

All grown up and no place to go teenagers in crisis

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Child and adolescent development specialist David Elkind contends that today's teenager's are struggling as the result of a shift in society to a "postmodern" period. In this period, "the needs of children and youth are often weighted less heavily than are the needs of parents and the rest of adult society" (xiii). Elkind believes that, as a result, "we as a society have abrogated our responsibility to young people" (xiv).

Elkind explains how, in this postmodern period, adults mistakenly treat teenagers as though they were already competent and sophisticated, and therefore do not guide them from childhood into adulthood, as youth were guided in previous generations. His words sound a clear warning to teachers and other adults who tend to confuse teenager's' physical maturity with emotional, psychological, social, intellectual, and spiritual maturity. A useful feature is his discussion of how the "growth markers" that were formerly available to guide children into adolescence and teens into adulthood are now absent.

Examples include girls of all ages now being encouraged to wear makeup and sophisticated clothes, and boys of all ages being encouraged to participate in high-stakes competitive sports teams. Teen's perception of stereotypes varies from person to person. It is interesting to know that how teens identify groups and how they decide to associate themselves with particular ones, at a time in their lives when age-mates take on a greater significance and the influence of adults diminishes.

Teachers should not ignore or underestimate the power of peer influence; although we commonly think of this influence in negative terms, this article helps us recognize that peer influence can be a positive contributor to

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teenager's' classroom behavior, too. The role of environment in determining behavior is considered, much greater by the intellectual descendants of Locke. More than adherents of other schools, they see humans as substantially malleable; they are convinced that children's behavior responds to the expectations expressed for it.

Thus, if we believe that teenagers will be moody and rude, our children are likely to comply; if we relegate them to a social holding pattern, they will adopt the general characteristics of powerlessness. The discipline of child psychology, as well as the children it studies, is influenced by cultural assumptions seems beyond doubt. But then, what is to be made of these conflicting views about the plasticity of development? It would hardly be feasible to attempt a grand synthesis of these positions. David Elkind, a longtime observer and scholar of child development and family life, sees in the modern family a "permeable" family.

He discerns in the seeming imbalances and morbidities of postmodern families the stresses hammering at children and youth in the contemporary society and a new family form emerging, a form that is based on values and sentiments that prepare its members to cope with this stunning array of pressures. Three sentiments and their resulting practices are particularly heartening from his point of view. To be sure, by the teenage years, parents must exercise most of their authority by stating acceptable alternatives and sticking to them, even if that means throwing a child out of the house.

In a sense, then, we are no longer talking about the kind of parental control liberationists object to, but more subtle pressures generally compatible with their stand except insofar as they think teens have a right to financial

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support no matter what their behavior. Teens might also insist that drinking or doing drugs should be their own choice, just as it is for adults. But the reverberations both for themselves and for those about them suggest the desirability of pressing them to limit such activities in a way that might not be appropriate for adults.

David Elkind has warned against pushing children too fast in an age-inappropriate manner. Latency-age children bear much of the burden of a faster-paced society. Adults are spending more time at work than ever before; children are shuffled between activities in part due to their parents' schedules. Children's time outside of school has become more structured; they participate in extracurricular pursuits at earlier ages. Doing nothing, as in "those lazy, hazy days of summer," previously part of the culture of a child, is no longer promoted or valued. Some children no longer just go out to play, they have "play dates.

"They are infrequently left free to explore what they would do if there were nothing to do. There is no time for daydreaming. Television and computers have replaced quieter moments. Rarely do you hear a child say, "Turn off the television. I want to read now." In this speeded-up society, adults are resigned to Elkind's concerns; there is no turning back for today's children. Parents may rationalize and say it is a good learning experience for an eight-year-old to be home alone. Elkind's recommendation is that given the stress imposed on them, children should be taught skills to help them cope effectively with what is expected of them.

For example, the "latchkey" child should be offered assistance such as phone numbers for reaching a parent, the police, and a neighbor, and <https://assignbuster.com/all-grown-up-and-no-place-to-go-teenagers-in-crisis/>

instructions on what to do in case of fire. Rituals and routines are important components in the structure of the middle childhood years. As children begin to organize and classify their knowledge, they come to depend on routines to help them consciously and unconsciously deal with new issues and experiences. Birthdays, secular and religious rituals, and common developmental milestones all help them to find their place in the world.

