

Trash Training Teens

WE ARE THROWING AWAY 20 MILLION YOUNG PEOPLE, PSYCHOLOGIST **ROBERT EPSTEIN** ARGUES IN A PROVOCATIVE NEW BOOK, *THE CASE AGAINST ADOLESCENCE*. TEENS ARE FAR MORE COMPETENT THAN WE ASSUME, AND MOST OF THEIR PROBLEMS STEM FROM RESTRICTIONS PLACED ON THEM. EPSTEIN SPOKE TO **HARA ESTROFF MARANO** ABOUT THE LEGAL AND EMOTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON AMERICAN YOUTH.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARJEAN LEVINE



It was his experience as a parent that led psychologist and former *PT* editor in chief **ROBERT EPSTEIN** to write his book, *The Case Against Adolescence*. "When my son was 14, he was unusually mature yet unable to drive or work. I felt a huge system was holding him back." Epstein argues that today's structures were set in motion during U.S. industrialization between 1880 and 1920. "Those systems trap the young in the vacuous world of teen culture." In "Trashing Teens," he discusses some of the resulting problems.





Why do you believe that adolescence is an artificial extension of childhood?

In every mammalian species, immediately upon reaching puberty, animals function as adults, often having offspring. We call our offspring “children” well past puberty. The trend started a hundred years ago and now extends childhood well into the 20s. The age at which Americans reach adulthood is increasing—30 is the new 20—and most Americans now believe a person isn’t an adult until age 26.

The whole culture collaborates in artificially extending childhood, primarily through the school system and restrictions on labor. The two systems evolved together in the late 19th-century; the advocates of compulsory-education laws also pushed for child-labor laws, restricting the ways young people could work, in part to protect them from the abuses of the new factories. The juvenile justice system came into being at the same time. All of these systems isolate teens from adults, often in problematic ways.

Our current education system was created in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and was modeled after the new factories of the industrial revolution. Public schools, set up to supply the factories with a skilled labor force, crammed education into a relatively small number of years. We have tried to pack more and more in while extending schooling up to age 24 or 25, for some segments of the population. In general, such an approach still reflects factory thinking—get your education now and get it efficiently, in classrooms in lock-step fashion. Unfortunately, most people learn in those classrooms to hate education for the rest of their lives.

The factory system doesn’t work in the

modern world, because two years after graduation, whatever you learned is out of date. We need education spread over a lifetime, not jammed into the early years—except for such basics as reading, writing, and perhaps citizenship. Past puberty, education needs to be combined in interesting and creative ways with work. The factory school system no longer makes sense.

What are some likely consequences of extending one’s childhood?

Imagine what it would feel like—or think back to what it felt like—when your body and mind are telling you you’re an adult while the adults around you keep insisting you’re a child. This infantilization makes many young people angry or depressed, with their distress carrying over into their families and contributing to our high divorce rate. It’s hard to keep a marriage together when there is constant conflict with teens.

We have completely isolated young

The factory system of education, in place for more than a hundred years, doesn’t work today; two years after graduation, information is out of date.

people from adults and created a peer culture. We stick them in school and keep them from working in any meaningful way, and if they do something wrong we put them in a pen with other “children.” In most nonindustrialized societies, young people are integrated into adult society as soon as they are capable, and there is no sign of teen turmoil. Many cultures do not even have a term for adolescence. But we not only created this stage of life: We declared it inevitable. In 1904, American psychologist G. Stanley Hall said it was programmed by evolution. He was wrong.

How is adolescent behavior shaped by societal strictures?

One effect is the creation of a new segment of society just waiting to consume, especially if given money to spend. There are now massive industries—music, clothing, makeup—that revolve around this artificial segment of society and keep it going, with teens spending upward of \$200 billion a year almost entirely on trivia.

Ironically, because minors have only limited property rights, they don’t have complete control over what they have bought. Think how bizarre that is. If you, as an adult, spend money and bring home a toy, it’s your toy and no one can take it away from you. But with a 14-year-old, it’s not really his or her toy. Young people can’t own things, can’t sign contracts, and they can’t do anything meaningful without parental permission—permission that can be withdrawn at any time. They can’t marry, can’t have sex, can’t legally drink. The list goes on. They are restricted and infantilized to an extraordinary extent.

In recent surveys I’ve found that American teens are subjected to more than 10 times as many restrictions as mainstream adults, twice as many restrictions as active-duty U.S. Marines, and even twice as many as incarcerated felons. Psychologist Diane Dumas and I also found a correlation between infantilization and psychological dysfunction. The more young people are infantilized, the more psychopathology they show.

What’s more, since 1960, restrictions on teens have been accelerating. Young people are restricted in ways no adult

The Adolescent Squeeze

BEFORE 1850, LAWS RESTRICTING THE BEHAVIOR OF TEENS WERE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN. COMPULSORY EDUCATION LAWS EVOLVED IN TANDEM WITH LAWS RESTRICTING LABOR BY YOUNG PEOPLE. BEGINNING IN 1960, THE NUMBER OF LAWS INFANTILIZING ADOLESCENTS ACCELERATED DRAMATICALLY. YOU MAY HAVE HAD A PAPER ROUTE WHEN YOU WERE 12, BUT YOUR CHILDREN CAN'T.

- **1600s**
 - 1641** Massachusetts law prohibits people under 16 from "smiting" their parents
 - 1836** Massachusetts passes first 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 U.S., requires three months of schooling for all young people ages 8-14
- **1800s**
 - 1880s** Some states pass laws restricting various behaviors by young people: smoking, singing on the streets, prostitution, "incorrigible" behavior
 - 1881** American Federation of Labor calls on states to ban people under 14 from working
 - 1898** World's first juvenile court established in Illinois—constitutional rights of minors effectively taken away
- **1900s**
 - 1903** Illinois requires school attendance and restricts youth labor
 - 1918** All states have compulsory education laws in place
 - 1933** First federal law restricting drinking by young people
 - 1936 & 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 to restrict young people from certain films
 - 1970s** Supreme Court upholds laws restricting young women's right to abortion
 - 1970s** Dramatic increase in involuntary electroshock therapy (ECT) of teens
 - 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' right to prohibit sale of lottery tickets to minors
 - 1980 to 1998** Rate of involuntary commitment of minors to mental institutions increases 300-400 percent
 - 1984** First national law effectively raising drinking age to 21
 - 1988** Supreme Court denies freedom of press to school newspapers
 - 1989** Missouri court upholds schools' right to prohibit dancing
 - 1989** Court rules school in Florida can ban salacious works by Chaucer and Aristophanes
 - 1990s** Curfew laws for young people sweep cities and states
 - 1990s** Dramatic increase in use of security systems in schools
 - 1992** Federal law prohibits sale of tobacco products to minors
 - 1997** New federal law makes easier involuntary commitment of teens
- **2000+**
 - 2000+** New laws restricting minors' rights to get tattoos, piercings, and to enter tanning salons spread through U.S.
 - 2000+** Tougher driving laws sweeping through states: full driving rights obtained gradually over a period of years
 - 2000+** Dramatic increase in zero-tolerance laws in schools, resulting in suspensions or dismissals for throwing spitballs, making gun gestures with hand, etc.
 - 2000+** New procedures and laws making it easier to prosecute minors as adults

CURRENTLY SPREADING NATIONWIDE:

 - New rules prohibiting cell phones in schools or use of cell phones by minors while driving
 - Libraries and schools block access to Internet material by minors
 - New dress code rules in schools
 - New rules restricting wearing of potentially offensive clothing or accessories in schools
 - New laws prohibiting teens from attending parties where alcohol is served (even if they're not drinking)
 - New laws restricting teens' access to shopping malls
 - Tracking devices routinely installed in cell phones and cars of teens
 - New availability of home drug tests for teens
 - New laws prohibiting minors from driving with any alcohol in bloodstream (zero-tolerance)
 - Proposals for longer school days, longer school year, and addition of grades 13 and 14 to school curriculum under discussion

would be—for example, in some states they are prohibited from entering tanning salons or getting tattoos.

You believe in the inherent competence of teens. What's your evidence?

Dumas and I worked out what makes an adult an adult. We came up with 14 areas of competency—such as interpersonal skills, handling responsibility, leadership—and administered tests to adults and teens in several cities around the country. We found that teens were as competent or nearly as competent as adults in all 14 areas. But when adults estimate how teens *will* score, their estimates are dramatically below what the teens actually score.

