for young people to prepare for the tests will be enormous, and even if they don't pass all of the tests, they'll still reap great benefits from the process of preparation—they're preparing for adulthood, after all—as well as from the limited privileges they obtain when passing certain tests (see below).

Meanwhile, imagine the triumphant fifteen-year-old male running down the court house steps echoing Martin Luther King's words, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!" (Of course, he isn't *really* free at all, is he? I'll return to this matter toward the end of the chapter.)

## Juvenile Justice

The time has come to end the grand judicial experiment that began just over a hundred years ago in Cook County, Illinois. The juvenile justice system was created by a handful of leaders who were caught up by the sentimentalist views of children sweeping the country in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Chapter Two). The system works poorly, if at all, and it hasn't fulfilled its mission. The original rationale for the system—that young people could be "nurtured" back to sweetness and light in supportive, female-run facilities where they would have no contact with hardened criminals—was completely off-track by the 1930s. Reformatories turned into poorly-staffed, overcrowded prisons, filled with acne-faced variants of every kind of adult criminal imaginable. And juvenile courts took away more human rights than the KGB did during its heyday.

Today it's becoming increasingly clear that young people should be held fully accountable for their actions—that young people who can be shown to understand

the difference between right and wrong, to have basic reasoning abilities, and to understand the serious nature of their crimes should pay the price for what they have done. Today when they commit serious crimes, young perpetrators are sometimes “waived” to the adult courts, but there’s still a chance they’ll stay in “juvie,” where they’ll get a slap on the wrist and where their juvenile record will likely be buried forever when they reach eighteen. And they know this all too well. Many minors count on the fact when they commit a crime, the worst fate they’ll suffer—if they even get caught, that is—is a few years in a juvenile facility (where they can sharpen their criminal skills) followed by a clean slate.

The best deterrent against crime by young people is to have all crime handled by the adult criminal justice system, with public hearings and permanent records. When the perpetrator is young and immature, judges and juries can make allowances as necessary, just as they do now when an adult is impaired or when there are extenuating circumstances in a case. When a young person must be incarcerated and the courts have concerns about housing young and old together, they can separate young criminals from older ones, just as they do now. Perhaps even more important, with just one criminal justice system, young people will be guaranteed all of the due process rights that are promised by the United States Constitution—rights often denied them by the highly-flawed juvenile justice system.

And what about those questionable “crimes against the self”—the multitude of crimes that were invented just for teens and that can’t be committed by adults? What about truancy, dirty dancing, staying out late, and “incorrigibility”? Again, I think the time has come for adults to grow up. We need one standard of crime, not two. If we locked up every adult for the “crimes” they committed against themselves, who would be left to turn *that* key?

## Education

Compulsory education may have seemed sensible in the late 1800s when tens of thousands of impoverished young immigrants were running ragged in the streets of America’s exploding industrial centers. Moralists like Jane Addams felt a duty to rescue the young, and industrialists like Henry Ford wanted to keep the teeming masses in check. But today’s America is a very different beast. A century ago we rescued young people from the factories and the streets; now we need to rescue them from the schools.

For many young people schools are little more than secure warehouses, complete with all the trappings: metal detectors, observation cameras, and armed guards. The students are the commodities being guarded, but most don’t want to be commodities—even the few who are genuinely interested in learning. Alas, a great many of our students aren’t even ready to learn, or at least they’re not ready to learn what the schools

are ready to teach. As pioneering educator Kurt Hahn told us in Chapter Four, teachers continue to try to fill vessels without first checking to see “whether the lid is off.”

Schools are supposed to propel young people forward, but they actually hold many back, preventing them from moving forward with work or more specialized training. Schools are also supposed to foster a love of learning, but they actually teach many people that the classroom is a place of torment and humiliation. As a result, after we complete the minimum schooling we feel we absolutely must have, most of us steadfastly avoid the classroom for the rest of our lives.\* We need new options, and especially options that will reduce the turmoil of the modern teen years.

- *We need shorter compulsory school hours, a shorter compulsory school year, and fewer required school years.* Recall that the first compulsory education law in the United States wasn't passed until 1852, and it only required people from eight to fourteen to attend school three months a year—less, if they could show they already knew the material. Leon Botstein, longtime president of Bard College and the youngest college president in United States history (at age twenty-three), recently called for the abolishment of high school.<sup>2</sup> It's an idea worth exploring, although giving most young people ways to circumvent high school is probably enough of a fix.
- *Students need options, the most important being the option to test out of courses, school years, or school altogether.* Students also need the option of balancing work and school on flexible schedules—just like some adults do when they're trying to switch professions or advance their careers.
- *Mandatory schooling needs to cover just the basics:* reading, writing, arithmetic, and citizenship being the most obvious subject areas—more than we require of immigrants before we grant them citizenship but not much more. Schools also need to teach basic reasoning skills and a love of learning—the cornerstones of meaningful lifelong learning. Finally, schools need to give people the tools they need for finding information, as well as for locating and preparing for the kind of specialized training they wish to have to enter the adult world. Specific instruction in a wide range of topic areas is largely a waste of time for the vast majority of our students, in part because they're not interested, in part because they'll never use what they're being taught, and in part because most of what we teach them is forgotten before they exit the building.

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\*Karen Edwards, an old friend from my Harvard days, coined the term “academic trauma” to describe this phenomenon after noticing how many Harvard undergraduates developed a serious aversion toward learning as a result of their school experiences. As of this writing she's working on a book on this topic.

- *We need to shift away from teaching in the traditional classroom environment.* There's nothing sacred about the schoolhouse classroom; it became common simply because it was the most efficient means available for trying to convey lots of information to lots of students. Although the classroom is a marginally efficient tool of mass production, it's actually a horrible system for individuals. People have different learning styles, different backgrounds, and different interests, and they also learn at different rates. When instruction is adjusted to take individual needs into account, *everyone* turns out to be an avid learner, but this can't happen in the conventional classroom. Having taught for twenty-five years, I know all too well what all experienced teachers know: The classroom at its best serves only a fraction of the middle third. It cheats and bores the outstanding students; it frustrates and punishes the lower third; and it has only a minimal impact on the most of the middle third.
- *We need to shift toward new methods of individualized instruction.* Home-based instruction needs to be looked at with fresh eyes, especially now that we have a powerful, inexpensive tool for educating almost everyone both individually *and* efficiently—namely, the Internet. The self-paced instructional systems proposed by Sidney L. Pressey in the 1920s and B. F. Skinner in the 1950s are gradually becoming a reality, with a new feature they could never have envisioned: Self-paced, high-quality instruction can now be provided anywhere, anytime, from any one of millions of computers that are connected to the Net. In theory, good software can even be designed to emulate the most outstanding teachers in history, preserving the genius of people like John Taylor Gatto for future generations. According to a new study by the federal government's National Center for Education Statistics, home schooling is indeed growing fast. As of 2004, the number of home-schooled young people at least 1.1 million—an increase of 29 percent over just the previous four years. The non-profit National Center for Home Education says the number of home-schooled young people is actually two million.<sup>3</sup>
- *One of the most factory-like aspects of the modern school—segregation by age—needs to be ended.* Through most of human history, teens spent most of their time with adults, not with each other; as we saw in Chapter Three, this is still true in developing nations today. And until the late 1800s, classrooms brought people together over a

wide age range. Grouping people together by age is a very recent phenomenon, and from a learning perspective it makes no sense.

- *Education needs to be spread out over one's life, not compacted into the childhood and teen years.* There are many reasons for this, but the most obvious is that the world is changing with increasing rapidity. A good portion of what you learned in school five or ten years ago—especially in the sciences or in high tech—is now obsolete. (Of course, I'm assuming here that you can even remember what you were taught, which is unlikely. Can you even remember the names of the teachers you had in high school?) Trying to teach every important thing an “educated” person needs to know in twelve years of instruction might have made sense a century ago, but it makes no sense now. Learning needs to be lifelong, and school—if it continues to exist at all—needs to provide people with the tools and inspiration they need to continue the learning process.

I realize that many of the recommendations I'm making in this chapter may never come to pass. But in the education area I'm optimistic. The Internet is like the mischievous Puck, crouching behind America's exhausted teachers, ready to buckle their legs with just the right shove behind the knees. When the time is right, even behemoths like the National Education Association will be toppled.

The Internet allows for decentralized, individualized, self-paced learning and true on-the-fly distance learning. No classroom and no teacher can compete with that. Even more significant, instructional software is only going to get better—much, much better—while teachers will remain as they are. As broadband becomes more commonplace, real-time one-to-one tutoring will become more practical, and this is only the beginning. Internet II, which first went online in 1999 and is now being used by select institutions nationwide (but not in homes), has about a thousand times the capacity of the Internet you and I use. It will allow high-fidelity real-time communication with virtually unlimited capacity. It's only a matter of time before the so-called Ultranet or Meganet comes to a living room near you, and that plus some superior software is likely to burn the old schoolhouse to the ground.

These technical developments alone will tend to reverse the artificial extension of childhood to some extent, because: (a) they'll keep many young people at home and away from peers, (b) they'll provide a platform for self-paced instruction (and hence end age segregation in education and allow some people to progress rapidly toward professional specialization), and (c) they'll create many opportunities for young people to combine work with education.

## Reintegrating Teens into the Adult World

### *Summary of Changes Needed*

<i>Abortion</i>	Young women of any age who can pass an appropriate competency test (demonstrating reasoning ability, awareness of consequences, and so on) should have the right to make the abortion decision without parental notification or consent; the procedure, when chosen, should be subject to the approval of a licensed physician.
<i>Contracts</i>	Young people of any age who pass an appropriate competency test should have the right to sign contracts.
<i>Corporal Punishment</i>	Striking an emancipated young person (see below) should be made a criminal offense; parents or school authorities should be able to strike unemancipated young people only when they can demonstrate that other reasonable means of behavior management have failed.
<i>Curfews</i>	Curfews, when necessary, should be applied to people of all ages; curfews should not discriminate by age; parents of unemancipated young people should remain responsible for their behavior.
<i>Dress and Appearance</i>	Young people of any age should be given rights equivalent to existing adult rights; for invasive procedures (tattoos, piercings, etc.), they should be required to pass a test showing appropriate reasoning ability and awareness of consequences.
<i>Drinking</i>	Young people of any age who pass one or more relevant competency tests should have drinking rights equivalent to existing adult rights, with commensurate responsibility for drinking-related damages.
<i>Driving</i>	A graduated series of licenses should be issued to young people of any age when appropriate and rigorous competency tests are passed; the license should be subject to revocation based on performance.
<i>Due Process</i>	Young people of any age should be granted broad due process rights equivalent to those of adults without having to demonstrate competence.
<i>Education</i>	Segregation by age should be ended; emphasis should be put on satisfying individualized instructional needs; more home- and Internet-based instruction should be available, as well as more options to blend school and work and more options for testing out of courses or degree programs; the minimum age of school leaving should be reduced substantially; education should be spread over one's life, as needed and desired.

<i>Emancipation</i>	Young people of any age should be granted full legal independence from parents simply by passing a wide range of state-approved competency tests.
<i>Entertainment</i>	Rating systems for movies, music, and games should be maintained; emancipated young people or people of any age who have passed appropriate competency tests should be able to make purchases or enter public facilities (theaters, clubs, etc.) without restriction.
<i>Free Speech</i>	Young people of any age should have broad free speech rights equivalent to those of adults without having to demonstrate competency.
<i>Independent Living</i>	All emancipated young people (see above) should have the right to live independently of parents or guardians, as well as the right to own or rent property; rights should be protected under Equal Housing laws.
<i>Juvenile Justice</i>	The juvenile justice system should be abolished; all crimes should be handled by the existing criminal justice system, with allowances made for the immaturity of the accused, just as they are made for the developmentally disabled or mentally ill; separate cells or prisons should be available for young perpetrators as needed for safety; judges should have discretionary power to transfer cases to youth-run peer courts.
<i>Lawsuits</i>	After passing appropriate competency tests, young people of any age should be able to file lawsuits.
<i>Legal Representation</i>	After demonstrating appropriate competencies, a young person of any age should have the right to represent him- or herself in court; as a defendant in a criminal case, he or she should have the right to counsel without needing to demonstrate competence.
<i>Marriage</i>	After passing one or more appropriate competency tests, a young person of any age should have the right to marry without parental or court consent.
<i>Medical Treatment</i>	After passing one or more appropriate competency tests (demonstrating reasoning ability, awareness of consequences, and so on), a young person of any age should have the right to make his or her own medical decisions.
<i>Mental Health Treatment</i>	After passing one or more appropriate competency tests (demonstrating reasoning ability, awareness of consequences, and so on), a young person of any age should have the right to make his or her own decisions regarding psychiatric care; parents should no longer have the right to commit

	<p>young people who can demonstrate appropriate competencies or who have been emancipated; young people should no longer be subjected to "treatment" unless suffering from legitimate disorders (such as schizophrenia or autism).</p>
<i>Military Service</i>	<p>After passing one of more appropriate (and presumably rigorous) competency tests, emancipated young people of any age should have the right to serve in the military; unemancipated young people will need the permission of a parent or judge</p>
<i>Pornography</i>	<p>If they can pass an appropriate test of maturity, young people of any age should have access to pornographic materials commensurate with adult access.</p>
<i>Privacy</i>	<p>Emancipated young people of any age should have broad privacy rights equivalent to those of adults; the privacy rights of unemancipated young people should be limited somewhat.</p>
<i>Property</i>	<p>After passing one or more appropriate competency tests, young people should have the right to own, control, and dispose of property.</p>
<i>Religion</i>	<p>Young people of any age should have the right to practice the religion of their choice without having to demonstrate competence.</p>
<i>Sex</i>	<p>After passing one or more appropriate competency tests (demonstrating sexual knowledge, physical and emotional maturity, awareness of consequences, and so on), a young person of any age should have control over his or her sex life.</p>
<i>Smoking</i>	<p>After passing one or more appropriate competency tests (demonstrating reasoning ability, awareness of consequences, and so on), a young person of any age should have the right to smoke.</p>
<i>Voting</i>	<p>After passing one or more appropriate competency tests (demonstrating basic knowledge of our political system, relevant issues, and so on), a young person of any age should have the right to vote in elections.</p>
<i>Wills</i>	<p>After passing one or more appropriate competency tests, a young person should have the right to make a will.</p>
<i>Work</i>	<p>After passing appropriate competency tests, young people of any age should have the right to compete with adults for any job; they should also get equal pay for equal work and should have the right to start, own, control, and dispose of businesses.</p>

## Work

Young people in America have been prohibited or discouraged from working for nearly a century now. We need to allow them to start working again, and not just in fast-food establishments. I'm not talking about exploitation or abuse, just the opportunity to become productive members of their families and of society at large.

My specific proposal is this: Any young person, no matter what his or her age, should be allowed to apply for any job. If he or she can demonstrate appropriate competencies, he or she should be taken seriously as a candidate. If he or she performs poorly, he or she should be fired. Just like in the real world. Just like with adults.

Young people should receive equal pay for equal work, just as women are supposed to be entitled to under the Equal Pay Act of 1963. They must also be able to own and control the money they earn through their labors—which brings me to the property issue.

## Property

A few years ago, I had trouble getting insurance for a second home I was trying to rent out. Renters, I was told, simply don't take care of property as well as owners do. Property that's occupied by owners is maintained far better than property occupied by renters. Realtors say this phenomenon is the result of "pride of ownership": people care about what they own. A third category of occupants—let's call them prisoners, for want of a better term—is the worst kind of all. Reluctant occupants—people who would rather be elsewhere but don't have much choice in the matter—generally don't care at all about keeping the lawn trim or the paint from peeling.

American teens are in Category Three. Past a certain age they are often reluctant occupants of—in other words, prisoners in—the home of one or both parents, and parents, at that point, become reluctant jailers. Teens living under a parent's roof are generally not allowed to own or even to rent property of any sort; even when they are somehow able to do so (say, with parental permission), they never have complete control over it. Even their treasured phones and CD players can be confiscated without notice or explanation by Mom or Dad or other authorities. (In one of the most poignant scenes in *The Virgin Suicides*, Lux's mom forces her to burn some of her precious record albums in a fire, and the rest are put out with the trash.) It should surprise no one that teens are sometimes reluctant to take out the garbage. What's the point? It's not *their* house and it's not *their* garbage—even if, as is likely, they're the ones who generated it.

If we want our young people to value property, we need to give them full property rights, along with the responsibilities that such rights entail. The rights can be given inalienably, as the Constitution provides, or they can be given in stages, based on competence demonstrated through a series of tests. To me, the competency approach is the safer, more rational one. If performance is poor, one or more property rights can be rescinded until corrective steps are taken. I know of no reason for establishing a minimum age on property rights.

For property rights to be meaningful, young people will need a whole new set of options in life, and other basic rights (such as a meaningful right to privacy, which I'll discuss shortly) will need to be granted to them. Moreover, their rights will need to be clearly codified in law.

Once young people have demonstrated that they are competent to own property, parents and other authorities should no longer be able to manipulate them by threatening to confiscate what they own. If this makes you bristle (assuming you're an adult), think about it this way: As long as you've made your payments on time and haven't run anyone over lately, no one can take away your car. And no one can confiscate your clothing or stereo system or furniture or photo albums or computer simply because you were rude or because you failed to do your homework or because you smoked a cigarette. *Ownership is meaningful and absolute when you're an adult, and your very identity is determined to a large extent by your property: your clothes, your home, your memorabilia, your nicknacks, and so on.* Imagine if all of the property you control were subject to the whims of an authority figure. What would that do to your sense of security?

By giving competent young people full property rights, we lose some degree of control over them; in return, we get more responsible, more secure, more independent young people. Those who pass the tests take measurable, fulfilling steps toward full adulthood, and those who don't pass are highly motivated to do so on their next try.

### **Sex, Marriage, and Abortion**

The rights of young people in all three of these controversial areas need to be firmly grounded in competencies. In other words, if a young person—no matter how young—can pass one or more tests showing that he or she understands what marriage is all about, knows how to make a relationship work, and is aware of the responsibilities that marriage entails, then he or she should be allowed to marry. If a young person can pass one or more tests demonstrating that he or she knows about the risks of sex, knows about birth control, is physically and emotionally mature, and so on, then he or she should be exempted from laws that may restrict his or her sexual behavior.