They are seeking to be connected to the larger society through attachments in school, with their peers, with their teachers, in social activities, and in their families. Ironically, because teenagers are continually redefining their thinking about self and their own value systems, they are highly vulnerable to believing in media myths. As such, outside-in problems manufactured by the media through the power of suggestion and constant repetition become teenagers' inside-out personal problems. In short, adolescence is the stage in life when children begin to question their own thinking in light of what others think of them as well as for them.

In this regard, teenagers' sense of thinking is not wholly independent of their social sense of self. Although as parents, researchers, and teachers, we may be aware of the variable nature of the teenagers' thinking self, we may not realize that adolescence is a relatively new stage in human development. In colonial America, teenagers served as a source of cheap labor. With the advent of modern industrialization, longer periods of schooling have been required to prepare children for the workplace. This, in turn, has extended the time that children are economically dependent on their parents.

As children enter the teenage culture, they are drawn away from their parents and into peer groups. In the process, teenagers' developing social

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sense of self is placed into a tug of war between the norms and pressures of parents and friends. Adolescence in America is the psychological equivalent of toddlerhood. Just as toddlers move away from their parents physically, so teenager's move away from their parents emotionally. There are continuous negotiations between parents and children about distance. Children want to explore and parents want to keep them safe.

And both toddlers and teenagers are outraged when their parents don't agree with them about the ideal balance of freedom and security. As teenager's turn to their peers for validation and support, they often engage in intense experimentation, exploring a wide range of possibilities that often contradict parents' cherished beliefs in behavioral norms. In the process, teenagers may become the biggest enforcers and proselytizers for their own peer culture: Teenagers may punish other teenagers for failing to achieve the same impossible goal that they themselves are unable to obtain.

Moreover, they may rush to set standards to ward off the imposition of others' standards on them. All the while, the content of the standards may remain variable often depending on what standards the media is marketing at a given time, from baggy pants and body piercing to tattoos and the latest neon hair styles. Teenager's' social sense of self invariably leads to contradictions, as does their thinking sense of self. Social self-contradictions arise from teenager's' membership in multiple groups that maintain different expectations and norms.

More importantly, contradictions continually arise as teenager's switch their loyalties from one peer group to the next, giving rise to competing allegiances. In sum, teenager's experience contradictions inside-out in terms

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of their thinking sense of self as well as outside in terms of their social sense of self. In many instances, the frustrations of these contradictions are further exacerbated by the academic sense of self that schools promote. One of the most visibly striking transformations during adolescence occurs as a girl's body changes in size and shape.

Girls tend to appear rounder as their hips widen, and fat develops in the breasts, thighs, and buttocks. As these changes occur, culture tells girls that thinness is beautiful, even imperative. Not surprisingly, it is also during this period that girls become increasingly concerned with their bodies. Girls' changing bodies provide powerful stimuli to the self and others. A pertinent issue during early adolescence is that bodily changes bring about a sense of fragmentation in body image. Thus, the body is frequently depicted as a collection of individual parts, such as breasts and hips.

So, for example, many girls this age worry about the size of their breasts. In the United States, bigger is generally considered better, yet not from girls' perspectives. Rather others are believed to hold that value. Because the body is often times viewed as a reflection of the self, the eroticization processes through which the body is transformed into a sexual object become a major source of conflict for many teenager girls. Teenager girls continue to suffer in multiple ways as a result of these complex social processes.

Meanwhile the psychologists and psychiatrists who have historically led the study of what is known as "body image" have done so in ways that limit knowledge and understanding of girls, further contributing to the structures supporting domination and oppression of females. That is, these researchers

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have almost exclusively studied “ body image” through quantitative measures that assume objectivity. In the process, they have conveniently and openly ignored and dismissed contributions from social scientists and feminists who have studied the body from alternative and more hopeful perspectives

Nevertheless, body image work has become influential, creating at least three problems. First, the historical study of “ body image” has contributed to the objectification of the body. Second, “ body image” researchers have created a logic of pathology to explain girls' problems Result of irresponsible sexual activity is substantial teenage motherhood. Yet the consequences of early childbearing are extremely damaging. Pregnancy doubles the risk that a girl will drop out of school; most such girls never return, regardless of their financial situation or ethnic background.

