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TEEN HEALTH

Arrested Development

Contrary to what you might expect in these fast-paced times, teens today grow up slower than their parents did. What exactly does that mean?



TEENS WHO CAME OF AGE IN THE 1970s, 1980s, AND 1990s OFTEN heard a common refrain from their parents: “You’re growing up too fast.” Today, as those Baby Boomers and Generation Xers raise their own adolescents, the trend has reversed, according to new research.

“Compared to a few decades ago, teens today are less likely to have a driver’s license, work at a paid job, go out without their parents, date, have sex, or drink alcohol,” says Jean Twenge, PhD, professor of psychology at San Diego State University. “Eighteen-year-olds are now content with acting like 15-year-olds once did.”

For years, research has shown that young adults are waiting longer to settle into marriage and careers. But Twenge’s research suggests

kids’ entire life trajectory is taking a slower pace. That’s positive news when it comes teen pregnancy and teen automobile crashes, which have both declined.

But societally, concerns abound. “Adolescents seem to be behaving in ways that are safer, and instinctively that sounds good,” says Julie Lythcott-Haims, a former dean of advising at Stanford University and author of *How to Raise an Adult*. “But we are not going to be well served if we have a society of 20- and 30-somethings who lack the impulse to be in charge of their own decisions or have a sense of obligation to work, pay their bills, and be productive.”

TEENS BY THE NUMBERS

In September, Twenge published a sweeping review looking at seven surveys asking 8.5 million teens from 1976 to 2016 when they first encountered key milestones. The contrast between today’s teens and previous generations was shocking, she says: “In all of my analyses of generational data—some of it reaching back to the 1930s—I had never seen anything like it.”

Twelfth-graders today go out without their parents less than 8th graders did in 2009, and half as many date, compared to their parents at that age. The average teen loses his or her virginity around the spring of 11th grade, while most Generation Xers lost it a year earlier. When it comes to alcohol, the percentage of 8th graders who have tried it has fallen by half, and use among 12th graders has fallen by one quarter since the 1990s.

Meanwhile, a full quarter of high-schoolers graduate without having a

driver’s license (a nearly unheard-of phenomenon in the 1980s, when films like *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* equated coming of age with driving). Nearly half of today’s high-schoolers do not have a paying job. In 1970, four in five did.

“Most parents would agree that fewer teens drinking and having sex are good trends,” says Twenge. But the slow life trajectory has its downsides too.

SUPER-CONNECTED AND COMPLETELY UNPREPARED

In her book, *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—And Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, Twenge suggests that the generation (named after the iPhone they grew up with) is leaving the house less because they can now socialize via their phone. “Today, the party is on Snapchat,” she says.

Overdone, that lack of in-person interaction can prevent the development of key interpersonal skills, she argues. And, according to a report published in January 2018 by the American Psychological Association, it can also sap happiness. “Adolescents who spent more time on electronic

communication and screens and less time on non-screen activities, including in-person social interaction, had lower psychological well-being,” the report concluded.

Haines warns that well-meaning parents, eager to support their children and carve out time for them to excel at school and extracurricular activities so they can get into a good college, often inadvertently rob them of the life experience they’ll need when they get there. “Too many of my students at Stanford seemed to be delighted to be helped by their parents in ways that you and I would have been repulsed by at that age,” she says.

As today’s parents embrace the upside of having more cautious, less rebellious kids, they should also be helping usher them into adulthood. That means setting limits on technology use, encouraging in-person time with friends, requiring chores or a job, and talking candidly about the risks of unprotected sex and binge drinking, which—if they haven’t encountered in high school—they will certainly be exposed to in college.

“It’s great that kids don’t have to grow up before they are ready,” says Twenge. “But they do have to grow up eventually.”

5 Skills

Former college student advisor Julie Lythcott-Haims says every teenager should solidly possess certain skills by the time they’re a senior in high school. Here they are—and ways parents can nurture them early.

1. BE ABLE TO TALK TO STRANGERS

Periodically send your teen to ask the clerk at the grocery store where something is. Bring him to adult events and encourage him to introduce himself to people.

2. BE ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE TO RUNNING A HOUSEHOLD

Require your child to do chores as early as toddlerhood and don’t let up when they get to be busy teenagers. “Doing chores turns out to be really foundational to a kid’s development of a strong work ethic,” says Lythcott-Haims.

3. BE ABLE TO MANAGE DEADLINES AND SCHEDULES

Encourage your teen to use a scheduling app or calendar. Sit down once a week and have her tell you what’s coming up.

4. BE ABLE TO MANAGE INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS

When your teen comes to you with a problem, start by expressing compassion: “Wow, that must really be frustrating.” Then ask her what she plans to do about it. “That signals that you think she is capable of handling it herself and forces her to start thinking through her options or next steps on her own,” says Lythcott-Haims.

5. BE ABLE TO MANAGE MONEY

Provide a weekly allowance and ask your teen to use it when they want to go out with friends. Resist the urge to give them cash whenever they ask for it.

BY THE NUMBERS



of 9th to 12th graders have had sex. That number was 54% in 1991.



of 12th graders have tried alcohol. That number was 85% in the early 1990s.



of 12th graders go out on dates. That number was 86% in the late 1970s.



of teens have a summer job. That number was 70% in 1980.

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