Abortion needs to be handled in a similar fashion. A young woman should be allowed to make the abortion decision if she can demonstrate that she is competent to make such a decision. The key questions here are: Does she have adultlike reasoning powers? Is she aware of the risks of the procedure? Does she have a basic understanding of the relevant moral issues? And is she aware of the possible negative consequences of having an abortion? A relatively simple test can determine all of this reliably, but because abortion is a medical procedure, the abortion itself should be subject to approval by a licensed physician. In all of these areas, there should be no need for notification of or approval by parents or other authorities. Once competence is established, even if it's in a narrow domain, the appropriate rights and responsibilities should be conferred.

### Medical and Mental Health Decisions

These are also areas in which competence is key. A young person who can demonstrate basic reasoning abilities and who can show that he or she is aware of the possible benefits and risks of a procedure should be able to make the treatment decision without interference from an adult. Emancipated young people should be given such rights automatically. No competent young person should ever be medicated, subjected to surgery, or institutionalized without his or her consent. If you question that, keep in mind that “adults”—defined by age only—can't be treated against their will even if they're immature and uninformed. I'm suggesting, in effect, that we *raise* our standards, not lower them.

But then there are those gray areas—especially when it comes to physical and mental health. Someone who has just suffered a head injury in a car accident may not be conscious. Someone who is experiencing schizophrenic delusions may not be capable of thinking rationally. Who should make treatment decisions for incapacitated young people? Emancipated young people should have the right (when they're conscious and capable) of naming the responsible individuals by executing a “power of attorney” or equivalent document, just as adults do. Unemancipated young people will probably need to remain under the control of their parents in such situations.

### Driving, Drinking, and Smoking

Young people already drink and smoke fairly freely; there's no easy way to stop them. As I discovered the hard way many years ago (with my two eldest sons), they also sometimes drive before they're legally allowed to do so. Our from-the-hip reaction is to get tougher and meaner, but that just makes most young people more secretive and more angry. Sometimes even when we think we've got some problem behavior under control, we find out later that we only drove it farther underground.

Is it really young people that we want to control, or is it the nature of their driving, drinking, and smoking? In other words, if we could be sure that a young person was driving safely (like a skillful adult), drinking only in moderation and never while driving (like a responsible adult), and fully aware of the risks of smoking before starting to light up (like a savvy but risk-prone adult), would we be so concerned? Don't we try to restrict the behavior of our young offspring because we're virtually certain that they'll drive recklessly, drink irresponsibly, and get addicted to cigarettes before they understand the risks?

We've seen abundant evidence that young people have the potential to rise to virtually all of the challenges of adult life, even if they're currently not expressing that potential. One way to measure and tap that potential—and to calm our fears—is through competency testing. Hence in these three areas my proposals are straightforward:

- *A young person of any age who can pass one or more rigorous driving tests should be allowed to have a drivers license (perhaps awarded in stages, as many drivers licenses are today). The license will be subject to revocation for poor driving, just as it is with any adult driver.*
- *A young person of any age who can demonstrate appropriate competencies (mainly reasoning skills and an awareness of risks and consequences) should be able to get an ID that allows him or her to purchase and drink alcoholic beverages. If the young person behaves irresponsibly (for example, by giving alcohol to peers who lack drinking privileges), his or ID will be subject to revocation.*
- *A young person of any age who can demonstrate appropriate competencies (again, mainly reasoning skills and an awareness of risks and consequences) should be able to get an ID that allows him or her to purchase and smoke cigarettes. Again, if the individual abuses this privilege, it will be subject to revocation.*

A friend of mine from South America—herself a mother of two teens—was amused on a recent trip here by the fuss we make about the drinking and smoking of young people. “We let them smoke and drink all they want,” she told me. “As a result, they don't get so excited about smoking and drinking, and we don't fight with them so much.” This is an interesting concept to be sure—and a very old one—but I'm not advocating that we let our teens “drink and smoke all they want.”

It's true that placing restrictions on people sometimes drives them precisely

in the wrong direction, but I'm not suggesting that we get rid of restrictions but rather that we give young people strong incentives to become responsible citizens. I don't want them to *feign* adulthood by drinking and smoking in dark alleys; I want them to *be* adults by drinking and smoking responsibly—more responsibly, perhaps, than most adults do. (Whereas adults do have to pass competency tests to get a drivers license, all they have to do to be able to drink and smoke is to reach a certain age—no competence required.)

### **Military Service**

Recall that by age thirteen golfer Michelle Wie was nearly six feet tall and making news with her three hundred-yard drives. I don't know whether she'd make a good soldier, but I do know that it's unwise to generalize about people based on their age (young or old). What's more, the American military has been competency-oriented for generations; it has the tools for weeding out the qualified. The modern IQ test was largely developed and legitimized in the United States by the Army during World War I. With millions of draftees to evaluate, in 1917 the Army established a committee of seven leading psychologists to devise a suitable screening test. By 1919 more than two million draftees had been given the new test, which gave applicants a grade from A through E (where A was the highest) based on their performance. All branches of our military still depend heavily on a variety of testing to determine fitness to serve, to fight, and to lead.

I propose, therefore, that an emancipated young person of any age who can qualify for service should be allowed to enlist without parental consent. Unemancipated young people of any age who can qualify for service should be allowed to enlist with the consent of at least one parent or a judge.

### **Free Speech and Privacy**

The right to free speech should, I believe, be granted to young people of any age in precisely the same way that it's granted to adults. It's not an absolute right—you can't run into a crowded movie theater, for example, and yell "Fire! Fire!" when there is no fire—but it's quite broad, and no one should need to pass a competency test or reach a certain age to acquire it.

Our right to privacy is also quite broad but also not absolute: If authorities suspect you of committing a crime, they can tap your phone, search your house and car, and even strip-search you. Emancipated young people should have privacy rights precisely equivalent to those of adults—no more locker searches based on a lowly school administrator's suspicions and no more room searches based on Mom's hunches. But unemancipated young people should continue to have only limited

privacy rights, much as they have today. Some privacy restrictions will have to remain in place because parents of unemancipated young people can be held responsible for whatever their offspring are hiding under the mattresses. More generally, if a young person cannot demonstrate that he or she is ready to live in the adult world, we should probably be reluctant to extend our complete trust.

### Legal Matters

Emancipated young people should have full adult rights and should therefore enjoy all of the legal rights they would normally obtain at the age of majority. But some legal rights should be absolute and not depend on age or even competency. I've already mentioned free speech in this regard, and I also believe that due process rights should be on the list. Young people of any age who are charged with a crime should have all of the rights that adults have: the right to counsel, the right to question witnesses, the right to a speedy trial, the right to examine a court transcript, and so on. The Constitution provides such guarantees for all "persons"—not just to people over a certain age.

Even if unemancipated, young people of any age who can demonstrate appropriate competencies should be able to make and revoke wills, sign contracts, file law suits, and represent themselves in court. After all, we automatically extend such rights to many older people who *lack* the appropriate skills and understanding.

### Dress, Appearance, and Curfews

When a young person wants to alter his or her appearance, he or she should generally be able to do so with the same freedom that an adult has. For invasive procedures like tattooing and piercing, a young person who wants to proceed without parental permission should be required to pass an appropriate competency test, mainly demonstrating that he or she has basic reasoning skills and is aware of the risks and consequences associated with the procedure. Emancipated young people should be presumed to be competent in this way.

The curfew issue is more complex. Some courts have opined that curfews violate our right of assembly, guaranteed under the First Amendment to the Constitution. Government can generally abridge that right only in serious crises. We treasure our freedoms in America, and freedom of movement is right up there with freedom of speech.

For government to single out any particular age group for a curfew seems to me to be a threat to our most basic liberties. Old people don't drive very well, and they probably drive more poorly in the dark. Does that give government the right to legislate curfews for the elderly? Blacks, on the average, commit more crimes

after dark than whites do; does that give government the right to legislate a curfew just for blacks?

The main problem with curfews that single out any particular group is that they turn perfectly innocent members of that group into criminals (that is, “curfew violators”) based merely on the remote possibility that *some* members of that group *might* commit a crime. Call it ageism, racism, or guilt by association; whatever the label, it’s not pretty.

Hence my proposal is fairly straightforward: No curfew should be allowed in this country unless it’s for everyone (excluding emergency personnel). Emancipated young people should be able move about as freely as adults. The wanderings of unemancipated young people will have to remain under parental control because parents of dependent offspring are often held responsible for their wrongdoings.

### Entertainment and Pornography

As G. Stanley Hall, the psychologist who put the distressed teen on the map in 1904, told us earlier, “Parents still think of their [adolescent] offspring as mere children, and tighten the reign when they should loosen it.”<sup>4</sup> No matter what those offensive anti-drug ads promise you about the magical powers you supposedly have over your offspring, if your teen has idle time, extra cash, and hangs around with peers, he or she will inevitably experiment with various forms of entertainment which some adults will find objectionable—at least for young people but not necessarily for themselves or other adults.

Tightening the rein is not the solution to this problem, and it’s not even clear that it’s possible. Even Socrates, when referring to efforts to control young people, said that “there is small wisdom in legislating about such matters; I doubt if it is ever done”<sup>5</sup> (see Appendix 4).

I’m not entirely convinced that teen tendencies to sample adult forms of entertainment are really a problem; they seem quite natural, especially when you accept the fact that teens aren’t children. To the extent that young people overindulge themselves, I think there’s only one legitimate solution: to integrate them as rapidly as possible into adult society. They’re most vulnerable to mischief when they’re with peers and less vulnerable when they’re with adults. As a psychiatrist colleague once said, there’s no intervention more powerful than simply “being with.”

Regarding violent or sexual music, movies, and video games, I know of no convincing evidence that such materials actually harm anyone (see my comments about correlational studies toward the end of Chapter Five), and I do not believe that teens are, on the average, any more vulnerable to the possible negative effects of such materials than adults are.

When it comes to entertainment, emancipated young people or people of any age who have passed appropriate competency tests should be able to make purchases or enter public facilities (theaters, clubs, etc.) without restriction. Regarding pornography, I believe that any young person who can pass an appropriate test of maturity should have access to pornographic materials that's similar to the access adults have.

## Corporal Punishment

Corporal punishment, although barbaric and unpleasant, is actually useful sometimes in child rearing. The many alarming studies that you read about that show a relationship between corporal punishment and various behavior and mood problems are all correlational. Not a single one shows that spanking a child (or paddling a young person in school) actually *causes* the associated problems. In fact, it is especially likely that corporal punishment and behavior problems are associated with each other primarily because parents and authorities are far more likely to hit unruly children than compliant ones.

In a few situations, corporal punishment is probably even the best way to handle a problem, because it's the only technique we have that can suppress behavior both immediately and long term. If a child routinely runs out into the street, plays with matches, or bites other children, a hard slap on the buttocks is probably the intervention of choice.

When we withhold punishment in situations like these, we potentially do great harm to a child. Harsh measures are not only justified sometimes, failing to use such measures can put people at great risk. This is especially obvious in the medical field, where the failure to amputate a gangrenous leg or irradiate a tumor can lead to death.\*

That said, for the vast majority of behavior problems that parents or teachers encounter, corporal punishment is not the answer. In continuing-education seminars I used to teach for clinical psychologists seeking to renew their practice licenses, I covered fifty ways of reducing problem behaviors without the use of corporal punishment. Given that corporal punishment is unpleasant and potentially damaging to relationships, parents and other authority figures should probably be made more aware of the positive alternatives they have—another interesting competency issue, to be sure.

So my recommendation is as follows: "Corporal punishment" of an adult is called "assault and battery," and therefore parents who strike their

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\*In medicine, a treatment that's worse than the original disease is called "iatrogenic." Withholding a harsh treatment also crosses this line when the consequences of not acting are worse than the consequences of providing treatment. The ultimate ethical guideline in medicine—"above all else, do no harm"—often requires physicians to perform risky or unpleasant interventions.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### The Unschooled Inventor

*As a young child Thomas Edison accidentally burned down the family barn in Ohio, and he caused so much trouble in school that his mother decided to home-school him, mainly letting him study whatever interested him. At twelve he started selling newspapers and candies on a train, where he continued his private studies and even tried to conduct scientific experiments. He was forced to stop his research after he accidentally caused a fire on the train. By sixteen he became independent of his parents and soon moved to Canada. After working as a telegraph operator for a few years, he decided to become a full-time inventor. By the time he died at age eighty-four in 1931, Edison had 1,093 patents to his credit—far more than anyone before or since has ever obtained. His inventions include the first practical electric light bulb, the first phonograph, the first movie cameras and projectors, and the first microphone.<sup>6</sup>*

emancipated offspring should be subject to criminal prosecution. (Now there's an incentive for young people to pass those emancipation tests.) But as long as young people remain unemancipated, parents should continue to have the right to strike them, with the proviso that when challenged by authorities, they should have a duty to show (a) that their use of corporal punishment was reasonable and appropriate (which means, among other things, that it didn't injure the recipient), and (b) that other, less risky means of behavior management had been tried first.

### Religious Decisions

Past a certain level of maturity, which many young people are probably capable of reaching in their early or mid teens, our offspring need to decide their own religious affairs. Young people should be allowed to do so without having to demonstrate any particular sort of competence. Faith is an intensely personal phenomenon. There's also no pushing anyone toward faith, as far I can tell. The more you push, the more closed the heart and mind become.

### Voting

As we'll see later in the chapter, a legislator in California recently tried to secure limited voting rights for minors in statewide elections, and several countries already allow people under eighteen to vote. But no one seems to be thinking about this issue with any great clarity. Why would we want to give someone the power to

vote—it's more than a right, it's a *power*—based simply on his or her *age*, whatever that age happens to be? Do we really want voters who don't know even the basics about government and who don't know about the issues and candidates?

Unfortunately, an informed electorate is not always what politicians want. Thomas Edison—the most prolific and influential inventor in history—learned this the hard way after patenting his first invention. It was a tabulation device that allowed people to see how legislators voted while they were actually casting their votes. It worked, but the legislators soon stopped using it because it provided more information to constituents than they wanted to provide.<sup>7\*</sup> Informed voters are difficult to influence; uninformed voters can typically be bought for a few dollars spent wisely on marketing and advertising.

This important issue aside, my recommendation here is clear: Young people of any age who can pass a test that shows they will be competent voters—that they understand how government works, that they understand current issues, and that they know about current candidates—should be given the right to cast full votes in relevant elections.

### Connecting Teens and Adults

Notice what's not on my list of recommendations. Nowhere have I suggested that we need to do anything about the many companies and organizations that currently provide the infrastructure for teen culture (see Chapter Fourteen). Young people fall prey to or come under the control of such entities because they have nowhere else to go. If they have real responsibility in their lives, and if they're meaningfully connected to the adult world, it's unlikely that mosh pits and MTV will have quite the fascination for them that they do now.

They also won't have quite as many legitimate reasons to direct anger toward their elders, because their elders will no longer be their jailers. Instead, we will become what we were during much of human history: master craftspeople, welcoming young people into our midst as quickly as they can hone their various skills. Young people will become apprentices of sorts, but unlike the apprentices of old, they'll have almost unlimited leeway to determine their own futures.

Notice also that I'm not suggesting that we take any steps backward into our agrarian, overly-romanticized past. I'm simply proposing ways to reintegrate modern young people into adult society, as well as to establish systems that improve and accelerate this process from one generation to the next.

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\*Edison swore that he'd never again patent something without first determining that there was a market for it. Fortunately for those of us who like to turn on lights, listen to recorded music, and watch movies, he made good on his resolution.

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### Twenty-Something Teens

*Jill Nelson, one of the people who helped me research this book, told me that when she was twenty-three, on a Christmas visit with her twenty-two-year-old brother to Dad and Step-Mom, the latter told them, "You teens can sleep in the living room." Teens, Jill wondered? At twenty-two and twenty-three? Was this just a slip, or are we expanding the definition of teen to include a wider age range? A recent Associated Press story about the murder of University of Dakota student Dru Sjoden is entitled "Justice Sought for Minnesota Teen." Dru was twenty-two when she was killed. Yet another slip, or more evidence of upward-creeping infantilization?*

What do we lose by establishing a competency-based system of rights and privileges for young people? I believe that all we lose is our sense of control—control that was unwise to try to exercise in the first place and that was largely illusory anyway. And what do we gain with the competency-based system I've proposed? In a word: *competence*.

## PROTECTING YOUNG CHILDREN

Although logic demanded that I state, in the list of recommendations I presented above, that there should be no minimum age limits on the rights that we extend to young people, I'm not at all comfortable about allowing young children to smoke, drink, drive, and so on. Then why am I not proposing minimum age limits?

You may recall from Chapter One that educator John Holt and psychologist Richard Farson suggested long ago that young children should automatically be granted virtually all adult rights. But as the data in chapters Seven and Nine make clear, children simply do not measure up. They don't have even a fraction of the physical and cognitive capabilities of teens and adults, and no amount of training can change that.

So why don't we just draw a line somewhere? Say, seven, the age when the Catholics say a child first becomes capable of committing a sin, or thirteen, the age of the Jewish Bar Mitzvah. English psychiatrist Philip Graham recently suggested that age fourteen should be the cutoff.<sup>8</sup> So why not say that from age X onward, we'll grant rights to young people who can demonstrate their competence—but never before that age?

There are several reasons we must resist our deeply ingrained tendencies to specify age cutoffs for basic rights:

- *Uniqueness of individuals.* First, everyone is unique; in America, we celebrate that fact, perhaps more so than in any other country on earth. We've seen examples in this book of extraordinary young people—Louis Braille, Jim Henson, Alexandra Nechita, Thomas Edison, Ming Kipa, Luther and Johnny Htoo, and many others—who simply don't fit our preconceptions about young people. Age cutoffs—whether for the young or for the old—often imprison people on the wrong side of the line. With competency testing, there's no need to do that. We can allow individuals to develop as quickly as they are able, holding no one back who has the ability and motivation to move forward, punishing no one for precocity.
- *Uniqueness of abilities.* Second, just as individuals differ in very general ways, so do their specific abilities. Piaget theorized that the abilities of young people develop in stages, but he also recognized that an individual's abilities might develop unevenly, out of sync with expected stages—a phenomenon he called *décalage*. Sometimes a young person who is weak in some respects (say, in verbal abilities) might be exceptionally strong in others (say, in mathematics or performance art). Age cutoffs can be stifling to such people; a competency-based system will allow them to flourish.
- *Arbitrariness.* Third, any age we pick for a cutoff point is necessarily arbitrary. Why bother?
- *Protected by competence.* Fourth, because we're withholding rights and privileges until appropriate tests are passed, there's no downside to eliminating the age cutoff. The tests guarantee that only competent people will be granted those rights and privileges, all of which are subject to revocation.

