

READING



4

Teenagers in Crisis

Directions: Read the following selection, then answer the questions that follow.

Many adults believe that it is more difficult to be a teenager today than when they were growing up. Although not all researchers agree, there is some evidence to suggest that American society is changing so rapidly that it is forcing its adolescents toward adulthood without the necessary time and training for a smooth transition from childhood to adulthood. The consequences to the adolescent and to society may be felt for several decades.

There is no place for teenagers in American society today—not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large. This was not always the case: barely a decade ago, teenagers had a clearly defined position in the social structure. They were the “next generation,” the “future leaders” of America. Their intellectual, social, and moral development was considered important and therefore it was protected and nurtured. The teenager’s occasional foibles [minor flaws] and excesses were excused as an expression of youthful spirit, a necessary Mardi Gras before assuming adult responsibility and decorum. Teenagers thus received the time needed to adapt to the remarkable transformations their bodies, minds, and emotions were undergoing. Society recognized that the transition from childhood to adulthood was difficult and that young people needed time, support, and guidance in this endeavor.

In today’s rapidly changing society, teenagers have lost their once privileged position. Instead, they have had a premature adulthood thrust upon them. Teenagers now are expected to confront life and its challenges with the maturity once expected only of the middle-aged, without any time for preparation. Many adults are too busy retooling and retraining their own job skills to devote any time to preparing the next generation of workers. And some parents are so involved in reordering their own lives, managing a career, marriage, parenting, and leisure, that they have no time to give their teenagers; other parents simply cannot train a teenager for an adulthood they themselves have yet to attain fully. The media and merchandisers, too, no longer abide by the unwritten rule that teenagers are a privileged group who require special protection and nurturing. They now see teenagers as fair game for all the arts of persuasion and sexual innuendo once directed only to adult audiences and consumers. High schools, which were once the setting for a unique teenage culture and language, have become miniatures of the adult community. Theft, violence, sex, and

substance abuse are now as common in the high schools as they are in the streets.

The imposition of premature adulthood upon today’s teenagers affects them in two different but closely related ways. First, because teenagers need a protected period of time within which to construct a personal identity, the absence of that period impairs the formation of that all-important self-definition. Having a personal identity amounts to having an abiding sense of self that brings together, and gives meaning to, the teenager’s past while at the same time giving him or her guidance and direction for the future. A secure sense of self, of personal identity, allows the young person to deal with both inner and outer demands with consistency and efficiency. This sense of self is thus one of the teenager’s most important defenses against stress. By impairing his or her ability to construct a secure personal identity, today’s society leaves the teenager more vulnerable and less competent to meet the challenges that are inevitable in life.

The second effect of premature adulthood is inordinate stress: teenagers today are subject to more stress than were teenagers in previous generations. This stress is of three types. First, teenagers are confronted with many more freedoms today than were available to past generations. Second, they are experiencing losses, to their basic sense of security and expectations for the future, that earlier generations did not encounter. And third, they must cope with the frustration of trying to prepare for their life’s work in school settings that hinder rather than facilitate this goal. Any one of these new stresses would put a heavy burden on a young person; taken together, they make a formidable demand on the teenager’s ability to adapt to new demands and new situations.

Contemporary American society has thus struck teenagers a double blow. It has rendered them more vulnerable to stress while at the same time exposing them to new and more powerful stresses than were ever faced by previous generations of adolescents. It

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is not surprising, then, to find the number of stress-related problems among teenagers has more than tripled in the last decade and a half.

Source: Elkind, D. (1984). *All grown up and no place to go: Teenagers in Crisis*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. pp. 3-6.

 **Understanding the Reading**

Directions: Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. When teenagers were considered future leaders, how did society treat them?

2. What changes does the author believe have occurred in society to make teens lose their place?

3. According to the author, how have high schools changed?

4. What two effects on teens does the author cite as a result of society's push toward premature adulthood?

 **Thinking Critically**

Directions: Answer the following questions in the space provided.

5. Do you agree with the author's point of view about society's treatment of teens? Explain your reasoning.

6. ~~Compose a letter to your congressional representative expressing your views on allowing advertisers to use sex or violence to sell products to teens.~~
