

Adolescence: Not Just for Kids; Some Definitions, It Ends at 34. Aren't We Stretching It Just a Bit?

By Laura Sessions Stepp. The Washington Post [Washington, D.C] 02 Jan 2002: C.1.

[Note: ellipsis (three periods) indicates text has been removed, in order to shorten the reading]

Adolescence: You thought it was over at 18. Not so fast. For those who study adolescence as a stage of life, treat it as a disease, sell to it as a market, entertain it with songs and shows that make it seem the greatest time of life, it is growing and growing, providing ever new opportunities for grants, fees, jobs and changing how we think about kids.

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Not all of the experts agree with adolescence inflation.

Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, says, "Adolescence has been stretched so much it's becoming an obsolescent term." Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, professor of developmental psychology at Columbia University, says, "It's very disrespectful. Twenty-year-olds aren't teenagers. Cognitively, emotionally, they're like adults."

The young Marines stationed in Afghanistan don't think of themselves as adolescents. "We're suffering in the cold together, defending our country together. We're all men," Lance Cpl. William Isaac Jones, a 20-year-old Californian, tells a Post foreign correspondent. Adolescents are children, says Lance Cpl. Kevin Ihm, also 20, and "children stay home. That's who we protect."

Powerful lobbies are at work to stretch adolescence as far into the third decade of life as they can.

One of these groups is retail merchandisers. The number of adolescents in the United States is greater today than ever before, 60 million if you start at age 10 and continue to 24, 80 million if you count all the way to 30. Or should we count higher? Once the different ages wore different styles. Now a 60-year-old can wear the casual clothes of a 20-year-old.

Much of today's youth is a pampered population, beneficiaries of a robust economy and parents obsessed with giving them a leg up on everybody else. One amusing measure is this: Adolescents today have received four times as many toys as the generation before them, according to the industry newsletter Retail Merchandiser.

In America's past, teenagers dug coal, stitched boots, plowed the plains and picked cotton, turning their money over to their families. The majority of today's teenagers work as well, but for fewer hours at low-skill jobs, with most of their money going to pay for clothes, cars and entertainment.

Their role has deteriorated, according to historian Thomas Hine, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, from contributors to consumers. Marketers expect them to spend roughly \$600 billion next year, dubbing them "Generation Market Clout."

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Those who work with, treat and study adolescents have seen their budgets increased substantially by donations from federal agencies, foundations, local and state government and the private sector. They're hoping for more: The Younger Americans Act introduced in Congress this year would fund youth development programs to the tune of almost \$6 billion over five years.

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Educators like to boast that more high school graduates enter college now than ever before, about six out of every 10. But only about half of them complete four years of college, according to Jeffrey Arnett, a psychology professor at the University of Maryland. This means that the majority of young adults are in the workforce. In fact, whole industries and institutions depend on our low-paid young. Fast food service is one. Another is the U.S. military, which has resisted pressure from other Western nations to outlaw the drafting of anyone under the age of 18.

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[Fifty years ago, it was] assumed that once you achieved maturity, you left home. Thus the end of adolescence came to mean getting a job, leaving home and having a family, and its endpoint fluctuated not because of any biological changes—boys and girls still reach physical maturity, on average, at about age 18—but for reasons of the economy and social custom.

This helps explain the current push toward lengthening the time frame. Young adults now marry about four years later than they did in 1970 (at 25 for women, 26.8 for men). More of them are moving in and out of jobs, or going to college, hoping to prepare themselves for a workplace that is constantly changing.

Larger proportions of young, unmarried adults are living at home with their families, even after living independently for a while. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than one-half of men ages 18 to 24, and almost one-half of women that age, lived with their parents last year.

More significantly, the proportion of college graduates 24 and younger living with their families is rising, to more than one-third.

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Jeffrey Arnett has discarded the term adolescence in favor of "emerging adulthood." Arnett, the University of Maryland psychology professor, argues that it makes no sense to call young people in their late teens and twenties adolescents or even late adolescents. Boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 19 "have in common that they live with their parents, are experiencing the physical changes of puberty, are attending secondary school and are part of a school-based peer culture," he writes in the May 2000 issue of *American Psychologist*. "None of this remains normative after age 18."

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So why not call them young adults, as we used to? Do we really want them to continue to think of themselves as dependent on their elders?

Another question: Is an adult someone who is capable of being on his own, not necessarily a person who is in fact on his own? "The point should be how an individual functions, not where," says Michael Kerr, director of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Georgetown.

With housing costs rising faster than food costs and insurance premiums going through the roof (especially for the young), it's tough to fly solo and, in fact, few young people do. Some seek support from their parents, others from the military service or social services. That doesn't mean they can't—or don't—shoulder some adult responsibilities.

If you ask them, assuming responsibility for themselves, and especially for others, is what separates men and women from boys and girls.

Mikesia Jackson was 16 when she took her first steps in that direction. The mother of 1-year-old DeAmonte, she was living with her grandmother, who became seriously ill. She tried moving in with her mother and, in Jackson's words, "ended up taking care of her, too."

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At 20, Jackson now makes loans and cashes checks at America's Cash Express in Oxon Hill. She saves most of what she makes, knowing that in a year she will be too old to qualify for assistance from the city or Catholic Charities.

She likes her work -- "It's the job I've been looking for, with benefits, a 401(k) plan" -- and has asked to be promoted to district supervisor. She also likes being a mom to DeAmonte, now in kindergarten. She even grooves on PTA meetings.

When she first started going to the meetings, she says, a couple of the other parents, who were older, talked to her like a child. "They'd say things like, 'Now, dear, once a year we have something we call a fundraiser.' "

She laughed it off, having learned that adulthood is also about attitude.

"You can't sit around saying, 'Oh, my life is so bad.' You have to get over it because if you don't you'll be stuck. As my friend at Catholic Charities says, 'Shake it off and step up.' "

"The hardest thing is having no one to depend on day to day. If I have a cold, I can't go home and lie down. There are dishes to be washed, groceries to be bought, books to be read to my son.

"When you're an adult, you don't get a day off. Maybe that could be the definition."