In contrast, an arbitrary age cutoff necessarily allows incompetent people to gain rights and privileges they probably shouldn't have. We're careful to give drivers licenses only to people who can pass both written exams and road tests. It would be absurd to let people drive simply because they turned eighteen or twenty-one. Yet this is exactly what we do with the vast majority of rights we give to young people now. A competency-based system—with no age cutoffs—is actually far safer and more conservative than an age-based system where competencies are never measured.

## FREEDOM, AUTHORITY, AND RESPONSIBILITY

When I was a senior in high school, American military forces made a major foray into Cambodia from Vietnam, and high school and college students, as well as others around the United States, protested. At the college I was about to attend, Trinity College in Connecticut, students occupied a building and locked up the trustees. By the time I got to school that fall, the campus was in chaos. The student government had voted itself out of existence; most of the clubs were gone; and drugs were being sold openly in the halls of the dormitories. Most important, course and attendance requirements had been abolished. I was compulsive about attending classes, but because there were no specific distribution requirements in place, I took exactly what I pleased, which turned out to be mainly courses in either dance or psychology.

When I reached the last semester of my senior year, a little common-sense light bulb lit up in my head: I realized that I had been through three-and-a-half years of college without ever having taken a single course in English, history, biology, economics, sociology, anthropology, or a dozen other major fields. During my last semester, I took four freshman-level courses in fields that were a complete mystery to me. Thank goodness for that light bulb. I just wish the current had flowed sooner.

Years later, I became a member of one of the governing boards of Trinity College, and I was a strong voice for strengthening distribution and attendance requirements. I also set in motion a “mentors” program that brought faculty members and graduate students into close, regular contact with undergraduates.

The point of my reminiscence is clear, I hope. *I am not advocating more “freedom” for teens.* The freedom that college students grabbed in the 1960s and 70s didn’t serve them very well; nor does any unbridled form of freedom. I hope no one reading this book ever gets the impression that because I object strongly to the infantilization of teens, this means I think teens should be more “free.” Absolutely not. *The corrective for infantilization is responsibility, not freedom.*

Although it’s true that adults are free to make many choices that children and teens cannot make, the freedom that adults have is enjoyed in the context of many restrictions and possible penalties. When an adult causes a car accident, he or she is liable for the damage he or she caused. When an under-aged, unlicensed teen causes a car accident, the parents are often held liable for the damage, and the

teen generally is not. It would be meaningless to hold the teen accountable because teens can't conduct business, own property, sign contracts, and so on; a teen generally can't compensate victims for the damage he or she has caused.

The freedom adults appear to have is actually authority, not freedom. Adults can't do anything they please; they can simply exercise authority in various domains in which they must also accept various forms of responsibility. They can make decisions, for example, about health care, religion, parenting, financial matters, and so on, and they can drive and smoke and drink, subject to a variety of restrictions. But in a rational world, authority always goes hand-in-hand with responsibility; that is, no one is given authority without also being required to take on the burden of corresponding responsibilities, and no one is given responsibilities without also being given some corresponding authority.

Giving someone authority without responsibility is akin to saying: "Sure, take the new Jaguar for a spin, and don't worry if you destroy it. I'll take care of it." That's a good way of putting the Jag on the road to the body shop or junkyard. Authority in the absence of responsibility promotes recklessness. And as I noted in Chapter Eleven, giving someone responsibility without authority is akin to saying: "You're responsible for whatever happens to that car, even if you're no where near it and even if you have no control over what happens to it." Responsibility without authority is frustrating and immobilizing.

So please, let's not give teens more freedom. They have much too much freedom as it is. By that I mean that many teens have too much free time (unstructured, unsupervised hours spent doing meaningless things, often with peers), too much free cash (money obtained from an allowance, gifts, or part-time work which can be used in entirely discretionary ways), and too much freedom from consequences (that is, from the negative consequences of behavior that would normally be severely punished in adults).

Let's give teens who seek it and who can demonstrate appropriate competencies the *authority* they deserve, along with the *responsibility* that such authority demands.

## ADOLESCENCE ABOLISHED

Competency testing for young people may be a reasonable idea, but what will happen if many of our young people are unable to pass or choose not to take certain tests? What will happen, in particular, if they are unable to qualify for competency-based emancipation by the time they reach age eighteen? Or perhaps even twenty-one? Or perhaps *ever*?

I believe there's a strong case to be made for withholding most rights (other than some obvious ones like due process and free speech) until the competencies entailed by the proper exercise of those rights can be demonstrated. Do we really want people to wield the enormous power of the vote when they don't know even the minimum about our government, the candidates, or the issues in the election? Do we really want people to get married who have no idea how to sustain a relationship? Do we really want people to have sex when they don't know the first thing about birth control, sexually-transmitted disease, and child rearing?

The unavoidable answer to all of these questions is, of course, that Americans today don't care about competency in most of the activities of daily living. We'd like our physicians and teachers and plumbers to be competent—and to demonstrate their competence by passing state exams and getting licenses and certificates—but we don't care at all about competence when it comes to marrying, having sex, parenting, drinking, smoking, voting, making wills, and so on. Adults—who often tend to be highly incompetent in such matters—don't have to demonstrate any degree of competence in order to engage in such activities; they just need to reach a certain age. Yet, based simply on their age, we deny young people a wide range of basic rights because we're afraid they might be *incompetent*. We just assume, based largely on unanalyzed assertions passed down over generations, that under a certain age people are necessarily incompetent (even though this probably isn't true) and that over a certain age people are necessarily competent (even though we *know* this isn't true).

If we had even an ounce of sense, we'd withhold certain rights and privileges from *everyone* until they could pass the relevant competency test. We've grown used to this idea when it comes to driving a motor vehicle; perhaps, some day, we'll be able to extend this logic to other areas. This is not likely to happen any time soon, however. We might see some advantages to looking more carefully at the competencies of teens, but we're far from being ready to consider the possibility of a competency based society.

The bottom line: for the foreseeable future, we'll almost certainly have to continue to award most rights automatically at certain ages. This means that young people who have not already earned certain rights through testing before age eighteen will gain them automatically at some point. Age, in effect, will have to continue to serve as a substitute for competency—a weak stand-in, to be sure.

Thus the competency-based system I'm proposing is not meant as a corrective for our generally incompetent society but rather as a corrective for a much smaller, although not inconsequential, problem: the artificial extension of childhood.

Allowing young people to test their way to adulthood will, I believe, have relatively immediate and dramatic effects:

- *It will help to restore the child-adult continuum that was disrupted by the draconian social reforms of the Industrial Revolution. It won't do so in a way that Jean Liedloff might envision—that is, by bringing children and adults together in the fields around a primitive village—but it will do so nonetheless. Adulthood has always been the ultimate carrot, but it was never within reach. With it just millimeters away, many young people will be strongly motivated to learn what they need to learn to grab the prize. And the main people they'll look to for help will be their older mentors, parents, and teachers. They'll be learning from the people they're supposed to learn from, not just from Hollywood's ejecta.*
- *It will force adults to look at young people with new respect and a new sense of optimism. As the numbers of young people who pass various tests or who achieve full emancipation multiply like the numbers on the old McDonald's signs, adults will have no choice but to see young people through competency-colored lenses—focusing on their abilities and achievements, not on their failings.*
- *It will integrate young people into adult society at a rapid pace by providing a fast lane to adulthood for the young people who choose it. The particular areas where the integration will first occur are impossible to say, but I'll make some quick guesses: Some young people will test their way out of school to try to start high-tech businesses, many of which will be Internet based. And they will own and control the fruits of their labors. When we take the energy and raw intellectual power of youth and add to it the limitless promise of Horatio Alger's American Dream, we might churn out Bill Gates clones by the thousands. Other young people may test out of school or at least gain partial adult privileges in order to work in family businesses, start their own families, or try for early college admission.*
- *It will reduce many of the signs of turmoil we currently see in our young: suicidal tendencies, ennui, anger, irresponsible drug and alcohol use, and so on. There is strong evidence, both historical and contemporary, that we have created this turmoil through the artificial extension of childhood. When we say to our young people, "Okay, you want to be adults?"*

Show us what you can do,” many will rise to the challenge. In effect, we’ll be tapping into one of the most basic of evolutionary imperatives: the desire to be independent. When young people have meaningful options for moving forward with their lives, I suspect teen culture will start to look pathetic.

- *It will spur an explosion of creativity among the young—and not just creativity that feeds teen culture, but creativity that will feed the great cultures of the world. It may also lead to the reappearance of the young genius—not just to the “gifted” children we parents puff about but to the true geniuses of our age. How many thousands of great talents have been buried under the minutia of the cookie-cutter educational system produced by the factories of the Industrial Revolution? We pay lip service today to difference and diversity; a competency-based society—at least for young people—will lead to a celebration of diversity like the world has never seen.*
- *It will bring vast new human resources to our culture. The twenty million American teens who currently live their semi-lives immersed in trivia will be given the means and the incentive to make meaningful contributions to our increasingly needy world. Their unflagging energy, superior intelligence, sizzling creativity, and unbridled idealism could make all the difference.*
- *It will abolish adolescence, at least as a time of storm and stress. Through much of human history, the teen years were primarily a time of learning, not a time of great turmoil; this is still true in many cultures today. If I’m right about competency testing for the young, perhaps “adolescence” will become a historical footnote in our textbooks rather than the subject of entire Ph.D. programs.*

## THE INEVITABLE REVERSAL

If adolescence is so unnatural and contrived, shouldn’t forces, both social and biological, be at work to undermine its existence? Toward the end of *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500*, historian Hugh Cunningham suggests just that.

Noting tendencies, especially in the United States, for young people to insist on behaving like adults—even, in some cases, bringing law suits against

their own parents—Cunningham predicts the inevitability of recreating an era when young people are integrated into adult society at an early age.

*The essence of the vision of childhood at the beginning of the [twentieth] century was the powerlessness of children, their dependence; good parenting consisted of preserving and prolonging this, in part at least by the exercise of parental authority. What has happened in the second half of the century is that parental authority has declined, and children have demanded and received an earlier access to the adult world; they have not been willing to accept the attempt to prolong childhood to the late teenage years. In some ways this represents a return to a historical norm in which childhood did not extend beyond fourteen at the maximum.<sup>9</sup>*

Notably, Cunningham concludes this discussion by pointing out that the reversal, to the extent that it is occurring, is flawed, perhaps fatally:

*The difference is that in earlier centuries at the age of fourteen a person was economically productive whereas in the late twentieth century he or she will have a minimum of two years and quite probably a further seven or more years of non-productivity. Not surprisingly “adolescence” has come to be seen as a time of stressful conflict between parents and children.<sup>10</sup>*

So far, the stressful conflict between parents and their offspring created by the artificial extension of childhood is not producing the “return to the historical norm” that Cunningham predicts. At least in the United States, teen attempts to reenter the adult world have largely failed. They have been met, in fact, with stronger controls: curfews, armed guards, metal detectors, dress codes, and new forms of incarceration, among many others.

The institutions and belief systems that have been established over the last century to keep teens in place aren't going to fall easily (see Chapter Fourteen). One rather mundane reason for this is that teens can't organize to any great extent, because *being a teen is temporary*. As Harvard's Herbert Kelman said years ago, “The young have very little in the way of a past and even less in the way of a future.”<sup>11</sup> Women and minorities don't suffer from this problem; they retain their identities for a lifetime. Teen leaders, on the other hand, cross the arbitrary threshold into adulthood almost overnight; with a full set of rights, their angst quickly disappears, along with their motives for elevating the status of young people.

But there is some hope. During the Vietnam War, which accelerated gradually over the course of the 1960s and ended pointedly in 1973, it became

painfully obvious to the American public that much of the fighting and dying was being done by very young men. The average age of the more than three million men who served was about twenty-two, compared with twenty-six in World War II. More than a million of our soldiers were under twenty-one, and, according to official records, 11,465 of the more than 58,000 American soldiers who were killed in action in Vietnam were nineteen or younger.<sup>12</sup> Bear in mind that this was the first war that was broadcast every day on television, where every ugly detail stood out in sharp relief. How could we deny eighteen-, nineteen-, and twenty-year-olds the basic rights of adulthood while we were so willing to ship them out by the hundreds of thousands to fight for our country? The war suggested a kind of hypocrisy in our structure of laws, and it set some corrections in motion.

### Real Juvenile Justice

In 1967, for example, the Supreme Court, in a case entitled *In re Gault*, restored long-lost due process rights to minors—well, at least somewhat. Two years before, fifteen-year-old Gerald Gault of Arizona had been taken into custody by juvenile authorities because of a complaint by his neighbor that he and a friend of his had made an obscene phone call to her. As is usual in juvenile court, there was no lawyer, no court transcript was made, Gault was never advised of his Fifth Amendment right not to say anything self-incriminating, and no witnesses were called—not even the neighbor who had made the complaint. Had he been an adult, the maximum sentence would have been two months in jail and a fifty dollar fine, but Gault was sentenced to *six years* in the State Industrial School (until age twenty-one)—a fairly standard sentence for the juvenile court.

In a scathing majority opinion that challenged the very foundations of the juvenile justice system, Justice Abe Fortas correctly explained that the original idea behind this “peculiar” system of justice was to protect young people from the hardships of the criminal justice system, to handle them with “care and solicitude,” and to “treat” and “rehabilitate” them, rather than punish them. But, he said, “however euphemistic the title, a ‘receiving home’ or an ‘industrial school’ for juveniles is an institution of confinement in which the child is incarcerated.... Under our Constitution, the condition of being a boy does not justify a kangaroo court.”<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the *In re Gault* ruling has had only a modest impact on the juvenile justice system, in part because it explicitly avoided addressing “the totality of the relationship of the juvenile and the state.”<sup>14</sup> Juvenile courts still routinely deny young people their due-process rights, and juvenile facilities are more punitive than ever.

In the late 1960s free-speech rights—again, quite limited—were also returned to young people. In *Tinker v. Des Moines School District*, the Supreme Court said that a

school was wrong for having suspended three students (ages thirteen, fifteen, and sixteen) who wore black armbands to school in 1965 to protest the Vietnam War. In its 1969 decision the Court said that only “disruptive” speech can be prohibited by a school, whereas the armbands were equivalent to “pure speech,” which is protected by the First Amendment.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, as we’ve seen, almost any form of speech—such as an objectionable article in a school newspaper—can be judged to be “disruptive.”

### New Voting Rights—and More

With due process and free speech rights at least partially restored, on March 23, 1971, after a bitter battle, Congress passed the text of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, granting eighteen-year-olds the right to vote in both federal and state elections. The amendment was ratified by the states in just three months. Even more significant, within a few short years, the new amendment inspired most states to lower the age of majority from twenty-one to eighteen (see table, page 347).

A few years later, in 1976, the Supreme Court made its most expansive statement ever about the rights of minors:

*Constitutional rights do not mature and come into being magically only when one attains the state-defined age of majority. Minors, as well as adults, are protected by the Constitution and possess constitutional rights.*<sup>16</sup>

Teens also now have some privacy rights—even “sexual privacy rights.” In 1977, in the case of *Carey v. Population Services International*, the Supreme Court invalidated a New York law that had prohibited the sale of contraceptives to people under sixteen on the grounds that young people have constitutionally-protected privacy rights.<sup>17</sup> The privacy issue is tricky, though. All states allow young people some degree of sexual privacy—in California, this even applies to young people under fourteen (Chapter Eight)—but in a practical sense the privacy rights of teens are actually quite limited—even illusory. Parents can search bedrooms and school officials can search school lockers, backpacks, and purses on almost any pretext; all they need is “reasonable suspicion” that something is amiss, and that’s a pretty easy standard to meet. The Supreme Court affirmed the school’s virtually unlimited ability to violate a student’s privacy in a case in 1985.<sup>18</sup> Even strip searches are allowed under some circumstances.

In recent years, youth advocates in the United States have been trying to get the legal voting age lowered to sixteen or younger, most notably the National Youth Rights Association, an Internet-based organization formed, more-or-less, in 1998. A California bill sponsored recently by state senator John Vasconcellos would have given sixteen-year-olds a half vote and fourteen-year-olds a quarter vote in state

elections. After the bill was killed by a committee vote, high school students in Berkeley, California, immediately took up the cause.<sup>19</sup> Along these lines, New York City councilwoman Gail A. Brewer recently introduced legislation that would lower the voting age to sixteen in municipal elections.<sup>20</sup>

In England the matter has long been under serious study by Parliament, which may lower the national voting age to sixteen by the time this book is published.<sup>21</sup> At the moment at least ten countries, including Brazil, Cuba, Indonesia, and Sudan allow people under eighteen to vote, with no ill effects that anyone can yet detect.<sup>22</sup>

Recent laws and court decisions have given teens a few other rights, as well. Teens now have limited property rights, for example. Even though they generally can't control their property—an important practical matter, to be sure—they can at least *own* property under certain circumstances, and a court can put their property into trusts to prevent parents or guardians from walking off with it. In cases, for example, where parents were squandering large sums earned by their talented thespian offspring, the courts have generally stepped in and protected the assets.<sup>23</sup> Because the vast majority of teens don't have Macaulay Culkin's resources, however, as a practical matter most teens actually have little or no control over their property and, in effect, no *useful* property rights.