Once the child is born, the girl is unlikely to be in a position to earn more than welfare would offer her and she has the responsibility of a child to boot. But if she chooses to go on welfare, her sense of agency and independence is seriously damaged. If she marries instead, she is not only unlikely to finish her schooling but also faces a significantly higher probability of divorcethan a woman who waits until her twenties to marry. Thus girls who engage in unprotected sex and who elect to keep their babies are at serious risk of a worse life than they could otherwise have expected.

“ But the damage does not stop there. The plight of their children is painful. Neither parent may take responsibility: they may be ignored by their fathers and handed to some female relative by their mothers. For the child, this may be a blessing in disguise, as the most irresponsible teens are those least

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likely to possess the qualities required for good childrearing. As these babies get older, however, they show the effects of their unfavorable environment. Children of teen mothers score worse on ability tests, get worse grades, and expect less in the way of education than children of older women.

They also get less education, marry earlier, and divorce more often". (p. 133)

David Elkind questions the popular conception of parental authority Exerting parental authority doesn't mean that we can't play ball with our children or joke with them or have fun with them. Being a parent doesn't mean being an ogre or a relentless disciplinarian. Rather it means asserting ourselves as adults who have more experience, knowledge, and skill than our offspring. Children and teenagers are young and inexperienced. They very much need and want guidance and instruction from us. (205)

At least three areas of concern arise from the literature about violence on television. The obvious ones are the relationship between television violence and aggression, even if the aggression is not directed against society, and the desensitization of children to pain and suffering. The less obvious one is the potential for children who are sensitive and vulnerable to become more fearful and insecure upon exposure to violence on television. " Television has brought murder into the home, where it belongs" (Elkind, p. 103). Murders and crime occur about ten times more frequently on television than in the real world.

A third of all characters in television shows are committing crime or fighting it, most with guns. It becomes, therefore, a chicken-and-egg question. When one examines violence in films the trend towards increased gore and explicit horror is easily documented. Rather than reflecting the content and meaning

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associated with myths and fairy tales, horror films today are pure sensation with little serious content. If violence on television is controlled, children and adults will still be able to experience violence vicariously through other media such as films, books, and recordings.

The contemporary challenges that have created this increase in stress among today's teenager's, in Elkind's terms -- the "perils of puberty," "peer shock," and "family permutations". Authentic parenting is an outgrowth of shared parenting but integrates unilateral and mutual authority depending on the concern at hand and the developmental stage of the child. But it is also leavened by a realization that each parent can perform their roles in ways that are true to their own temperaments, personalities, and experience. Finally, there is an emergent relationship between community and family.

How well a family does is seen as partly dependent upon the ties it has with the community and the resources and assets available in the community. Community service has become a part of the required curriculum in many schools. Other neighborhoods are reaching out to isolated families or individuals and families in trouble. Some schools have become "lighted schools"—twenty-four-hour family resource centers providing programs, services, and opportunities for connections to others. According to Elkind, interdependence is a central value and sentiment that underlies this emerging family form.

"Interdependence is founded upon a sense of being both one and many, of being different from everyone else and like them at the same time" (p. 220).

Traces of his longing for the modern family aside, Elkind's thesis about the <https://assignbuster.com/all-grown-up-and-no-place-to-go-teenagers-in-crisis/>

new family embodies some of what we know about family resilience to this point. And it can apply in spirit to all families and caretaking relationships. It is important, as a starting point, to realize that every family, even those in the midst of gripping disorganization and bewildering turmoil, has strengths and capacities.

Every angry, demanding parent has moments of caring; every confused teenager has moments of hope and clarity; every abusive father has a twinge of doubt or regret. At some time in every family's life there have been periods of relative calm and stability. Every family has overcome hurdles, some more successfully than others. All of these are resources to be drawn upon, by the family members themselves or by someone who would deign to be of help to them. Works Cited Elkind David. (1998). All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis. Rev. ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley