

TODAY'S TEENS

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For my project, I researched adolescence. I was curious to discover what influences these years of growth and change. Is our understanding of teenagers based on psychological research, or is it shaped more by cultural trends and societal expectations?

For my artwork, I created what I call a “true yearbook.” I think that a yearbook is incredibly valuable. It gives readers a look into the unique experiences of high school. But often times, I don’t think a yearbook accurately depicts how teenagers experience high school.

Through interviewing my peers, and speaking from my own life, I attempted to create a more accurate depiction of these years of development. I also want to dedicate this book to OS36. I decided to feature these last four months that we’ve shared in a more traditional way by creating a headshot and “quotes page” for OS36. While we all experience adolescence in different ways, we all have one thing in common: Oxbow.

With this book, I hope to provide more insight into what’s going on in the minds of adolescents. It may not capture one universal experience, but I hope it tells an honest story.

Jesse Z

Adolescence is an influential time in a person's life. Every single adult has been through adolescence, and yet it seems as though there is still much about teenagers that is misunderstood. This paper addresses the many expectations placed on teenagers. Whether psychological or cultural, it is undeniable that the influences on teenagers shape this time of significant growth and self-discovery. What are these expectations that shape the "teenage experience"? This paper addresses the psychology and sociology of adolescence, as well as the changing culture around this period of one's life.

Introduction

When I turned fourteen, I noticed a drastic change in my world. I was now in high school, and it seemed as though all the expectations that come with being a teenager hit me at once. I began to hear stories from my friends about drinking and smoking, sex and parties. My workload increased, my sports teams intensified. Since becoming a teenager, I have found it to be a defining time. Not just in the sense that I am changing in many ways, but in the sense that my age is a significant part of my identity. There are many expectations placed on adolescents. And while expectations are generally healthy and common, those placed on teenagers are unrealistic and damaging.

I'm hyperventilating. The tears won't stop flowing and I can't form my thoughts into words. It's 9:30 and I don't have anything done on my essay. My mom is sitting next to me, trying to console me, push me into getting something, anything down on paper. But I can't be reached. I'm in the middle of a full blown panic attack for the second time that month. Attending a school named "University Prep" has affected me since the start of high school. Whether from myself or my teachers, I have felt a pressure to succeed to the highest level. Lunch talk with my friends is often focused on our GPA or latest college meeting. And although no one explicitly tells me that an A- isn't good enough, I feel disappointed in myself when I see any score lower than an A on an assignment. Every single day, when I walk onto the campus of my school, I feel the academic expectations placed on me. Some of these expectations are communicated quite explicitly. My teachers hand me detailed rubrics for their assignments that spells out exactly what to strive for and pay attention to. Our College Counseling Office sends out a stream of emails and letters outlining where we should be at each stage of our college search process. Teacher evaluations comment on whether academic goals are being achieved and appropriate effort is being expended. Other kinds of expectations are received more subtly. Comments are overheard about how another person dresses or behaves. Social media broadcasts the ideal image of popularity. Whether it's college as the end goal, or the rubric for my homework that I have to follow religiously, I'm constantly trying to reach a bar that has been set for me, either by myself or others.

"Did you hear anything about the party this weekend?" I ask her. "No, but I can text Harry about it," she replies. "Okay. Oh, we also need his interview about the ASB event." I'm in eleventh grade, and I'm sitting in the North Lab with my co-managing Yearbook editor. Our school president, Harry, is also our go-to when it comes to information on parties. Almost every Friday, around 9 or 10 o'clock, Snapchat stories of the party that night would start to show up. I'd have to watch lots of people that I didn't even like dance to music that I didn't like, all while drinking something that I didn't like. And yet, I would be sorry for myself for not being there. "Is there something wrong with me?" I would think.

I'm in the ninth grade, and my best friend is telling me about last weekend when she woke up half naked after drinking with her friends. She isn't sure what happened, but she thinks she hooked up with some guy she'd been talking to. All I can think about is how I've really only ever been kissed. Sex sounds so crazy to me, and I'm nervous just thinking about it.