Teens also now have limited rights to religious freedom (although their parents can prevent them from attending churches or participating in religious rituals), a limited right to get an abortion without parental consent (if a judge okays it), limited rights to be free from sexual harassment (if they can get anyone to pay attention to their complaints), and limited rights to be free from sex and race discrimination (if they can show that they suffered some loss because of their sex or race and not for other reasons).<sup>24</sup> In most states, teens can also now get medical help for drug problems, alcoholism, or pregnancy without parental consent.<sup>25</sup> As for corporal punishment, it's still legal in all states for parents to strike their minor children (a legacy of the "chattel" tradition), but a majority of school districts have now made it illegal for school officials to strike students. At this point, fewer than 350,000 students in the United States are paddled in school each year, compared with four times that number in 1980.<sup>26</sup>

Some curfew laws have also been struck down by state courts in recent years. The matter hasn't yet come before the Supreme Court, and lower courts are divided on the issue. As you might imagine, where curfews have been prohibited, it hasn't been because teens are considered competent. Rather, the courts have said that the government shouldn't be interfering the *parents'* right to determine when it's safe for a teen to be outside the home. Being outside the home, after all, is not in and of itself a criminal act, and curfews, some legal experts say, interfere with the constitutional right of assembly. As an attorney

representing families in a case in Alaska put it, “Curfews don’t punish kids who commit real crimes and they punish kids who aren’t doing anything wrong.”<sup>27</sup>

Age of Majority by State in the United States as of 2004	
Age	State
18	Alaska <sup>b, c</sup> , Arizona <sup>a, d</sup> , Arkansas <sup>a, d</sup> , California <sup>b, d</sup> , Connecticut, Delaware <sup>b</sup> , Florida <sup>b, d</sup> , Georgia, Hawaii <sup>h</sup> , Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas <sup>b</sup> , Kentucky <sup>b</sup> , Louisiana <sup>a</sup> , Maine <sup>b</sup> , Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan <sup>b</sup> , Minnesota <sup>e</sup> , Missouri <sup>f, g</sup> , Montana <sup>b</sup> , New Hampshire <sup>a, d</sup> , New Mexico, New Jersey, New Mexico, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota <sup>b</sup> , Ohio <sup>a</sup> , Oklahoma <sup>b</sup> , Oregon <sup>f</sup> , Pennsylvania <sup>a</sup> , Rhode Island, South Carolina <sup>a</sup> , South Dakota <sup>b</sup> , Tennessee <sup>a</sup> , Utah <sup>a</sup> , Vermont <sup>a</sup> , Washington <sup>a</sup> , Wisconsin <sup>b</sup> , Wyoming <sup>e, i</sup>
19	Alabama, Colorado, Nebraska, Virginia
21	Washington D.C., Mississippi, New York, Puerto Rico

a. age may be extended if individual is in school

b. age may be extended to nineteen if individual is in school

c. age may be extended if individual is residing with custodial parent

d. age may be extended if individual is disabled

e. age may be extended to twenty if individual is in school

f. age may be extended to twenty-one if individual is in school

g. age may be extended to twenty-two if individual is attending post-secondary school

h. age may be extended to twenty-three if individual is attending post-secondary school

i. age may be extended indefinitely for disabled individuals

## Divorcing One’s Parents

Emancipation rights have also been changing, generally giving young people more options. Most states have had emancipation laws on the books for a long time; these allow minors over a certain age (typically sixteen), with the permission of a court, to assume some or all of the rights of adults. Unless one is a wealthy young actor, however, these laws are fairly meaningless. At sixteen most vendors, employers, and landlords will be reluctant to deal with you; flashing a piece of paper saying you were “emancipated” won’t make much difference.

The latest variation on emancipation is for a young person to “divorce” his or her parents. The most famous proceeding in this area is a 1993 Florida case called *Kingsley v. Kingsley*, in which an eleven-year-old successfully terminated his mother’s parental rights in an effort to become part of another family. An appeals court ruled in this case, however—in classic Catch-22 fashion—that the young man didn’t have the right to file the original law suit. He ultimately won only because a lawyer representing him (with a court’s permission) had filed his own petition in behalf of the young man.<sup>28</sup> So you do have a right to divorce your parents, but first you have to file a law suit—which, of course, you can’t.

In 2004 fourteen-year-old Patrick Holland was able to end his father’s parental rights after a difficult two-year battle in Norfolk County, Massachusetts. His dad, Daniel Holland, is in prison on a life sentence (with no possible parole) for the beating and murder of his mom when Patrick was eight.<sup>29</sup> Even in a case so clear and extreme, it’s not easy to terminate a parent’s parental rights.

### Baby Steps

Such issues are in constant flux, needless to say. Dress codes are generally becoming far more strict, for example, but in one recent case parents won their law suit against a school district that had required their eighth-grade daughter to remove a small tattoo from between her thumb and index finger.<sup>30</sup> In another case Native American students in Texas, objecting to dress-code restrictions, prevailed in a law suit against the Big Sandy School District, arguing that in their culture hair has “spiritual properties.” The court ruled that members of their tribes did not have to abide by the district’s strict limits on hair length.<sup>31</sup>

At this writing the state legislature in California is considering a ban on random drug testing in California schools; the new legislation would also require permission from a parent or guardian before a drug test could be administered.<sup>32</sup> And GKC Theatres, a Midwestern movie chain, is offering “R-Cards” to minors who get the signature of a parent.<sup>33</sup> The card gets them into R-rated movies without the embarrassment of being accompanied by a parent or guardian, an innovation that’s sure to be tested in court even before the coming attractions are over.

Hugh Cunningham suggested that what I’ve been calling “the artificial extension of childhood” may eventually be reversed, and we’ve seen a few indications that he’s correct. But the going is slow, and sometimes we take three adult-size steps backward for every baby step we take forward.

**Q:** *Isn't our school system critically important for the socialization of young people? Isn't that why we segregate young people by age—so that they can learn appropriate social skills?*

**A:** Socialization is important, but we make a tragic error by forcing young people to socialize only with each other. As it stands, teens learn virtually everything they know—including many bizarre and useless social norms—from their peers, but *peers are the last people on earth from whom they should be learning*. Ideally, teens should be interacting with people over a wide age range, and their most significant interactions should be with the people they are about to become.



## Chapter 14

# Why Some Will Resist

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*After winter must come spring,  
Change, it comes eventually.*  
—Lauryn Hill, “Everything is Every Thing”

***Overview.** A number of organizations and businesses in America benefit from the artificial extension of childhood and will therefore oppose its reversal. In 2006 alone teens are believe to have spent over \$190 billion on music, clothes, and gadgets developed for their use, and marketers are deliberate in their efforts to tap and expand teen markets. Allowing teens to enter the adult world will hurt the many businesses that currently maintain teen culture and will also be seen as a threat to America’s adult labor force. For a number of reasons, many adults will also have trouble seeing teens in a more accurate light. It’s all too easy, for one thing, to confirm one’s faulty beliefs about teen incompetence simply by focusing one’s attention on dysfunctional teens—an error of thinking psychologists call “confirmation bias.” If we fail to make changes, however, the vacuous world of teen culture will persist, teens and adults will continue to be adversaries, and the horrific problems that plague our teens will continue and may escalate. The advantages of restoring the child-adult continuum—of judging young people by their ability and not by their age—far exceed the disadvantages.*

Here is the text of a poster I saw recently in a Boston subway station:

THE ENFORCER.

She doesn’t love being tough.  
She’s tough because she loves.

PARENTS:

The anti-drug.

A large close-up of a determined-looking woman appears in the foreground. Her eyebrows are raised, and her look is stern. Her hair is held back by a white bandana, and she's wearing an open blue-jeans jacket over a snug sweater. In other words, she's dressed somewhat like a teen. In the background, off to the right, a young man—perhaps seventeen—has an expression of irritation, or perhaps even disgust, on his face. His head is tilted to his left, and his left arm is akimbo, in apparent defiance of his mom. He too is dressed like a teen—baggy open shirt over a t-shirt.

The poster says it all: Teens cannot be trusted to make their own decisions. Teens need adult protection and direction. If you're an adult, it's your duty to make teens your adversaries. You need to be an "enforcer"—tough and controlling and unrelenting—perhaps even violent, like enforcers are in the movies.<sup>1</sup>

The teen's clothing also reminds us of the existence of teen culture—a culture created by laws and cultural practices that have isolated teens from adults in much of the industrialized world for a century. And the mom's clothing is a subtle reminder of the backward nature of the relationship that currently exists between adults and teens: Adults revere and seek to emulate teens in some respects, but teens no longer revere or seek to emulate adults. Note also that the adult is in the foreground, blocking the teen, who looks small, insignificant, and angry.

I'm probably adding symbolism where none may have been intended, just as we did when we studied the classics in high-school English classes. But I hope my point is clear: The position I've developed in this book runs directly counter to mainstream views in modern America—views so mainstream that they stare you in the face on subways, so to speak. In fact, there are organizations, institutions, industries, professions, and religious groups that will tend to resist the views I've developed, along with many individual parents, teachers, therapists, clergyman, and so on.

Who will object, and why? Is anyone likely to agree with me—in other words, to acknowledge the simple truth about teens? *And who is responsible for that offensive poster?*

## ENEMIES OF THE TEEN

Early in the 1970s Richard Nixon and his staff compiled an "enemies list" of hundreds of political figures, business people, and organizations they considered to a threat to the Nixon administration. Perhaps all politicians have such lists, but President Nixon was rash and arrogant enough to lash out at some of the people on that list in unlawful ways, which led eventually to his downfall.

In my view, teens also have enemies: people or organizations who do them harm, often unintentionally and often simply by preventing them from joining the adult world. Here is my list of teen enemies, grouped into eleven categories. I acknowledge that it's unlikely that a single entity on this list sees itself as a wrongdoer. Some of the people involved would probably say that they're just catering to the teen's special needs and interests, and many, I'm sure, consider themselves to be the teen's helper and protector. As we saw with the saintly Jane Addams, however, good intentions sometimes go awry.

### Government Agencies

That anti-drug subway poster I spoke of earlier is a product of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign of the federal government's Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The ONDCP spends upwards of \$200 million per year to dissuade teens from using illegal drugs.<sup>2</sup> This is a worthy mission, but I wonder whether some of this money couldn't be better spent trying to integrate teens into adult society. We know—both from common sense and, conveniently, from an extensive study published in 2001 by Jerald Bachman of the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research—that most young people stop “partying” almost immediately after they enter the working world.<sup>3</sup> If integration into adult society were to begin at a young age, would young people even bother with drugs?

Government agencies are the worst offenders in the infantilization of our young for the simple reason that we now reflexively call upon government to solve almost every problem that confronts us. When teens are violent or sexually reckless or taking too many drugs, we expect government to step in, and government typically does so in simplistic, reactive, restrictive ways. The Federal Communications Commission recently announced draconian penalties for broadcasters and performers who offend people over public airwaves<sup>4</sup>; the goal, we're told, is to “protect children.” Meanwhile, most young people in America today have virtually free access to cable TV and the Internet, where content is entirely unregulated. Fines against Howard Stern (for sexual talk on the radio) or Janet Jackson (for flashing a breast on TV) seem hypocritical when eight-year-olds have easy access to “Loveline” or “Sex and the City” over cable television or to hardcore pornography over the Internet.

Government concerns about teens sometimes penalize adults, not just young people. The Federal Drug Administration recently withheld approval of an over-the-counter morning-after contraceptive pill (“Plan B”) for more than three years because the manufacturer, Barr Laboratories, failed to show what impact the pill *might have* on people under sixteen. In other words, no one was allowed to have

## YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACTION

### High-Pitched Generation Gap

*In 2005 a security company in Wales announced the sale of the Mosquito, a device that emits irritating high-pitched sounds that teens (and presumably young children) can hear but that adults cannot. It was immediately put to use in front of malls and stores where young people loiter as a means of dispersing them. Having tuned in to the technique, teens are now getting their revenge. Many are now installing similar tones (easily downloadable from the Internet) on their cell phones so that adults won't know when the phones are ringing. The technique is being used in classrooms where cell phones are prohibited. When a phone rings, a student gets permission to visit the lavatory, where the conversation can proceed.<sup>6</sup>*

easy access to this pill because it might encourage sexual activity among young people. This decision was made in spite of the fact that the FDA's advisory panel voted overwhelmingly (twenty-three to four) for pill approval. Panel members suggested that the pill could cut the nation's high rate of unwanted pregnancies—three million per year—in half. Even when it was approved, over-the-counter sales were restricted to people eighteen and over; the most vulnerable population can get the medication by prescription only.<sup>5</sup>

Other federal agencies that hold young people back include, among many others, the U.S. Department of Labor (which, as we saw in Chapter Eleven, prohibits many young people from working, regardless of competence), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (which helps keep dangerous items out of teen hands, even if they handle them responsibly), and the Department of Health and Human Services (which currently promotes abstinence-only sex-education programs throughout the United States).

As we've seen, both the United States Congress and the Supreme Court sometimes hold teens back, and so do state legislatures and courts. In addition, as I indicated in Chapter Two, state and local lawmakers often restrict young people in areas that are beyond the reach of federal officials: with curfews, curbs on entertainment, invasive searches of personal property, free speech restrictions, truancy laws, driving restrictions, and so on.

### Religious Institutions

When it comes to the lives of young people, religious organizations tend to be highly controlling these days, sometimes in ways that depart from the content

of primary religious texts such as the Bible (see Chapter Twelve). Some organizations, such as the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family, have urged schools and bookstores to ban the *Harry Potter* books, for example, because of the witchcraft, and many groups, such as Operation Keepsake and the Abstinence Clearinghouse, campaign to promote sexual abstinence before marriage.

Historian Joseph F. Kett's book, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present*, does an impressive job of showing how church attitudes toward young people changed over the course of the nineteenth century. Early in the century, young people were generally left alone by the church. Religious societies that involved young people were almost always founded and run by the young people themselves. By the end of the century, however, the youth-run societies were replaced by church-run organizations that began to supervise virtually every aspect of a young person's life.

Between 1880 and 1900, says Kett, "Protestant churches attempted, as never before, to take over the spare-time activities of youth... and women were often becoming the agents of control."<sup>7</sup> Church groups became obsessed with teaching young people principles of "purity," "chastity," "temperance," and the like, just as Jane Addams and other child savers were doing in more secular realms. In other words, the religious community adopted the new concept of adolescence that was sweeping the country: Teens are weak and incompetent, and they need strict adult supervision.

These views are still firmly embedded in church teachings in America today. Religious groups have largely abandoned the model of parenting one finds in the Bible, where the child-adult continuum was strong and where young people were rapidly integrated into adult culture according to their individual ability.

## The Media

Let's start with cable television's MTV, which caters to teens and older teen wanna-bees. MTV programming tells us repeatedly and unequivocally that teens are irresponsible, overgrown children. MTV also happens to be, at least according to company materials, "the largest network on the planet," reaching more than 412 million households in the United States and other countries.<sup>9</sup> That translates to more than *a billion* viewers—one-sixth of the world's population.

MTV, which stands for "Music Television," got its start showing back-to-back "music videos"—mindless, mildly erotic infomercials for the music industry—but soon branched out with reality shows, sitcoms, and such, all of which perpetuate teen myths and teen culture. In *Viva La Bam*, one of MTV's recent prime-time entries—a show that *Newsday* says "male teens across the nation" are "insanely down with"—Bam Margera, a Philadelphia skateboarder, and his "crew" paint his home's entire

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Even more TV for Teens

*Launched in 2005 by former vice president Al Gore and partner Joel Hyatt, "Current TV" is the latest youth-oriented cable channel, called by The Nation an "interactive grad-school version of MTV." Although Gore initially wanted it to have a liberal, change-the-world, political slant, financial realities quickly transformed it into a more conventional television entry where, said The Nation, "hipness triumphs over values." One regular feature: news alerts displaying the most searched items on Google. Current's marketing guru? Annie Zehren, the founder of Teen People magazine. Current TV is now available in twenty-eight million homes in the United States.<sup>8</sup>*

kitchen electric blue (including the appliances and food), after which Bam paints his father the same color. They steal his mom's car and have it "tricked out" at the local chop shop. They dig a tunnel under his uncle's house so they can surprise him in his bedroom. And then, according to *Newsday*:

*...for the grand finale, Bam's pals shove dad Phil and Uncle Vita into the makeshift backyard equivalent of a steel-cage wrestling ring, to be pelted with a deluge of increasingly gross debris—flour and cornflakes, crickets and maggots, bacon and honey, even anchovies and money.<sup>10</sup>*

That's right. The teens cage the adults and then pelt them with garbage. Other MTV shows are equally disturbing: the long-running *Real World* (beautiful young people party and fornicate); *Pimp My Ride* (you learn how to create a "fully-loaded pimp chariot"); and *Rich Girls* (a show about "normal" but extremely wealthy teens who "enjoy doing normal teenage things like shopping, talking on the phone, and going to the prom"). Perhaps the worst of them is the highly-rated *My Super Sweet Sixteen*, which gives us an inside look at \$200 thousand parties for super-rich young women; their purpose, according to *TIME*, is "to prolong the whiny, self-centered greediness that gives *infantile* a bad name."<sup>11</sup>

A billion people are exposed to dozens of MTV shows like this every day. Only one of their ninety-four currently listed programs—*Choose or Lose*—comes anywhere near portraying young people as competent in any way. This lone program, which airs only occasionally, solicits opinions from young people on timely issues: gay marriage, the presidential candidates, and so on. Even here, though, we learn merely that young people have opinions, not that they are competent thinkers or leaders.

In prior chapters we've looked at some of the popular teen films, but let's review. Major film studios like Universal and Paramount have been instrumental in shaping our distorted view of teens and in creating the distressed teens with whom we live. Consider films like *American Pie*, which grossed more than 234 million dollars worldwide after its 1999 release (male teens party, drink beer, and treat women like sex objects); *Dude, Where's My Car?* (two male teens lose their car while on a drunk and encounter strippers, ostriches, aliens, and angry girlfriends while searching for it); *Clueless* (frivolous female teens act frivolously); and *Dazed and Confused* (teens cruise, smoke marijuana, and try not to worry about the future).

We've already looked at the film *Thirteen*—cowritten by a thirteen-year-old—which shows us young teen females immersed in a world of drugs and sex. Even more disturbing is the 1995 documentary-like film *Kids*, which looks at the depraved lives of young New York City skateboarders. Telly, the main character, is on a mission to have sex with as many young virgins as possible; it turns out that he's unknowingly spreading the AIDS virus. In the film, people as young as ten or eleven drink alcohol and take drugs with their teen friends.

Dozens of glossy magazines are produced just for teens, mainly for females. *Seventeen* alone has over 2.3 million subscribers and focuses on how to dress and apply makeup to be trendy, sexy, and beautiful. This market is so large and so robust that four of the top adult magazines—*People*, *Elle*, *Vogue*, and *Cosmopolitan* have recently launched teen spinoffs. Recent cover lines include: “The Best Ways to Flirt,” “Virginity: Real Girls, Real Stories,” “Your Best Hair Ever,” and “Advanced Pleasure Seeking.” These magazines are made possible not just by the subscribers but by their advertisers, which brings me to our next set of enemies.

