

“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.

\$24.95  
(\$32.95 Canada)

*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.

This landmark book will change the thinking about teens for decades to come.



**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.

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## Praise for *The Case Against Adolescence*

"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*

"This is a profoundly important book. Dr. Epstein is raising issues about our young people that we need to think about and evaluate carefully. If you care about America's young, this is a must read."

—Dr. Joyce Brothers, author & columnist

"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

"We need to reexamine our basic assumptions about young people, and Epstein shows us how."

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

"If you care about the future of our young people, *The Case Against Adolescence* is an essential read."

—Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock, 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

"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

"This is an amazing book, long overdue... 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 Guardian Angels

"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*

"This book should be required reading for all youth workers, all parents trying to better understand their kids, all politicians setting youth policy..."

—Alex Koroknay-Palicz, president, National Youth Rights Association



***THE CASE AGAINST ADOLESCENCE:  
REDISCOVERING THE ADULT IN EVERY TEEN***  
<http://thecaseagainstadolence.com>

***Robert Epstein, Ph.D.***

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**  
***for Parents and Media Professionals***

*1. What is this book about?*

It's about human potential and the uniqueness of the individual. It's about practices that might have made sense a hundred years ago but that don't make sense in today's world. It's a reminder that we should judge people according to their abilities, not according to their race, gender, ethnicity—or *age*.

*2. 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?*

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.

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

No, but many "adults" also handle responsibility and authority poorly: drink before they drive, abuse drugs, 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 abilities, not on their age.

4. *Do you mean to imply that it's okay for my 13-year-old daughter to have sex—and perhaps even to have sex with a 25-year-old man?*

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*, 13-year-olds are ready for sex, and even for deep love and marriage. Remember that throughout most of human history, we all began to bear and care for 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 25-year-old man, please allow me, once again, to answer with a question. If this man 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? One of the most successful marriages ever documented in America—a happy marriage for more than 80 years—was between Mary Corsaro and Paul Onesi, who married in 1917 when she was 13 and he was 21. 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.

5. *How can I find out if my teen is capable of handling more responsibility?*

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 13- or 14-year-old will do. Dr. Diane Dumas and I have also developed a comprehensive test, the *EDTA*, that measures “adulthood” competencies in 14 different areas. Scores on tests of this sort can help pinpoint skill areas where a teen is strong or weak. But bear

in mind that the average scores we obtained with teens were almost identical to the average scores we obtained with adults, which suggests that many “adults” aren’t really very adultlike. See <http://HowAdultAreYou.com>.

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

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 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 9 or 10. In the big city, we allow most teens to drive in limited ways when they’re 15 and to get minimally-restrictive drivers licenses when they’re 16—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?

7. *It’s bad enough that we’re allowing women to serve in combat roles in the military. Are you suggesting that we put 14-year-old boys and girls at risk on the battlefield?*

As women have rightly pointed out for many decades, it should be up to them to decide what risks they want to take. 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 rigorous criteria. If “G. I. Jane” can measure up, doesn’t she deserve a chance to serve our country? And if a 15-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? If Joan of Arc had been forced to attend high school until she was 18, the history of France might have been even bleaker than it was.

8. *Do you have any unstated political or religious agendas in advocating your unusual views on adolescence?*

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, on interviews with teens, and on an examination of hundreds of documents in the fields of history, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so on. I’m a Jew by background, but I’m also 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 not 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.

9. *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?*

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. 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 need to think carefully before blaming the brain for *any* of our difficulties.

*10. If teens are so darn capable, why is my 16-year-old son such a mindless, disrespectful jerk?*

Well, first of all, it's quite possible that your son doesn't appear to be so mindless or so 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 not 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 even half 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, the many restrictions that govern his life probably make him feel angry sometimes.

*11. Why are you focusing on teens? Couldn't you make the same arguments about children? If an 8-year-old showed that he was capable of driving safely, shouldn't we issue him a driver's license?*

Educator John Holt and psychologist Richard Farson argued in books they published in the 1970s that *all* young people should have adult rights, regardless of age or even of competency. My proposal is much more conservative, and, I believe, defensible. Yes, some very young people are certainly competent in some



ways, but I don't see how we can ignore the dramatic changes that take place during puberty—in bodies, emotions, and thinking ability. The post-pubescent individual is a radically different individual than the pre-pubescent individual. If that 8 year old showed that he was capable of driving safely—well, I'd still have him wait a few more years before handing him the license. On the other hand, I believe strongly that there is no legitimate reason to deny driving privileges to a teen who can pass rigorous tests of both driving and judgment. Most teens are “fully cooked,” as my old gym teacher used to say.

*12. Isn't all the aggression and craziness we see in teenagers caused by hormones?*

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. Teen problems in the United States are caused by a host of factors related to the artificial extension of childhood: poor role 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.

*13. My son wants to quit school to join a rock band. Are you saying that's okay?*

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.

*14. 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?*

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?

*15. Aren't teens doing better these days? Don't statistics show that?*

In response to Columbine, medication and monitoring have led to “improvement” in a few measures of teen behavior, but the overall picture is still bleak: more than two million attempted suicides each year (no improvement at all), suicide the third leading cause of death (with a rate more than three times what it was in the 1950s and a recent turnaround in what had been a favorable trend), dramatic increases in both legal and illegal use of prescription drugs, the highest teen pregnancy rate in the world (5 times the rates in France and Italy), homicide the second leading cause of death, a high rate of conflict with adults (20 times per month on average), declining and dismal academic performance (only 1 in 4 high school seniors now competent in math), a high school dropout rate of 30 percent (50 percent for some minorities), a high rate of gambling (80 percent per year), a high rate of depression (5.5 million teens in counseling), and so on. In more than 100 cultures around the world, teen turmoil is entirely absent; the serious problems of American teens are the creation of a culture that infantilizes young people and isolates them from adults.

*16. The kinds of changes you're recommending seem too radical. Are you serious about them? Do you think they'll ever occur?*

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—it was difficult for me 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 10 to 20 years, in part because of the enormous power that modern technology has to accelerate social change.