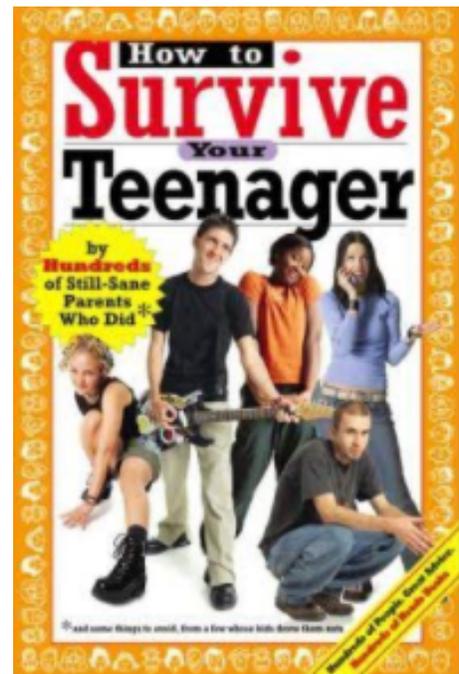
I'm in the tenth grade, and I'm listening to gossip about all the latest hookups. I feel embarrassed. "What if I'm behind?" I think. "I haven't dated anyone in so long, let alone hooked up with anyone. Is there something wrong with me?"

As I've grown older, I've only experienced more and more of the expectations placed on teenagers in today's society. As I've continually asked myself, "Is there something wrong with

me?”, I’ve become more aware of the unspoken expectations that are placed on me. This isn’t to say, however, that I feel alienated from my peers. Just because I wonder whether or not I am “keeping up” with my friends, per se, doesn’t mean that my experience of adolescence has been abnormal. From academics to parties, self-esteem to relationships, it’s seemed at many times that my life is similar to those of characters in cheesy shows that you see on TV. But as adolescence has become a larger part of my identity, it has also become a source of curiosity for me. Are the expectations placed on teenagers based simply on the science of our brain? Or are we socially conditioned to act a certain way? Why is there such a negative association with being a teenager? Oftentimes, we’re seen as grumpy, lazy, and rebellious. But over the last few years, I’ve been able to meet some of the most thoughtful, driven, and creative young people. I decided to research adolescence because it influences my life in many ways. I was curious to find out if the “teenage experience” is dictated from within, based on our brain development, sense of self, and search for identity. Or from the outside, from society, our family situation, and our personal experiences.

While the experiences that I’ve had are personal, I am not alone with my interest in adolescence. If you were to search online for information on the teenage brain, you may find books designed for parents, focused on “how to survive your teenager” (See Image 1). While these books provide the reader with a general understanding of teenagers, adolescence is often “[treated] like an illness to be cured of” (Stephenson). Over the past twenty or so years especially, with the emergence of new scientific technology, psychologists have been able to discover a lot more about the teenage brain. Thanks to the MRI, we now know much more about what influences the “fascinating creature known as the American teenager” psychologically (“The Invention of Teenagers: LIFE and the Triumph of Youth Culture”).

It used to be believed that the most significant period of growth in a person’s life was between the ages of zero and three. However, the period of adolescence is an important period of brain development as well. Because the brain grows in size at such a rapid rate in the first few years of a child’s life, the development that takes place later on was overlooked. Psychologists have now found, however, that the “intricate architecture of the brain” is continuing to change for another decade or more (“Inside the Teenage Brain”). Scientists were surprised to find that over-production, which takes place between the ages of zero and three, occurs again at the beginning of puberty, and continues into adolescence. Over-production is a process in which “the brain over-produces brain cells (neurons) and connections between brain cells (synapses) and then starts pruning them back” (“Inside the Teenage Brain”). The process is similar to that of pruning a tree: cutting back certain branches allow others to flourish. Most of the changes that occur within an adolescent’s developing brain take place in the the front part of the brain, called the frontal cortex. The frontal cortex “involves judgment, organization, planning, and strategizing” (“Inside the Teenage Brain”). While “teenagers are capable of enormous intellectual and artistic accomplishments, that basic part of the brain that gives us strategies and organizing and perhaps warns us of potential consequences isn’t fully on board yet” (“Inside the



Teenage Brain”). “In another study of growth patterns of the developing brain... [researchers] found waves of growth in the corpus callosum” (“Adolescent Brains Are Works In Progress”). The corpus callosum is a fiber system that relays information between the hemispheres of the brain (“Adolescent Brains Are Works In Progress”). These findings have reinforced studies on language and communication, and show that one’s ability to learn a new language drops after the age of twelve. (“Adolescent Brains Are Works In Progress”). Based on this psychological research, we are given some explanations as to why certain qualities are associated with adolescence. For instance, “Studies suggest that increased risky behavior during adolescence reflects different rates of growth in the brain’s socioemotional cognitive control systems. After puberty, dopamine receptors increase rapidly in regions that control sensation-seeking, which encourages behaviors that bring some emotional or sensory reward” (Research on Adolescence in the Twenty-First Century).

While much of researchers psychological findings on adolescence is fairly new, the concept is widely believed to have first started in the 1940’s. It isn’t that the transition from childhood into adulthood used to occur overnight, but adolescence as a distinguishable stage of life did not come into being until the post-depression era. (“The Invention of Teenagers: LIFE and the Triumph of Youth Culture”). One reason for this could have been the introduction of cars. And what better image of adolescent independence than a car? Another factor into the cultural norms of youth is the federal regulations on activities such as voting, drinking, and even watching R-rated movies. With more and more restrictions being enforced based on age, teens often feel an even greater urge to break these rules.

Although research into adolescence can show us many general trends in the period of adolescence, our general understanding of this stage of life is in no way universal. “It is important to note that in many other societies, adolescence is not recognized as a phase of life. Instead, there is a distinction between childhood and adulthood, with significant rituals around this transformation” (“Brief History of Adolescence & Youth Culture”). For instance, at age

twelve or thirteen, boys and girls of the Jewish faith celebrate their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, where they officially become responsible members of the Jewish community. “In North Baffin Island, Inuit boys have traditionally gone out to the wilderness with their fathers



between the ages of 11 and 12 to test their hunting skills and acclimatize to the harsh arctic weather” (“13 Amazing Coming of Age Traditions From Around The World”). For the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania, “boys between the ages of ten and twenty come together to be initiated as the new ‘warrior class’ of the tribe, placed in dozens of houses built for the occasion. The

night before the ceremony the boys sleep outside in the forest, and at dawn they return for a day of singing and dancing” (“13 Amazing Coming of Age Traditions From Around The World”).

Many cultures from around the world celebrate the transition into adulthood in different ways. American teens seem to be one of the only cultures that recognizes adolescence as a period of life without any major celebration or initiation from the community. However, the Westernized image of adolescence that includes partying, high school cliques, and the struggle for self-discovery is a privileged experience transition into adulthood. Not only do personal experiences shape one’s time as a teenager, social differences such as race, socioeconomic status, and sexuality impact teenagers in significant ways. Many teenagers do not have the luxury of trying out new hobbies, or drinking and smoking with friends on weekends. The reality of adolescence for many involves working every day after school to help provide for their family, or looking after their younger siblings while parents are gone. The process of applying for college that is so often talked about among my friends is not even an option for students whose family can’t afford to pay for more schooling. While the “teenage experience” may often feature drugs and alcohol, an excessive amount of video games and sleeping in, and fighting with parents, this is not an accurate representation of all adolescents in America, much less the rest of the world. Adolescence as a period of self-discovery comes from a place of luxury.

As members of society, we experience several different stages in our lives. We are the child: curious and unsure. We are the adult: mature and reliable. We are the senior: relaxed and peaceful. And we are the youth: those caught in between worlds. It is a period of time that all adults have experienced, yet most have trouble understanding. For a period of such intense growth and change, adolescents often times don’t receive the support needed to navigate their transition into adulthood. It’s no coincidence that “the most common cause of disability among teenagers is mental illness. Symptoms of depression, whether major or minor, affect up to one third of teenagers” (Goleman). I know from personal experience what it feels like to be misunderstood by adults. Adolescents have the potential to make change in our world. This is one of the first times in history that a period of life has so distinctively been devoted to self-discovery and transition. Because of how the concept of adolescence has changed over time, youth now provides a partial protection from adult responsibilities, and an opportunity to harness awareness and idealism to contribute new perspectives and energy for the world. But without the support and empathy of older generations, it is impossible for youth to experience a smooth transition into adulthood. In order to better prepare our future generations for the world around them, we must first strive to understand them. In doing so, we can lessen the intense pressures placed on adolescents, and encourage positive growth and change more successfully.

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