## Business and Industry

I'm holding a recent issue of *Teen People* in my hands. The emaciated, billionaire, eighteen-year-old Olsen sisters are on the cover, and here is a sampling of what's inside: Herbal Essence hair products, Neutrogena makeup, Guess clothing, Roxy clothing, Maybelline makeup, Pacific Sun Clothing, Paul Mitchell hair care products, American Eagle Outfitters clothing, Clinique lipstick, Garnier hair color, Candies shoes, Brilliant Brunette hair products, Chanel perfume, Borders books, and Unionbay clothing—just a few of the more than one hundred advertisers that fill most of *Teen People's* pages.

Do companies benefit by the maintenance of teen culture? Most definitely. One of the reasons business and industry targets teens is because of the vast sums of money teens now control. American teens supposedly spent more than \$190

<b>Enemies of the Teen</b>		
<i>Type</i>	<i>Exemplars</i>	<i>Nature of Threat</i>
<i>Government agencies</i>	U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, FCC, FDA, ONDCP, Dept. of Labor, ATF, HHS, state legislatures, city councils	Prevent competent young people from working, owning property, filing lawsuits, smoking, driving, voting, marrying, etc.
<i>Religious groups</i>	Christian Coalition, United Methodist Church, Assemblies of God, American Family Assn., Family Research Council, Church World Service	Perpetuate myths about young people being helpless and incompetent; have lost sight of the important roles that young people played in the Bible.
<i>Media</i>	<i>Seventeen</i> , <i>Cosmo Girl</i> , <i>Elle Girl</i> , <i>Teen People</i> , <i>Teen Vogue</i> , MTV, CBS, ABC, NBC, FOX, VH1, The WB, Clear Channel, UPN, MPAA, RIAA	Routinely portray young people as self-absorbed, frivolous, oversexed, drug-abusing, stupid, or incompetent.
<i>Business and industry</i>	Paramount, Universal, Jive Records, Coca Cola, Abercrombie & Fitch, Pfizer, Eli Lilly, Macy's, Guess Clothing, Vans, Clinique	Make upwards of \$200 billion per year through the maintenance of teen culture.
<i>Mental health system</i>	American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, National Association of Social Workers, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry	Label a wide range of troublesome teen behaviors as indicative of mental illness; provide "treatment" rather than helping to incorporate teens into the adult world.

<p><i>Juvenile justice system and law enforcement</i></p>	<p>State juvenile justice systems, all 50 states; police departments</p>	<p>Arrest and incarcerate young people for “juvenile” offenses invented by 19th-century moralists; deprive teens of basic constitutional rights.</p>
<p><i>Public figures</i></p>	<p>Bill McCollum (U.S. Rep.), Mary Lou Dickerson (U.S. Rep.), Hillary Clinton, Tipper Gore, George W. Bush, Joseph Lieberman, Laura Schlessinger, James Dobson</p>	<p>Help to perpetuate myths about teen incorrigibility and incompetence; fail to acknowledge teen abilities and potential.</p>
<p><i>Organized labor</i></p>	<p>AFL-CIO, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers Intl., Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees</p>	<p>Oppose entry of qualified young people into the working world.</p>
<p><i>Education establishment</i></p>	<p>National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, National Parent Teacher Association, teachers unions, local boards of education</p>	<p>Warehouse young people in schools even when they’re not ready to learn; segregate people by age rather than by ability; fail to meet individual learning needs; instill a long-term dislike of learning.</p>
<p><i>NGOs</i></p>	<p>Parents Television Council, Child Labor Coalition, Children’s Defense Fund, Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Natl. Coalition for the Protection of Children &amp; Families</p>	<p>Infantilize young people; discourage integration of young people into adult society; encourage censorship.</p>
<p><i>Parents</i></p>	<p>You and I</p>	<p>Underestimate the competence and potential of our children; enter into adversarial relationships with teens.</p>

billion in 2006, up from \$155 billion in 2000, and that's a small fraction of the amount of money teens control through what marketers call "pester power."<sup>12</sup>

A 2000 PBS survey found that 22 percent of teens had at least one credit card—up from only 11 percent in 1994, and the number surges to over 70 percent for college students.<sup>13</sup> The money comes mainly from parents and part-time jobs, but even those who work seldom have adult responsibilities to tie up the funds. In other words, most of the money in teen hands is *entirely disposable and discretionary*—the sales executive's dream come true.

Marketing firms around the country study teens carefully and advise major businesses about how to position their products. Some marketing firms, such as Teenage Research Unlimited, American Student List, and Student Marketing, have built their entire businesses around the booming teen market, helping a wide range of companies to develop entirely new markets from scratch.<sup>14</sup> The Pottery Barn, for example, recently developed a new line of furnishings for teens ("PBTeen") and the cell phone companies have been remarkably successful at putting colorful, flashy new cell phones into teen hands nationwide; more than one in three teens now have their own cell phone, with the proportion increasing rapidly. According to one research firm, in 2004 young people were expected to generate nearly a quarter of all cell-phone revenues—about \$20 billion.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most diabolical of the teen marketing schemes comes from the 99.44 percent pure-hearted executives at Proctor & Gamble, makers of Ivory Soap and Pampers. Created in 2001, P&G's "Tremor" division soon recruited nearly 300,000 teens to help marketing professionals figure out how to empty teen pockets.<sup>16</sup> In return, Tremor "members" received free samples, coupons, discounts, and unreleased music.

According to industry sources, in 1990 American industry spent about \$100 million on advertising and marketing to young people; by 2000, the figure increased *twenty-fold*, to \$2 billion.<sup>17</sup> Recent books such as *What Kids Buy and Why: The Psychology of Marketing to Kids*, by psychologist Daniel Acuff, help guide the marketers to their targets.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the industries that profit from teen culture are oppressively conspicuous, and the music industry probably tops the list. As I was finishing this book it was tough to get through a day without seeing multiple images of pop-diva Britney Spears. About 22 percent of recorded music is purchased by young people between ages ten and nineteen, even though they bring in only 4 percent of household income.<sup>19</sup> Older people are fairly set in their musical ways, whereas young people are *impressionable*; again, this is the kind of group that marketing, sales, and advertising professionals

live for. You can't create a "star" for middle-age people; to them, a star is someone with both charisma and staying power. With young people, however, you can create a star overnight. Young people are also the primary purchasers of many of the music spinoffs: live concerts, merchandise, films, DVDs, and so on.

As I noted in Chapter Five, the pharmaceutical industry has been successful in recent years in making enormous inroads into the youth market, with more money now being spent on behavior-altering medications for youth than on all other prescription medications combined in that age category. Companies like GlaxoSmithKline, Eli Lilly, and Pfizer would lose enormous sums of money if teen problems were ameliorated even slightly. The illegal drug industry, which also preys upon our youth, also benefits from the existence and maintenance of teen culture.

One way to get a quick sense of the economics of teen culture is to walk into any large shopping mall, where you'll find entire stores and whole departments catering to teens. Stores like PacSun, Forever 21, Wet Seal, Hollister, Charlotte Russe, Hot Topic, and American Eagle are teen-only haunts, and so are large departments like Nordstrom's "BP" (Brass Plum) or Macy's massive new dance-club style department called "ThIsIt" (pronounced "this is it"), which typically has more than ten thousand square feet of teen fashions on display.

Another way is to walk into a teenager's room. In a young male's room you might find an X-Box (Microsoft), a teen-tuned cell phone, a guitar, and one or more skate, surf, or snow boards. You'll find even more teen-oriented products in a young female's room: Stila, Urban Decay, or Hard Candy makeup, Bath and Body Works lotions, Bed Head hair products, teen magazines, teen DVDs, teen idol posters, and a closet packed with Roxy t-shirts and Steve Madden shoes.

This is a far cry from the world in which young children were dressed like adults or in which teens were rapidly integrated into adult culture. The isolation of teens from adults brought about by the Industrial Revolution has been a boon for American business, which has, in turn, widened the gap between teens and adults.

The editors of the ubiquitous *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* recently announced that their next edition will include the word "teensploitation"—the exploitation of teens by industries such as the movie industry. In an Associated Press article about Merriam-Webster's decision to canonize this term, lexicographer John Morse, president of the company, reminds us that "language is a window into our culture and history." The term "teensploitation" has been used, he says, for twenty-two years now—and the practice, of course, has been around far longer.<sup>20</sup>

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Forever Young

*I don't wanna grow up,  
I'm a Toys "R" Us kid.  
A million toys to choose from,  
that I can play with.*

—From a 1980s Television Commercial

## The Mental Health System

I can remember my visceral reaction when, many years ago, I first ran across “Oppositional Defiant Disorder” in the *DSM*—the manual that mental health professionals use to diagnose their clients, developed jointly by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association. It’s defined as “a pattern of negativistic, hostile, and defiant behavior” toward adults which lasts at least six months. To make the diagnosis, the therapist merely needs to conclude that the client exhibits any four behaviors of out a list of eight, which includes items like “often argues with adults,” “deliberately annoys people,” and “is often touchy.” The official diagnostic code is 313.81; that’s the code the therapist lists on an insurance form in order to seek compensation for the treatment he or she is providing.<sup>21</sup>

I remember thinking, “Why is such commonplace behavior in this manual?” The diagnosis seemed to fit me as a teen (at times) and many people I knew when I was growing up, not to mention the classic picture of adolescence that had been created by James Dean in “Rebel Without a Cause” and Marlon Brando in “The Wild One.” In recent years, I’ve come to view this “disorder” for what it really is: the modern label for “incorrigibility”—the criminal category that had been invented by aristocratic child-savers of the late 1800s (Chapter Two).

As Joseph Kett and other historians have pointed out, when G. Stanley Hall and other psychologists made adolescence an institution a century ago, they also created new jobs for armies of counselors, social workers, and juvenile justice workers. They pathologized normal behavior created by the social chaos of the time, devising methods of “treatment” for the behavior rather than providing appropriate social fixes. As we saw earlier (Chapter Four), the transformation is neatly captured by the change that took place in Father Flanagan’s Boys Town in the 1950s: in the original community, troubled young people were helped with heavy doses of adult responsibility, whereas the new Boys Town provided professional “treatment” for the residents’ deviant tendencies.

In short, my own colleagues have long played and continue to play a leading role in the maintenance of the artificial extension of childhood. They have pathologized socially-induced behavior and have, in recent years, even medicalized its “treatment,” relying heavily on drugs to get young people under control. There are about four hundred thousand workers in today’s mental health professions\*—a \$100 billion industry<sup>22</sup>—with more than 70 percent of the industry devoted at least in part to serving the needs of teens, largely, in my view, using outmoded concepts and inappropriate techniques.<sup>23</sup>

### Law Enforcement Agencies and the Juvenile Justice System

Police should focus on real crime, not on the special juvenile crimes-against-the-self invented by the child savers. As I indicated in the last chapter, we also need to consider dismantling the juvenile justice system.

Unfortunately, in *Roper v. Simmons*, a landmark case decided in 2005, the United States Supreme Court indirectly strengthened the juvenile justice system by making it unlawful to execute people who committed their crimes before age eighteen.<sup>24</sup> In so doing, the court has uncritically accepted this magical age as a reliable indicator of reasoning ability and maturity. Rather than look for real measures of such abilities, which vary enormously from one person to another at *any* age, the court elected, quite explicitly, to conform to societal “trends.” In strongly worded opinions, the four dissenting judges correctly noted that “differences in the aggregate between juveniles and adults...frequently do not hold true when comparing individuals” and that the “startling conclusion” of the majority decision that “juries cannot be trusted” to look at individual factors in criminals under eighteen “undermines the very foundations of our capital sentencing system.”<sup>25</sup>

### Elected Officials and Other Public Figures

A decade ago on the floor of the United States House of Representatives, Representative Bill McCollum warned the nation about an upcoming scourge of teen “super-predators”<sup>26</sup>; there’s no sign of it at this point, and it’s not likely to come any time in the foreseeable future. Although it’s true that many American teens are troubled or troublesome, we need to stop the hyperbole and refocus our thinking and our efforts, moving toward a competency-based system that allows teens to grow and flourish by connecting meaningfully with the adult world.

Meanwhile, the naysayers, alarmists, and modern child savers will grab every

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\*There are six major licensed professions that serve mental health needs in the United States: marriage and family therapy, counseling, psychiatry, psychology, psychiatric nursing, and social work.

possible headline. Some of the worst offenders today include media personalities Laura Schlessinger and James Dobson, who condemn any kind of sexual exploration before marriage; Tipper Gore and United States Representative Mary Lou Dickerson, who believe that teens are too tender to be exposed to offensive songs or video games; and Brent Bozell, president of the Parents Television Council, who insists that television content needs to be tightly controlled to protect our young people from harm.

As we've seen, Anna Freud, one of the twentieth century's most vocal and influential critics of the modern teen, was highly distressed during her own teen years. I suspect that most or all of the leading alarmists in our country today also had a rough time growing up or at least were close to some troubled teens. Many modern child savers undoubtedly have difficult teens at home, or in some cases, experienced tragedy because of a son or daughter's involvement with drugs, alcohol, gangs, or other risky activities. Perhaps they want to spare others their pain or are looking for ways to bury old demons. Understandably, they may feel that they or society in general should have been there to protect their offspring before tragedy struck. But it's not more protection that our young people need; they need the experience and tools and opportunities that will allow them to protect *themselves*.

### Organized Labor

Earlier in the book we learned that child labor was eventually outlawed because of the concerted efforts of organized labor, big business, and various child-saving groups. We also learned that the definition of "child" was gradually broadened to include increasingly older young people. During the Great Depression and at other times when jobs were scarce, unions were especially hard on young people, immigrants, minorities, women, and other vulnerable groups that threatened the jobs of their members. Social change and prosperity gradually broke down many of the barriers, allowing minorities and women, at least, to work in some industries. But the young are still excluded.

The battle against child labor was won so completely that I'm sure that modern union leaders don't give it a second thought—but they should. Young people are excellent workers, and the workplace is far less dangerous and exploitative than it was when the child-labor laws were enacted. Ambitious young people deserve the chance to work in business and industry just as soon as they can demonstrate appropriate competencies.

Will the AFL-CIO or Teamsters welcome an age-blind, competency-based system of employment in the various industries they serve? Of course not. Adults

are still the breadwinners, after all (in fact, adult *males* are still usually the primary breadwinners), and any perceived threat to the economic security of the current union memberships will, understandably, be fiercely resisted. If 20 million young people—or even 20 or 30 percent of those individuals—were suddenly available to compete on the American job market, union leaders would be the first to dig all the old child-labor arguments out of the mothballs, no matter how absurd those arguments may be in today’s OSHA-governed workplace.

### The Education Establishment

The National Education Association, descended from an organization founded in 1857 and with almost 2.7 million members today, works hard through its extensive lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill to make sure that America’s inadequate education system stays that way—by which I mean, stays exactly the way it is, except with greater job security, more resources, and higher revenues.

You won’t see the NEA calling for a return to home schooling, and I suspect that perceptive NEA leaders are extremely nervous about the effect the Internet will have on our schools over the next decade or two.

The many teacher unions around the country, our local school boards, and even the proverbial PTAs, also want to keep things the way they are—except with more money, resources, and so on. But high school is little more than a prison for many of our teens, and the time has come to explore bold new approaches to education that will allow our young to reconnect meaningfully with the adult world they’re about to enter. Don’t expect the NEA to go down without a fight, however.

### Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

According to the *Washington Times*, in 2000 the FCC received 111 complaints about indecent material being broadcast over public airwaves, but in 2003 there were 240,350 such complaints. The increase was driven by coordinated campaigns mounted by organizations such as the Parents Television Council.<sup>28</sup> It’s understandable that people might object to broadcasting they find offensive, but perhaps we should all object even more strongly to any form of censorship, no matter how well intentioned.

The modern effort to protect our supposedly fragile young people by curtailing free speech rights is, in my view, both wrongheaded and dangerous. On this issue Voltaire’s words ring true: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

You may have run across the “Bill of Non-Rights” that circulates on the Internet now and then. Attributed to a member of the United States House of Representatives but actually written by a Libertarian computer professional named

## WISDOM OF THE AGES

### Unions and the Young

*The union battle against young people is still going strong, especially when a non-union business is involved. In 1999, in Salinas, California, a \$45 million mall construction project was shut down by a judge after members of the Carpenters Union Local 605 went to court armed with a video tape showing the twelve-year-old son of the construction boss operating a forklift. The union also filed a complaint with the state Labor Commissioner's Office and threatened to report the construction company to the county Social Services department. An attorney for the mall said this was a situation in which "a dad brings his kid to work on the weekend"—and that the non-union construction firm had long been a target of the carpenter's union.<sup>27</sup>*

Lewis Napper, the document is a cogent reminder about what the Constitution and the Bill of Rights do not guarantee. Article II of Napper's piece reads:

*You do not have the right to never be offended. This country is based on freedom, and that means freedom for everyone—not just you! You may leave the room, turn the channel, express a different opinion, etc.; but the world is full of idiots, and probably always will be.<sup>29</sup>*

But some NGOs, influenced by the echoes of the voices of Hull-House, want to curtail people's rights in order to build higher walls around the young—walls that generally do more harm than good, as I've demonstrated throughout this book.

The wall idea isn't just my personal metaphor, by the way. In a recent Sunday paper, the nationally-syndicated "Zits" cartoon, which provides humorous commentary on today's teens, shows five consecutive drawings in which a young man is gradually enclosed, from the ground up, by a brick structure the size of a compact phone booth. In the fifth drawing, he's completely enclosed. The captions above each drawing read, respectively: "CURFEW: 11 PM," "NO UNSUPERVISED PARTIES," "LIMITED TIME ON THE INTERNET," "NO R-RATED MOVIES," and "NO RIDING IN CARS DRIVEN BY ANYONE UNDER TWENTY-FIVE."<sup>30</sup> The Parents Television Council, which "scientifically monitors prime time television to assist your family," is adding a new layer of bricks.<sup>31</sup>

Other NGOs that infantilize our young people include the Child Labor Coalition, which seems to consider virtually any form of work by young people to

be harmful or exploitative, and the Children's Defense Fund, which considers young people to be inherently defense-less and lobbies hard to protect them in every respect. Founded in 1985 by the wives of prominent federal officials (Tipper Gore, Susan Baker, Nancy Thurmond, and others), the Parent Music Resource Center started out with a censorship agenda but eventually settled for a voluntary pledge by the RIAA to put warning labels—so-called “Tipper stickers”—on the packaging of music recordings that might corrupt fragile young listeners.<sup>32</sup>

### My Fellow Parents

I've done it, and you have, too. We force our offspring to cram their entire education into the first eighteen to twenty-two years of their lives, whether or not they're ready to learn. Prompted by those omnipresent government media campaigns and by laws that make us responsible for the misbehavior of our young, we try to monitor and control every aspect of our sons' and daughters' lives. The latest trend: equipping them with cell phones than generate GPS signals that allow us to track their whereabouts twenty-four hours a day—or at least the whereabouts of the phone!<sup>33</sup>

We search their rooms, make decisions about their medical and psychological treatment, coerce their cooperation by making threats about the car keys, try to restrict their sexual behavior and limit their access to unsavory characters, and forbid them from drinking or taking drugs, even though we drink without restriction and can barely get through the day without an anti-depressant.