Other long-standing data show that teens are at least as competent as adults. IQ is a quotient that indicates where you stand relative to other people your age; that stays stable. But raw scores of intelligence peak around age 14–15 and shrink thereafter. Scores on virtually all tests of memory peak between ages 13 and 15. Perceptual abilities all peak at that age. Brain size peaks at 14. Incidental memory—what you remember by accident, and not due to mnemonics—is remarkably good in early to mid teens and practically nonexistent by the 50s and 60s.

If teens are so competent, why do they not show it?

What teens do is a small fraction of what they are capable of doing. If you mistreat or restrict them, performance suffers and is extremely misleading.

The teens put before us as examples by, say, the music industry tend to be highly incompetent. Teens encourage each other to perform incompetently. One of the anthems of modern pop, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana, is all about how we need to behave like we're stupid.

Teens in America are in touch with their peers on average 65 hours a week, compared to about four hours a week in preindustrial cultures. In this country, teens learn virtually everything they know from other teens, who are in turn highly

influenced by certain aggressive industries. This makes no sense. Teens should be learning from the people they are about to become. When young people exit the education system and are dumped into the real world, which is not the world of Britney Spears, they have no idea what's going on and have to spend considerable time figuring it out.

There are at least 20 million young people between 13 and 17, and if they are as competent as I think they are, we are just throwing them away.

Too often, giving young people more responsibility translates into giving them more household chores, which only creates more conflict with adults.

Do you believe that young people are capable of maintaining long-term relationships and capable of moral reasoning?

Everyone who has looked at the issue has found that teens can experience the love that adults experience. The only difference is that they change partners more, because they are warehoused together, told it's puppy love and not real, and are unable to marry without permission. The assumption is they are not capable. But many distinguished couples today—Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, George and Barbara Bush—married young and have very successful long-term relationships.

According to census data, the divorce rate of males marrying in their teens is lower than that of males marrying in their 20s. Overall the divorce rate of people marrying in their teens is a little higher. Does that mean we should prohibit them from marrying? That's absurd. We should aim to reverse that, telling young people the truth: that they are capable of creating long-term stable relationships. They might

fail—but adults do every day, too.

The “friends with benefits” phenomenon is a by-product of isolating adolescents, warehousing them together, and delivering messages that they are incapable of long-term relationships. Obviously they have strong sexual urges and act on them in ways that are irresponsible. We can change that by letting them know they are capable of having more than a hookup.

Studies show that we reach the highest levels of moral reasoning while we're still in our teens. Those capabilities paral-

el higher-order cognitive reasoning abilities, which peak fairly early. Across the board, teens are far more capable than we think they are.

What's the worst part of the current way we treat teens?

The adversarial relationship between parents and offspring is terrible; it hurts both parents and young people. It tears some people to shreds; they don't understand why it is happening and can't get out of it. They don't realize they are caught in a machine that's driving them apart from their offspring—and it's unnecessary.

What can be done?

I believe that young people should have more options—the option to work, marry, own property, sign contracts, start businesses, make decisions about health care and abortions, live on their own—every right, privilege, or responsibility an adult has. I advocate a competency-based system that focuses on the abilities of the individual. For some it will mean more time in

school combined with work, for others it will mean that at age 13 or 15 they can set up an Internet business. Others will enter the workforce and become some sort of apprentice. The exploitative factories are long gone; competent young people deserve the chance to compete where it counts, and many will surprise us.

It's a simple matter to develop competency tests to determine what rights a young person should be given, just as we now have competency tests for driving. When you offer significant rights for passing such a test, it's highly motivating; people who can't pass a high-school history test will never give up trying to pass the written test at the DMV, and they'll virtually always succeed. We need to offer a variety of tests, including a comprehensive test to allow someone to become emancipated without the need for court action. When we dangle significant rewards in front of our young people—including the right to be treated like an adult—many will set aside the trivia of teen culture and work hard to join the adult world.

Are you saying that teens should have more freedom?

No, they already have too much freedom—they are free to spend, to be disrespectful, to stay out all night, to have sex and take drugs. But they're not free to join the adult world, and that's what needs to change.

Unfortunately, the current systems are so entrenched that parents can do little to counter infantilization. No one parent can confer property rights, even though they would be highly motivating. Too often, giving children more responsibility translates into giving them household chores, which just causes more tension and conflict. We have to think beyond chores to meaningful responsibility—responsibility tied to significant rights.

With a competency-based system in place, our focus will start to change. We'll become more conscious of the remarkable things teens can do rather than on culture-driven misbehavior. With luck, we might even be able to abolish adolescence. **PT**