When teens try to confront us as if they are fellow adults, we do our best to shut them down, and, in so doing, establish an adversarial relationship with our offspring that may last many years. In short—no matter how old they are and no matter how competent they may be—we treat our offspring like incompetent children.

## SHODDY THINKING

This book contains some disturbing news. Here's more: Generally speaking, we're all fairly shoddy thinkers. Evolution equips us primarily with practical abilities, not cognitive ones—mainly tools for making babies and then trying to keep them alive long enough for them to make babies of their own. We don't need to be rocket scientists to accomplish these modest feats, which suggests why there are so very few rocket scientists among us.

Psychologists sometimes spend their whole careers showing just how irratio-

nal most people really are. In fiendishly revealing studies conducted in the 1970s by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, for example, people were confronted with simple situations of the sort that modern juries might see.<sup>34</sup> For example:

*The town where a certain crime has been committed is 85 percent white and 15 percent black. The witness was 80 percent sure that he saw a black person commit the crime. Therefore, we're correct in concluding that the perpetrator was probably black.*<sup>35</sup>

This sounds tidy, but our conclusion is wrong, and most adult subjects—including most real jurors—will in fact get it wrong. It's great that the witness was so confident, but being confident about an improbable event (only 15 percent of the people in the town are black) doesn't make it any more probable, and being doubtful about a probable event (85 percent of the people in the town are white) doesn't make it any less probable. When you do the math, the odds that a black person committed the crime in this situation turn out to be less than one in two.

When it comes to our thinking about teens, a number of cognitive pitfalls of this sort appear to limit our ability to think clearly:

### The Confirmation Bias

My mother has often claimed that her dreams allow her to foretell the birth of babies in our extended family, but she rarely reports that she has had one of these predictive dreams until *after* a birth. "I *knew* she was going to give birth to a boy today," she'll say. "I had a dream about it last night." Presumably, when she has a dream that doesn't pan out, she just forgets about it.

We're all subject to this phenomenon, which psychologists call "confirmation bias" or "the confirmation error." We pay special attention to events that confirm our beliefs and tend to ignore events that don't. Unfortunately, this tendency allows us to preserve virtually any belief, no matter how mistaken or irrational it might be. The issue is explored in an old "Seinfeld" episode in which a reporter mistakenly gets the idea that Jerry and George are gay. Once he's got that idea, it's easy for him to find a wide range of "evidence" that supports his belief. This makes for great comedy—and, in some situations, for great tragedy too.

It's easy for us to confirm our mistaken beliefs about teens by selectively focusing on information or events that confirm those beliefs: sensational headlines about teen violence, the sight of oddly-dressed teens on the street, the bumping and grinding of a dim-witted teen diva on television, a disrespectful remark

from a teen relative, and so on. In a culture that holds teens back and brings out their worst, it's especially easy to find "evidence" that teens are incompetent and impaired.

As we've seen throughout this book, however, the hard evidence shows overwhelmingly that the turmoil experienced by American teens is a creation of modern culture and that teens have the *potential* to function at least as well as most adults do. Whether we choose to try to tap that potential is up to us.

Am I vulnerable to the confirmation bias? Of course! But I hope that the diligent reader will concede that I have at least taken pains to ground my views in a wealth of data and that I have attempted to interpret those data with at least a modicum of objectivity. It's relevant here that my own views on teens have *changed* through my investigations. I set out nine years ago mainly with questions and curiosity—with a willingness to challenge my own biases, not simply a desire to confirm them.

### The Fundamental Attribution Error

When we judge others, we virtually always attribute their behavior to internal traits, not to the circumstances surrounding their behavior. When we judge ourselves, however, we tend to do the opposite—to blame our actions on circumstances rather than on internal factors. In other words, we're much more likely to condemn other people than we are to condemn ourselves. Psychologists call this tendency the "fundamental attribution error."

We seem to be especially consistent in making this error with teens, whom we're quick to label "lazy," "forgetful," "deceitful," "materialistic," "flighty," "irresponsible," "aggressive," and so on. We tend to be oblivious to the circumstances and experiences that have contributed to their less-than-desirable ways.

I'm not trying to excuse teen excesses and imperfections. Nor do I mean to say that individual teens don't have real personality differences; they certainly do, just as adults do. But we err when we blame their wrongdoings exclusively on their supposedly inherent traits.

### Mindlessless

As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, once certain practices are set in motion, we tend to repeat them mindlessly, without ever looking back at the events that set them in motion. We'll continue to cut the corner off the roast before we cook it just because Grandma use to do so. But Grandma trimmed the roast because it was too big to fit in her one small roasting pan, whereas we trim the roast because—well, just *because*.

As social psychologist Ellen Langer has pointed out, mindlessness is a costly

cognitive phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> It makes us insensitive to a changing world, doomed to repeat actions that no longer make any sense.

Again, when it comes to teens, we are repeating actions that were set in motion during a very peculiar time in American history: the decades of the Industrial Revolution, when our cities were struggling to cope with dramatic population growth (New York City's population, for example, grew from 152,000 to 1,478,000 between 1820 and 1870), when our country was overwhelmed by massive immigration, and when rapid industrialization led to the exploitation of millions of workers.<sup>37</sup>

The opposite of mindlessness is mindfulness, a state of mind in which your awareness of the causes of things is heightened. If this volume has made you even somewhat more mindful about why our teens are the way they are, then I've done my job.

### Cognitive Inertia

You're given (a) a box of nails, (b) a candle, and (c) a lighter and asked to find a way to attach the candle to a wall so that it won't drip on the floor when it's lighted. How would you do it? Most people nail the candle to the wall or melt some wax and affix the candle with the melted wax. But neither approach takes care of the drip problem. Very few people are able to solve this problem, even though the solution is simple: dump the nails out of the box, attach the *box* to the wall, and then affix the candle to the inside of the box. The box now serves as a candle holder that catches any dripping wax.

According to Karl Duncker, a Gestalt psychologist who studied this problem nearly a century ago, people have trouble solving it because of their previous experience with boxes. A box is supposed to be a *container*, not a candle holder, and it's difficult to think about boxes having new functions. Duncker labeled our lack of insight in such situations "functional fixedness" or "mental set." Modern psychologists study a similar phenomenon called "cognitive inertia"—the inability to alter one's beliefs until they're sufficiently challenged by conflicting information.<sup>38</sup>

Our beliefs about teens are based on a lifetime of experience, shaped by headlines, movies, and personal encounters and distorted by the confirmation error, the fundamental attribution error, and other cognitive truth-manglers. Beliefs of this sort don't change instantly, even after one reads a persuasive book. But they can and do change when we're bombarded with sufficient information that contradicts our beliefs. This book might set change in motion, especially if it leads you to look for new information that confirms some of the assertions I've made here. (This would be an instance of the confirmation bias operating in reverse.)

## Social Influence and Prejudice

Our thinking is also distorted both by peer pressure and by our tendency to accept the pronouncements of “authorities” and “experts” without question. We’re creatures of a community, and we’re trained early on to conform to the community’s wishes and expectations, especially if those wishes and expectations are properly packaged. Community-induced beliefs are sometimes so pervasive that they have been called “institutional delusions.”<sup>39</sup>

Our views on teens are largely determined by the powerful messages our media sources and thought leaders feed us daily: Teens are reckless, incompetent, and violent; young people need to be sheltered; childhood should be extended as long as possible. Our views can reasonably be conceived of as a kind of irrational prejudice programmed by our culture—almost precisely the kind that mainstream Americans bore towards women and blacks until very recent times.

The programming is pervasive and sometimes nearly invisible, like those subliminal “Buy Popcorn” messages that were embedded in some movies in the 1950s. The popcorn messages didn’t work, but the subtle messages we’re constantly fed about young people work all too well.

Just recently, when my two youngest children were watching *Mary Poppins* in the back of our mini-van, I suddenly understood this modern classic (released in 1964) in a new light. In the film, set in London in 1910, the magical and mysterious Poppins (Julie Andrews) floats her way into a traditional family in which the banker dad (George Banks, played by David Tomlinson) is focused on his career and is unaffectionate toward his children, determined to “mold” them into responsible citizens. Mom is passive inside the home, but she’s bold on the streets, where she marches with her “sister Suffragettes” to try to get women the vote. Poppins sets events in motion which threaten Dad’s career and cause him to reassess his role in the family.

Toward the end of the film, just after his children have inadvertently caused a run on his bank and he realizes he’s about to be fired, he laments his situation to Bert the chimney sweep (Dick Van Dyke), Mary Poppins’ friend. Bert, an early practitioner of reverse psychology, counsels Mr. Banks as follows:

*Mr. Banks: My world was calm, well ordered, exemplary. Then came this person with chaos in her wake. And now my life’s ambitions go with one foul blow. It’s quite a bitter pill to take. It’s that Poppins woman! She did it! ... You know what she did? I realize it now. She tricked me into taking Jane and Michael to the bank. That’s how all the trouble started.*

*Bert: She tricked you into taking the children on an outing? Outrageous! A man with all the important things you have to do. Shameful! You're a man of high position, esteemed by your peers. And when your little tykes are crying, you haven't time to dry their tears. And see them grateful little faces smiling up at you because their daddy always knows just what to do.*

*Mr. Banks: Well, I mean.... Look.... I....*

*Bert: You've got to grind, grind, grind at that grindstone. Though childhood slips like sand through a sieve. And all too soon they've up and grown, and then they've flown. And it's too late for you to give....*

In other words, Bert is saying—and Banks ultimately agrees—that Banks was wrong to put his career first, to want to be a responsible provider for his family, and to try to shape his children to be responsible citizens. Banks is supposed to put the immediate needs of his children—for affection, fun, and nurturing—ahead of all else. After he is indeed fired, the film ends with Banks doing just that, literally flying kites in the park with his children—and, miraculously, with all of his fellow bank executives. The children-first message has, it seems, broken through not only to Mr. Banks but to all reasonable adults.

We've seen these messages before (especially in Chapter Two): the family should be centered around children, who are helpless and incompetent. Parents should cater to the needs of children, not vice versa. Young people should be sheltered, not raised to be responsible adults. Childhood should be extended indefinitely.\*

With messages of this sort reaching us daily, it's a wonder we can think with any clarity at all about young people. We are told what to think, continue to do so mindlessly, and pay special attention to confirmatory information that keeps our faulty beliefs intact.

## CAN WE CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE?

Historical forces created the crazy, vacuous world that modern teens inhabit, and a vast array of contemporary institutions keep them trapped there. These same forces and institutions have distorted our thinking about teens, forcing us to see them through extremely biased eyes.

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\*The movie is based on a 1934 book by P. L. Travers. Curiously, Travers herself fails to deliver these messages. In the book Mrs. Banks isn't a crusader for women's rights, Mr. Banks doesn't lose his job, and the family structure doesn't change during Mary Poppins' stay. It took the magic of Walt Disney's writers in the early 1960s to layer these social agendas onto Travers' simple story. At the movie's premiere in 1964, Travers was apparently crying, not out of joy but rather because the movie "had done a strange kind of violence to her work."<sup>40</sup>

Can we change our perspective on teens? I have no doubt that we can. Our attitudes toward gays, women, blacks, the elderly, Arabs, and others have changed dramatically in recent times—sometimes over a period of years and sometimes virtually overnight. Polls conducted shortly after the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, for example, showed an immediate downward shift in attitude toward Arabs, with nearly six in ten Americans feeling that people of Arab descent should be subjected to special security checks before boarding airplanes.<sup>41</sup>

In 1984 George Orwell speculated that widespread attitudes toward an entire population could be changed completely “within two or three minutes.” On the sixth day of a massive Hate Week rally, an announcer—with “nothing altered in his voice or manner”—substitutes “Eastasia” for “Eurasia” as the name of the country’s vile enemy. Showing remarkable adaptiveness, the crowd suddenly notices that the posters and banners on display at the rally are “all wrong.” Frenzied people in the crowd attribute the faulty signs to “sabotage” and quickly tear them to shreds.<sup>42</sup>

Deeply entrenched attitudes, like those we hold toward teens, sometimes take years to change, but the changes can still be substantial. For example, according to pollsters, in 1993 only 40 percent of Americans favored allowing gays to serve openly in the military; by 2004, this figure had risen to 67 percent.<sup>43</sup>

Societal attitudes change when authority figures make pronouncements, when people get new information or have new experiences, when people’s beliefs are inconsistent with their own behavior, or when events in the news make people question their views. Sometimes attitude change comes easy, and sometimes it comes hard, but it does occur. As I noted earlier, I hope that this book will prove, over time, to be one of several factors that lead to widespread changes in how we view our deeply misunderstood, highly undervalued young people.

## REESTABLISHING THE CONTINUUM

The enemies list I’ve generated for teens is long, and the enormous sums of money that people make through the maintenance of teen culture is especially troubling; when money is at risk, the wheels of change turn particularly slowly. Even so, there are a few hopeful signs that the century-long trend toward extending childhood may be turning around, or at least that some people are trying to slow its momentum.

The United States Supreme Court has restored a few of the basic rights that young people lost at the turn of the twentieth century, and a constitutional amend-

ment has lowered the voting age to eighteen, with small movements afoot to lower the voting age further; following the ratification of that amendment most states lowered the age of majority from twenty-one to eighteen. We're also seeing general grumbling about the effectiveness of the juvenile justice system, some respectable people calling for the dismantling of the modern high school, the closing of some of the correctional boot camps, the emergence of streamlined systems for prosecuting juvenile offenders as adults, the rapid spread of peer courts, the creation of new teen-run teen rights groups, and the promising beginnings of Internet-driven education systems. Our teens are still being infantilized, but change is at least in the air.

Will anyone simply *agree* with what I'm saying? There is certainly one large group that is likely to be sympathetic: America's 20 million infantilized teens, many of whom are acutely aware of the fact that they're living in a cage of dubious purpose. I've also spoken with many adults in recent years who immediately "get it"—sometimes because they work with teens and see the down side of regulating the lives of teens so completely.

As I noted early in this volume, educators John Holt and John Taylor Gatto, French psychiatrist Patrice Huerre, American psychologist Richard Farson, and historians Hugh Cunningham and Marc Kleijwegt, among others, expressed concerns about the artificial extension of childhood long before Diane Dumas and I began our research. Given strong arguments for change, I believe that many adults will at least give the case against adolescence a serious look.

In any case, either we reverse the trend or continue to suffer the consequences. For more than a century now, we've been caught in a vicious cycle in which restrictions on teens have produced more teen problems and teen problems have in turn produced more restrictions. Teen problems are substantial, and some indicators suggest that they're getting worse. Even if we find ways to contain certain problems—with metal detectors, room searches, guards, video surveillance, prison sentences, medication, boot camps, treatments, and so on—is that really the kind of society we want to have? Do we really want our schools looking and functioning like minimum-security prisons? Do we really want to walk down our city streets in fear of being victims of gang rivalries? Do we really want to stunt the growth or waste the potential of a large, highly-competent segment of our population? Do we really want teens learning most of they know from *each other*? Do we really want our teens to be so completely under the thumbs of the frivolous media, music, and fashion industries? As teachers, do we really want to be in adversarial relationships with our students? As parents, do we really want to be in conflict with our offspring, and do we really want our loved ones to mistrust or disrespect or even hate us?

Adolescence as we know it in the United States should be abolished, and we should also stop exporting this dysfunctional period of life to other countries. Teens in the United States are almost completely isolated from adults, and adults in turn have very little understanding of what it's like to be a teen. The time has come to end the isolation. Young and old, we will all benefit by restoring the child-adult continuum that existed through most of human history in industrialized nations and that still exists in preindustrial societies today. The teen years need to be what they used to be: a time not just of learning, but of learning to be responsible adults.

Can the continuum be reestablished, and is competency testing and training really the key? I'm convinced that an age-blind, competency-based program of evaluation and education can restore the child-adult continuum in a way that will strengthen our society at multiple levels—and that it will do so without threatening any truly essential structures or institutions. The structures it will tear down are relics of the early years of industrialization and have long needed to go.

**Q:** *The kinds of changes you're recommending seem too radical. Are you serious about them? Do you think they'll ever occur?*

**A:** It took me years to develop the recommendations I'm making in this book. As a father and teacher—and as the flawed product of modern American society—I found it difficult to think about real change, especially about changes that appeared to put young people at risk.

At first, my recommendations were timid, and when more radical changes seemed called for, I was reluctant to write them down. But as I learned more about the issues, and especially about the history of teens and about teens in other cultures, it became increasingly clear that all of the systems about which I was concerned were created by people; there's nothing perfect or eternal about them.

These systems were themselves part of a process of change many years ago, and they can be modified or abandoned now. At this point, I'm very serious about the program I've outlined, and I'm confident that the child-adult continuum will be restored to some extent over the next ten to twenty years, in part because of the enormous power that modern technology has to accelerate social change.

# Appendix 1

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## HOW ADULT ARE YOU?

### *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood (EDTA), Abridged Version*

Do you possess the necessary competencies to be legitimately considered an adult in American society? Chapter Six describes a comprehensive test—the *Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood (EDTA)* that measures adult competencies in fourteen different domains. The test contains multiple sections, and the competency section alone contains 140 questions—far too many to include in this book. But you can at least get a rough idea of how “adult” you are by taking the abridged version of the test included in this appendix. Simply fill in the bubbles as directed; it shouldn’t take you more than five minutes. Then complete the self-scorer on the following page to get your overall score, as well as separate scores in five of the most important areas of adult competency. For information on accessing the unabridged version of the *EDTA*, check <http://myparentingskills.com>.



## EPSTEIN-DUMAS TEST OF ADULTNESS (EDTA) [Abridged]

*Please use a pencil to fill in the bubble that best represents your reaction to each statement.*

1. The U.S. has only two political parties. Is this true? Yes  No
2. Most problems have just one solution. Do you agree? Yes  No
3. Are you always careful with your money? Yes  No
4. Heavier people can tolerate more alcohol. Is this true? Yes  No
5. Do people need to be loved to be fulfilled? Yes  No
6. Love is all you need to make a marriage successful. Do you agree? Yes  No
7. Do you think about the consequences of your behavior before acting? Yes  No
8. When you don't understand something, do you ask for help? Yes  No
9. In the U.S., all government officials are elected by voters. Is this true? Yes  No
10. To get married, you need to have a special license. Is this true? Yes  No
11. No medical examination is needed to join the military. Is this true? Yes  No
12. Drugs and alcohol can interact to produce deadly effects. Is this true? Yes  No
13. If unable to take care of yourself, would you know where to get help? Yes  No
14. To get a driver's license, you have to pass both a written test and a road test. Is this true? Yes  No
15. When you make a commitment, do you always honor it? Yes  No
16. The purpose of taxes is to pay for schools, roads, and other services that people share. Is this true? Yes  No
17. When people misunderstand you, can you explain your point of view? Yes  No
18. Almost everyone in the U.S. has to pay taxes of some sort. Is this true? Yes  No
19. Are love and sex the same thing? Yes  No
20. Can you make decisions without help from other people? Yes  No
21. You can drink any amount of alcohol and still remain alert. Is this true? Yes  No
22. Drinking coffee counters the harmful effects of alcohol. Is this true? Yes  No
23. Does being in love always feel good? Yes  No
24. Intimate relationships always require work and compromise. Do you agree? Yes  No
25. Does everyone have a soulmate? Yes  No



## Self-Scorer for EDTA [Abridged]

To score your test: Generate your total score by placing a 1 or a 0 in the blanks in the left-hand column below. Give yourself a 1 if you filled in a bubble in the shaded area; otherwise give yourself a 0. Count up the 1's and fill in your total score at the bottom of the column. The highest possible score is a 25. If you scored lower than that, you can probably improve your adult competencies. To focus on specific competencies, complete the five boxes below by circling item numbers for which you received a score of 1. In each box, count the 1's, and fill in the blank with the total. If you scored below the maximum, you may need to strengthen your skills within that competency area.

1. Yes  No  \_\_\_
2. Yes  No  \_\_\_
3. Yes  No  \_\_\_
4. Yes  No  \_\_\_
5. Yes  No  \_\_\_
6. Yes  No  \_\_\_
7. Yes  No  \_\_\_
8. Yes  No  \_\_\_
9. Yes  No  \_\_\_
10. Yes  No  \_\_\_
11. Yes  No  \_\_\_
12. Yes  No  \_\_\_
13. Yes  No  \_\_\_
14. Yes  No  \_\_\_
15. Yes  No  \_\_\_
16. Yes  No  \_\_\_
17. Yes  No  \_\_\_
18. Yes  No  \_\_\_
19. Yes  No  \_\_\_
20. Yes  No  \_\_\_
21. Yes  No  \_\_\_
22. Yes  No  \_\_\_
23. Yes  No  \_\_\_
24. Yes  No  \_\_\_
25. Yes  No  \_\_\_

1) **Love.** You understand the important role that love and romance play in the adult world and appreciate ways in which love is sometimes misunderstood.

5      6      19      23      25                      Total 1's: \_\_\_\_ / 5

2) **Problem solving.** You know how to solve problems, how to get help, and how to make decisions on your own.

2      7      8      17      20                      Total 1's: \_\_\_\_ / 5

3) **Handling responsibility.** You honor your commitments, know that relationships take work, and in other ways show that you can handle responsibility.

3      10      13      15      24                      Total 1's: \_\_\_\_ / 5

4) **Managing high-risk behaviors.** You understand and can manage the risks associated with drinking, taking drugs, driving, and other risky activities.

4      12      14      21      22                      Total 1's: \_\_\_\_ / 5

5) **Citizenship.** You understand the fundamental obligations of citizenship and basic structures and purposes of government.

1      9      11      16      18                      Total 1's: \_\_\_\_ / 5

**TOTAL SCORE:** \_\_\_\_ / 25

# Appendix 2

ADULT AND TEEN COMPETENCY SCORES ON THE <i>EDTA</i>							
Competency	Adults (n=100)		Teens (n=100)		Mean Difference	t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Love	8.32	0.89	7.95	1.09	0.37	2.62	<.009**
Sex	8.25	1.14	8.11	1.11	0.14	0.88	<.382
Leadership	8.88	0.67	8.20	1.00	0.68	5.62	<.001**
Problem Solving	8.43	0.81	8.06	0.96	0.37	2.94	<.004**
Physical Abilities	7.91	0.99	8.10	0.99	-0.19	-1.35	<.178
Verbal and Math	8.03	0.89	8.15	0.99	-0.12	-0.90	<.369
Interpersonal Skills	8.06	1.06	8.06	1.06	0.00	0.00	<1.00
Handling Responsibility	8.47	0.80	8.39	0.85	0.08	0.64	<.520
Managing High-Risk Behaviors	8.44	0.81	8.19	1.02	0.25	1.91	<.056
Managing Work and Money	8.95	0.77	8.63	1.04	0.32	2.47	<.014*
Education	8.71	1.17	8.58	1.00	0.39	0.84	<.400
Personal Care	8.33	0.83	8.26	1.00	0.07	0.54	<.591
Self Management	8.37	0.97	8.07	1.03	0.30	2.11	<.036*
Citizenship	8.07	1.10	8.01	1.05	0.06	0.39	<.694

\*\*p<.01

\*p<.05

# Appendix 3

## A DEBATE ABOUT TEEN CRIME

It wasn't a particularly great debate. It was just a long exchange of e-mails between me and Mike Males. Males is a lecturer in sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz and the author of *The Scapegoat Generation* and *Framing Youth*—fact-filled, impassioned defenses of the American teen. It started innocently enough. I asked Males (a) whether he was a father, (b) whether he had ever known any “incorrigible” teens, and (c) how he got so interested in teens, and he replied: (a) no, (b) yes, and (c) “from wilderness work with teens crews.” Good enough, but we got into trouble when we started looking at numbers.

Over a period of weeks, I pointed to a variety of government data that show that the peak age for virtually any crime in the United States is about eighteen—earlier for a few crimes like arson (thirteen to fourteen) and car theft (sixteen) and later for a few crimes like fraud (twenty-two), but usually eighteen. Overall, the curve that describes the relationship between age and crime looks roughly like an upside-down V:

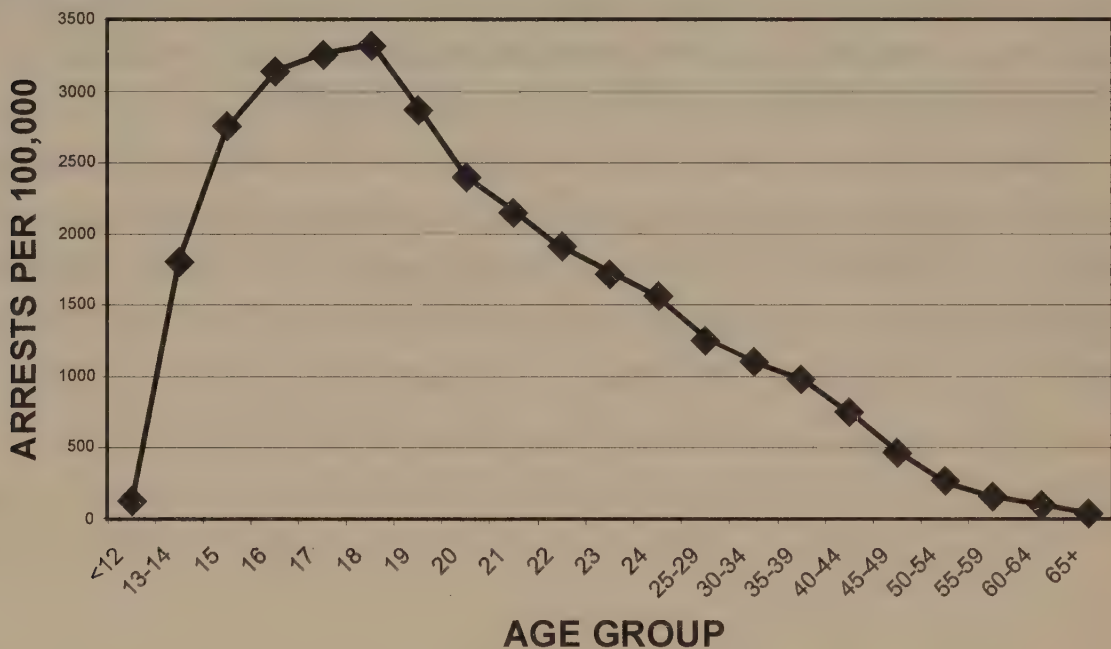


Figure Appendix 3.1. Crime Index by Age, 2001. Arrest data suggest that young people in America commit crime at a higher rate than older people, with the arrest rate peaking at about age eighteen. The hump to the left of the peak suggests that older teens commit crimes at higher rates than younger teens. After eighteen, the arrest rate falls off sharply and continues to decline at a steady rate throughout the life span.

The graph above is based on data supplied by the FBI for crimes nationwide in 2001.<sup>1</sup> But Males didn't want to hear this. At first, he replied that "race is a far better predictor of violence than age"—at least, he said, in California, which supplies more detailed data about such matters than does the FBI.<sup>2</sup> That's true, I said, but when you look at the races separately, crime still peaks at about age eighteen for every race. Here, for example, are felony arrests in California for blacks and whites:<sup>3</sup>

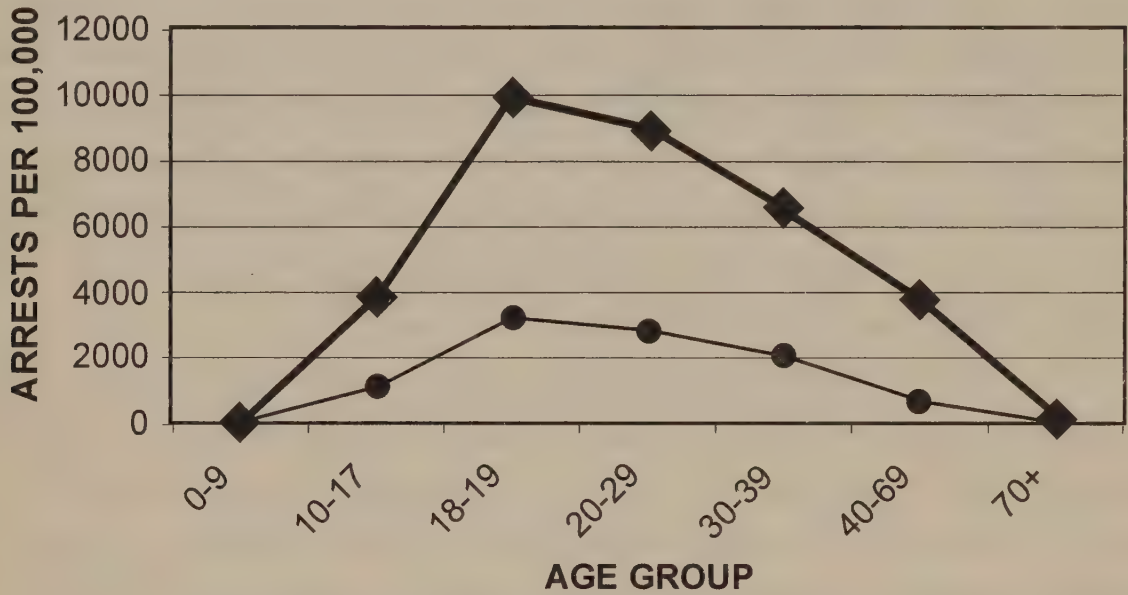


Figure Appendix 3.2. Felony Arrests in California by Age and Race, 2002. The upper curve is for blacks, and the lower curve is for whites. Although the overall arrest rate for blacks is higher than for whites, the shape of the two curves is virtually identical. Arrests peak for both blacks and whites, as well as for other races in the United States, at about age eighteen.

Although the crime rate is higher for blacks, the similar shape of the curves tells you that, whatever else is going on, there's something about being young in our society which brings out criminal tendencies. But Males wouldn't budge, even after I showed him that this pattern occurs year after year and for a wide variety of crimes:<sup>4</sup>

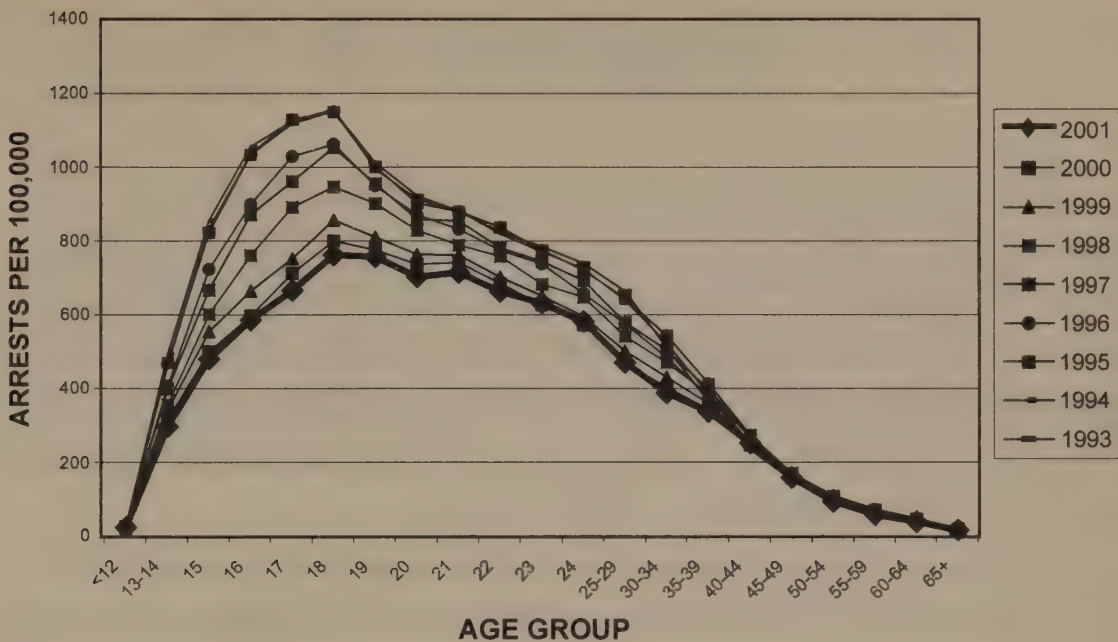


Figure Appendix 3.3. Violent Crime Arrests by Age, 1993–2001. Although the overall crime rate in the United States decreased between 1993 (top curve) and 2001 (bottom curve), arrests each year still peaked at about age eighteen.

Over the course of our exchange, Males shifted his emphasis toward income, insisting that this very robust age pattern occurs because young people are relatively poor. He tried to back up his claim by using a statistical technique called “regression,” but his numbers weren’t based on actual poverty data. In any case, poverty just isn’t the whole picture: poor elderly people don’t commit crimes, even though they can pull triggers and light fires and forge signatures just as easily as young people can, and neither do poor teenagers in developing nations. (See Chapter Three.)

In our exchange, Males acknowledged that “American adults have more trouble with teens than adults in any other country.” He even acknowledged his own occasional frustration: “I admit getting furious at youths for not meeting perfect-behavior standards and getting me into trouble.” But his anger, he says, was misplaced: “I should have been furious at a culture that imposes absolutist standards teens can’t be expected to follow and adults can’t be expected to enforce.”<sup>5</sup> On this, at least, we agree.

# Appendix 4

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## PLATO, SOCRATES, AND ARISTOTLE ON TEENS

In a 1999 essay called “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered,” developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jansen Arnett said that Aristotle and Socrates characterized youth negatively, and in the textbook Arnett published in 2001, he said the same about Plato and Aristotle, Plato’s student:

*...Both Plato and Aristotle viewed adolescence as the third distinct stage of life, after infancy (birth to age seven) and childhood (ages seven to fourteen). In their views, adolescence extended from age fourteen to twenty-one. Both of them viewed adolescence as the stage of life in which the capacity for reason first developed. Writing (in 4 B.C.)\* in The Republic, Plato argued that serious education should begin only in adolescence.*

*Aristotle argued that it takes the entire course of adolescence for reason to become fully established. At the beginning of adolescence, in his view, the impulses remain in charge and even become more problematic now that sexual desires have developed. It is only toward the end of adolescence—about age twenty-one, according to Aristotle—that reason establishes firm control over the impulses.<sup>1</sup>*

Arnett has these ancient philosophers sounding suspiciously like modern psychologists, complete with developmental stages. In fact, neither Plato nor Aristotle talked about “adolescence” in the modern sense, and neither philosopher ever delineated either the stages or the specific ages Arnett gives us. In *The Republic*, Plato’s characters say virtually nothing negative about the young, and Socrates, one of the participants in the book’s dialogues, warns (much as G. Stanley Hall did) against trying to control young people too severely. Speaking of manners and respect that young people are supposed to show their elders, Socrates says “There is small wisdom in legislating about such matters; I doubt if it is ever done.”<sup>2</sup>

Although it’s true that Aristotle characterized young people harshly in his *Rhetoric*, he was even harder on old people. He seemed, in fact, to be creating caricatures of the young and the old simply for didactic purposes: perhaps to sug-

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\*Plato’s *Republic* was actually written around 360 B.C.E.

gest an ideal, middle ground of optimal functioning. Of the young, Aristotle said (among other things):

*Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of self-control. While they love honor, they love victory still more; for youth is eager for superiority over others, and victory is one form of this. They love both more than they love money, which indeed they love very little, not having yet learnt what it means to be without it.<sup>3</sup>*

Speaking of the old, Aristotle simply reversed many of his criticisms of the young and then added many more (not included here):

*The character of Elderly Men—men who are past their prime—may be said to be formed for the most part of elements that are the contrary of all these. They have lived many years; they have often been taken in, and often made mistakes; and life on the whole is a bad business. The result is that they are sure about nothing and under-do everything. They are not generous, because money is one of the things they must have, and at the same time their experience has taught them how hard it is to get and how easy to lose. They are cowardly, and are always anticipating danger.<sup>4,5</sup>*

But Aristotle is equally emphatic that these are not *necessary* characteristics of the young and old. Age, he says, is not what makes people behave as they do:

*It is superfluous...to distinguish actions according to the doers' ages, moral states, or the like; it is of course true that, for instance, young men do have hot tempers and strong appetites; still, it is not through youth that they act accordingly, but through anger or appetite.<sup>6</sup>*

That the most eminent thinker of his day—and perhaps of any day—recognized that age wasn't a reliable indicator of ability probably explains why young people in ancient Greece and Rome were generally integrated into adult society early on—and sometimes given great responsibility. (See my discussion of historian Marc Kleijwegt's book in Chapter Two.)

# Appendix 5

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## BRIEF TIMELINE OF TEEN RESTRICTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

- 1641* - Massachusetts law prohibits people under 16 from “smiting” their parents
- 1836* - Massachusetts passes law requiring minimal schooling for people under 15 working in factories
- 1848* - Pennsylvania sets 12 as minimum work age for some jobs
- 1852* - Massachusetts passes first universal compulsory education law in the U.S.; requires 3 months of schooling for all young people ages 8 to 14 (but the requirement is waived if appropriate competence can be demonstrated)
- 1880s* - Some states pass laws restricting various behaviors by young people: smoking, singing in the streets, prostitution, “incorrigible” behavior
- 1898* - World’s first juvenile court established in Illinois; constitutional rights of minors effectively taken away
- 1903* - Illinois enacts tough law requiring school attendance and restricting youth labor
- 1916* - First federal law restricting labor by young people; struck down by Supreme Court in 1918
- 1918* - All states have compulsory education laws in place
- 1933* - First federal law explicitly restricting alcohol consumption by young people
- 1936 and 1938* - First successful federal laws restricting labor by young people, establishing 16 and 18 as minimum ages for work; still in effect
- 1940* - Most states have laws in place restricting driving by people under 16
- 1968* - Supreme Court upholds states’ right to prohibit sale of obscene materials to minors
- 1968* - Movie rating system established, prohibiting young people of various ages from attending certain movies

- 1970s* - Supreme Court upholds new laws restricting a young woman's right to abortion
- 1970s* - Dramatic increase in use of involuntary electroshock therapy (ECT) with teens
- 1974* - New federal law makes it easier to shift teens from juvenile justice system to mental institutions
- 1980s* - Many cities and states pass laws restricting teens' access to arcades and other places of amusement; Supreme Court upholds such laws in 1989
- 1980s* - Courts uphold states' rights to prohibit sale of lottery tickets to minors
- 1980 to 1998* - Rate of involuntary commitment of minors to mental institutions increases 300 to 400 percent
- 1984* - First national law effectively raising drinking age to 21; all states in compliance by 1998
- 1988* - Supreme Court rules that freedom of the press does not apply to school newspapers
- 1989* - Missouri court upholds school's right to prohibit dancing
- 1989* - Court rules school in Florida can ban salacious portions of works by Chaucer and Aristophanes
- 1990* - Supreme Court upholds recent laws requiring minors to get parental consent for abortion
- 1990s* - Curfew laws for young people spread widely among cities and states
- 1990s* - Dramatic increase in the use of security systems in schools: metal detectors, armed guards, video cameras
- 1992* - Federal law prohibits sale of tobacco products to minors
- 1997* - New federal law makes involuntary commitment of teens easier by requiring school systems to pay for hospitalizations
- 2000+* - New laws restricting a minor's right to get tattoos, piercings, and to enter tanning salons
- 2000+* - Tougher driving laws being passed by many states; full driving rights obtained gradually over a period of years

2000+ – Dramatic increase in zero-tolerance policies in schools, resulting in suspensions or expulsions for actions such as throwing spitballs, making gun gestures with one's hand, or having a dull kitchen knife in one's car

2000+ – New procedures and laws making it easier to prosecute minors as adults

*Currently spreading nationwide:*

- Rules prohibiting use of cell phones by minors in schools
- Laws prohibiting use of cell phones by minors while driving
- Libraries and schools blocking access to Internet material by minors
- New dress code rules in schools, including rules restricting wearing of potentially offensive clothing or accessories
- Laws prohibiting teens from attending parties where alcohol is served (even if they're not drinking)
- Restrictions on food and drinks served in school cafeterias or dispensed in school vending machines
- Increasing use of keylogging software to monitor computer usage by teens
- Laws suspending driving privileges based on convictions for vandalism or other non-driving-related offenses
- Laws restricting teens' access to shopping malls
- Tracking devices routinely installed in cell phones and cars of teens
- Increasing use of bumper stickers on cars driven by teens, asking people to call a number to report bad driving habits
- Increasing efforts to ban or restrict violence on television programs seen by young people
- Increasing efforts to ban or restrict advertisements that might encourage young people to drink alcohol, have sex, or eat unhealthful foods
- Bill introduced in U.S. Congress to prohibit individuals from transporting minors over states lines to have abortions
- Social-networking Internet websites restricting both the activity of young people and contact between adults and minors
- New availability of home drug tests for teens
- Zero-tolerance laws prohibiting people under 21 from driving with any alcohol in bloodstream
- Proposals for longer school days, a longer school year, and the addition of grades 13 and 14 to the school curriculum

# Notes

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## Chapter One

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- [www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Policy+Statements&name=Children+and+Guns](http://www.aacap.org/page.ww?section=Policy+Statements&name=Children+and+Guns) (accessed September 2, 2006). Also see: CNN.com, "Survey: 29 Percent of High School Boys Have a Gun," <http://cnn.tv/US/9810/14/boys.guns/index.html> (accessed September 2, 2006).
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36. Robert Epstein, *Creativity Games for Trainers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996); Robert Epstein, *Stress-Management and Relaxation Activities for Trainers* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999); Robert Epstein, *The Big Book of Stress-Relief Games* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000); Robert Epstein, *The Big Book of Creativity Games* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).; Robert Epstein, with J. Rogers, *The Big Book of Motivation Games* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001).
37. David L. Rosenhan, "On Being Sane in Insane Places," *Science* 179 (January 1973): 250-258.
38. Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (New York: William Morrow, 1973).
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41. Richard Evans Farson, *Birthrights: A Bill of Rights for Children* (Hampshire, England: Macmillan, 1974). Calls for children to receive rights commensurate with those of adults have even been called a “movement.” Consider: Beatrice Gross and Ronald Gross, eds. *The Children’s Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977). Howard Cohen, *Equal Rights for Children* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, 1980). Henry H. Foster, Jr., *A “Bill of Rights” for Children* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1974). John Harris, “The Political Status of Children,” in *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, ed. K. Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Calling such authors “liberationists” and herself a “protectionist,” Wells College philosopher Laura M. Purdy challenged the children’s rights viewpoint in her 1992 book *In Their Best Interest? The Case Against Equal Rights for Children* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). I’m skeptical about both viewpoints, preferring instead to look at young people individually. In my view, authority and responsibility should be granted based on competency, not on age, in part to give young people strong incentives to join the adult world as soon as they are able.
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44. Philip Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
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## Chapter Two

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2. *Ibid.*, 317.
3. *Ibid.*, xii.
4. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Bard Books, 1999) 9.
5. Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1975) 8.
6. Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) 238.

7. Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962) 30.
8. Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 8.
11. *Ibid.*, 110.
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13. Phillipe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1962).
14. *Ibid.*, 30.
15. *Ibid.*, 30.
16. *Ibid.*, 25. Hanawalt also acknowledges that “the medieval word *adolescencia* did not mean the same thing as the modern term ‘adolescence’” (Hanawalt, 1993, p. 8). According to Ariès, a seventeenth-century listing of students in a Jesuit college in France refers to a 15-year-old boy as a “*bonus puer*” and a 13-year-old boy as an “*optimus adolescens*.” (Aries, 1962, p. 25). A grammar book used for hundreds of years in England used the word “baby” and “child” interchangeably. An early eighteenth-century French dictionary defines child, in part, as “a term of friendship used to greet or flatter someone.” The modern meaning of “child” doesn’t begin to take hold until the late eighteenth century, and the modern meaning of “adolescence” doesn’t appear, according to Ariès, until the early twentieth century.
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18. *Ibid.*, 33.
19. *Ibid.*, 39. For a balanced look at the affection issue, see: Emily Eakin, “Did Cradles Always Rock? Or Did Mom Once Not Care?” *New York Times*, June 30, 2001.
20. *Ibid.*, 219-220.
21. Joan Acocella, “Little People: When Did We Start Treating Children Like Children?” *The New Yorker*, August 18 and 25, 2003.
22. Donald T. Kramer, *Legal Rights of Children*, 2nd ed. vol 3, chaps. 28-33 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 3-4.

23. Ariès developed and defended a fairly radical thesis: Childhood and adolescence are recent inventions, created by some of the dramatic societal shifts of recent centuries: improved hygiene and medical care, mass education, industrialization, and so on. For about 20 years his views, even though unpalatable, were widely accepted among fellow historians. But history has a curious way of getting rewritten every 20 years or so—in other words, with every new generation of historians. My mentor at Harvard, B. F. Skinner, once wrote that we can't write history "until a sufficient number of details have been forgotten" (*Walden Two*, London: Macmillan, 1946, p. 226). He was being cynical, perhaps, but this much is clear: Different historians have very different viewpoints on childhood and adolescence, and those viewpoints often reflect prevailing values. As University of Texas historian Harvey J. Graff commented in his own recent history of American children, "The history of growing up is deeply fragmented in its definition and delineation and in the approaches to it" (*Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 4).
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29. *Ibid.*
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33. Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994) 76. Also see: Adriana Lleras-Muney, "Were Compulsory Attendance and Child Labor Laws Effective? An Analysis from 1915 to 1939," *Journal of Law and Economics* 45, no. 2 (2002): 401-435.
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37. Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia, "Child Labor," [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761552027/Child\\_Labor.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761552027/Child_Labor.html) (accessed August 15, 2006). The case is: *Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Co.*, 259 U.S. 20 (1922).
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- New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1937) 252.
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### Chapter Three

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the Yequana magic, and they might even foster dependency rather than independence; there's no clear evidence either way, as far as I know. I suspect that some of Liedloff's fans have adopted such practices because doing so fits the modern child-centered approach to parenting; in that sense, some of her followers may have missed the boat to Venezuela.

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42. Ibid., 160.
43. Ibid.
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59. A study of "adolescents' self-image" in ten countries by Dr. Daniel Offer of the University of Chicago and his colleagues is relevant here. At least when it comes to "self-image"—a relatively soft psychological concept—Offer and his associates believe that there exists a "universal adolescent" who's in pretty good shape. But nine of the ten countries in the study are highly industrialized: the United States, Australia, Germany, Italy, Israel, Hungary, Turkey, Japan, and Taiwan (according to UNICEF, Turkey is an industrialized nation), and the tenth country in the study—Bangladesh—doesn't fit the "universal" pattern. The percentage of young people in Bangladesh who are depressed, for example—in the 40-to-50 percent range—is about twice as large as the average percentage for the other nine countries. Offer and colleagues also focused on a very narrow construct ("self-image") and did not look for corroboration in behavioral variables (drug abuse, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, suicide rates, etc.) or even in ratings of teens by other people (parents, teachers, or therapists, for example). The study is based exclusively on teens' scores on the "Offer Self-Image Questionnaire"; as one might expect, the self reports of teens don't always correspond to other data. When one looks at a wide range of behavioral and other data, it's difficult to find a "universal adolescent"; different cultures produce very different kinds of teens. See: Daniel Offer, Eric Ostrov, Kenneth I. Howard, and Robert Atkinson, *The Teenage World, Adolescents' Self-Image in Ten Countries* (New York: Plenum Medical Book Company, 1988).
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### Chapter Four

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100. To find out what's really causing what, you would need to conduct experimental research—the kind in which you randomly assign people to treatment and control groups. Unfortunately, when you're looking at a topic as sensitive as infantilization (or child abuse, parenting styles, suicide, anorexia, depression, or hundreds of other interesting topics), you can't conduct true experimental research because such research puts people at risk and thus violates modern ethical standards. In the case of infantilization, you would need to direct the parents in a number of families (chosen at random) to infantilize their young teens for several years and direct the parents in other families (also chosen at random) to raise their young teens with lots of responsibility and respect. If you could find cooperative families of this sort (unlikely), at the end of several years you could compare the teens in the first group to the teens in the second. If the infantilized teens ended up significantly worse off than the teens in the second, you could conclude with some degree of confidence that infantilization causes psychopathology. Understandably, however, people don't want you to play with their lives this way. It's not acceptable to put young people at risk just because you've come up with an interesting research question.
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### Chapter Six

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35. The rational-choice approach to studying judgment and decision making is not without its flaws. When you're choosing between \$10 today and \$15 tomorrow, the rationality of your decision is determined largely by circumstances. If you desperately need money for food or gas, or if you only have 24 hours to live, or if you have an investment opportunity that ends at midnight, it would be crazy for you to turn down the immediate cash. In other words, outside the laboratory (and even inside the laboratory, with properly designed experiments), "circumstance is man's master," as Mark Twain said long ago. As I noted in the text, under appropriate circumstances, virtually any behavior might be considered rational or reasonable. The rational-choice approach can rapidly be retrofitted to fit any situation by inventing a new set of choices that each situation seems to create, but the best theories, I believe, are

those that are capable of surprising you—and that can also give you cause to discard them. What's more, the sad truth is that human beings—even wise adults—make non-optimal choices as a matter of course, especially in “important” situations. We're products of evolution, not of computer programming, and we're more likely to follow the rules of the hunting ground than the rules of logic. If you want to predict what decisions someone will make, you need principles that take into account that person's genetic makeup, his or her environmental history, and relevant aspects of the current situation. And if you want to help people make better decisions, you need to understand what's happening in their lives, and then you need to apply tools that will influence them effectively—tools that may need to appeal to emotion rather than reason. The rules of rational choice aren't particularly helpful in these respects; our behavior is just too beastly. As the English philosopher David Hume said, “Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions.”

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ish and backward judicial system in America.) He and his mom were broke when they filed the lawsuit; money they had received from media sources over the years, including a \$100,000 rights fee for a made-for-TV movie, was gone. What's more, in 1996 Fualaau's 768-page deposition told, in clear and consistent and intelligent terms, a very different story than the one he was telling in 2002. Also see: Nancy Bartley, "Fualaau Says Price For Damages He Suffered Should Be \$20 Million." *Seattle Times*, April 10, 2002.

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## Chapter Nine

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## Chapter Fourteen

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ship between parents and their teenage offspring is not only normal, but desirable. The ad also warns parents that if they fail to get tough, they'll end up with "an addicted child later"—suggesting, mistakenly, that a teenager is still a child. Even more disturbing: a new national ad campaign co-sponsored by the National Fatherhood Initiative and the Ad Council which gives advice about raising teens. The message of their radio ad is "Embarrass them, horrify them, freak them out. Don't worry, they'll appreciate it... eventually." See [http://www.fatherhood.org/psa\\_radio.asp](http://www.fatherhood.org/psa_radio.asp) (accessed September 7, 2006).

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43. "A Call to Attention on Gays in the Military: Is It Time to Revise 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell?'" <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/allnewsbydate.asp?NewsID=61> (accessed July 31, 2006). National Annenberg Election Survey, October 16, 2004, [http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004\\_03\\_2military-data\\_10-16\\_pr.pdf](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_2military-data_10-16_pr.pdf) (accessed July 31, 2006).

### Appendix 3

1. Uniform Crime Reporting Program Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Age-Specific Arrest Rates for Selected Offenses: 1993-2001," [http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/adducr/age\\_race\\_specific.pdf](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/adducr/age_race_specific.pdf) (accessed July 28, 2005).
2. Mike Males, e-mail message to author, June 11, 2004.
3. California Department of Justice, "Crime in California 2002," <http://caag.state.ca.us/cjsc/publications/candd/cd02/tabs/33.pdf> (accessed July 28, 2005).
4. Uniform Crime Reporting Program Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Age-Specific Arrest Rates for Selected Offenses; 1993-2001," [http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/adducr/age\\_race\\_specific.pdf](http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/adducr/age_race_specific.pdf) (accessed July 28, 2005).
5. Mike Males, e-mail message to author, June 6, 2004.

### Appendix 4

1. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 6-7. Also see: Jeffrey Jansen Arnett, "Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 5 (May 1999): 317-326.
2. EServer, "The Republic," <http://eserver.org/philosophy/plato/republic.txt> (accessed June 2, 2005).
3. EServer, "Rhetoric," <http://eserver.org/philosophy/aristotle/rhetoric.txt> (accessed June 2, 2005).
4. Ibid.

5. There is little question that Aristotle's comments on youth and old age were meant didactically when one looks at the next section of his discourse, in which he defines optimal functioning as a middle ground between the two extremes he just described: "As for Men in their Prime, clearly we shall find that they have a character between that of the young and that of the old, free from the extremes of either. They have neither that excess of confidence which amounts to rashness, nor too much timidity, but the right amount of each. They neither trust everybody nor distrust everybody, but judge people correctly. Their lives will be guided not by the sole consideration either of what is noble or of what is useful, but by both; neither by parsimony nor by prodigality, but by what is fit and proper. So, too, in regard to anger and desire; they will be brave as well as temperate, and temperate as well as brave; these virtues are divided between the young and the old; the young are brave but intemperate, the old temperate but cowardly. To put it generally, all the valuable qualities that youth and age divide between them are united in the prime of life, while all their excesses or defects are replaced by moderation and fitness. The body is in its prime from thirty to five-and-thirty; the mind about forty-nine" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book II, Part 14, translation by W. Rhys Roberts).

6. Ibid.

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# About the Author

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Robert Epstein is the former Editor-in-Chief of *Psychology Today* magazine, as well as a contributing editor for *Scientific American Mind* and the host of “Psyched!” on Sirius Satellite Radio. While conducting the research described in this book, he also served as University Research Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University. He is currently a visiting scholar at the University of California San Diego. In addition, Dr. Epstein is the founder and Director Emeritus of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies in Massachusetts. A Ph.D. of Harvard University, he has published 12 books and more than 150 articles, and he has developed competency tests in the areas of parenting, adolescence, creativity, motivation, stress management, and relationships. He is also the proud father of four children. See <http://drrobertepstein.com> for further details.







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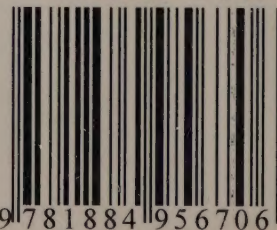
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