

Teens in Time

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Dramatic changes have occurred in the role of teenagers in American history. How does your experience compare with that of your counterpart in colonial days? Or when urban America was absorbing waves of mass immigration? How did this differ for boys and girls? If we are to better understand where your generation may be heading, and why, it helps to look back at where American teenagers have been.

COLONIAL TIMES AND RURAL TEENS

Early America was largely a rural society where roads were poor and relatively long distances separated farms. The family therefore operated as a total economic entity producing and consuming the bulk of what it needed. Family members had to understand every aspect of their lives on the farm, including planting and harvesting, fertilizing, and caring for the crops and livestock. They even had to be responsible for the health and care of other family members.

Children had roles that were well-defined. They provided essential labor and a critical component in maintaining the household. From the age of three, they worked with their mother and father. Boys learned all the skills and crafts of farming, woodworking, woodcutting, management of crops, and making and maintaining farm machinery. Girls learned as many or more jobs

for sustaining a household. The personal goal was to grow up to be just like mother and father-able, competent, and skilled in all aspects of rural farm life.¹

COLONIAL TIMES AND CITY TEENS

Some youngsters, however, saw a different goal, and were lured by the appeals of town or city life, or pushed by poverty from rural areas. Cities were small by today's standards and had a different economic structure from rural communities. The city family's father was much more likely to be engaged in manual labor-often for someone else-as a teamster, or in a shipyard or a factory. People with eighteenth-century skills and crafts could operate as a very small business, as a draper, a smith, a cartwright, a barkeep or a hotelier.

If the young man was lucky, he would, at an early age, perhaps fourteen to sixteen, be apprenticed to a skilled craftsman. Over several years, he would learn a craft from the bottom up. He then became a journeyman, who had the right, obligation, and expectation of moving across the countryside to practice his skills and earn his living. After the journeyman period was complete, and he had demonstrated skills, he would be admitted into a guild, which certified him as a craftsman. For those not fortunate enough to learn a craft, city life could be harder, with the primary work being physical.

Girls had a parallel goal to that on the farm: to be homemakers and to tend the family. If it was necessary that a girl work outside the home, she tended to work in a wealthy household as a maid, cook, or servant.

While young people had limited expectations, they understood what they had to do to earn a living as adults. Severe discipline and sharp and harsh expectations were often meted out by extremely demanding parents.

Boys often found a way to escape to the country's then-endless frontier. They could literally run away from home, sometimes to the city, more often to the open land of the frontier to the west. That opportunity provided a brake from extremely severe adult demands. Boys who ran off might become workers on someone else's farm until they could build their own stake.

AMERICA'S RESTLESS TEENS

City life, as well as country life, was continually refreshed by immigrants from all parts of the world. Americanization was important, especially learning the language, laws, and the customs of the new country.

Many non-English-speaking immigrants, however, found ongoing conflict between their desire to maintain traditional beliefs and the desire of their children-once they had experienced the new world-to abandon these same beliefs. Teenage offspring of immigrants wanted to experience the marvelous opportunities that come with living in the United States as compared to the constricted world their parents tried to impose on them.

This showed up prominently in the case of teenage girls who were expected to become dutiful wives; obedient to their husbands, and having no job or career for

themselves except in straitened circumstances (as when widowed). Boys always had more opportunities. Just as the rural boys could travel over the next mountain and be free of an oppressive parent, urban boys could break away even within the city.²

Urban life presented teenagers with a different model of the future. Father went off to work, whether as a laborer in a factory or as a white-collar worker. What father did and how he did it was often a mystery to his son and the rest of the family. Mother worked at home or got a job in a mill or a retail shop. She could describe her work and it could become a goal for her daughter.

EDUCATION AND JOBS

Over time, children became less of an economic asset to the household. A greater emphasis was placed on education as preparation for jobs *outside* the home: Teenagers were told to prepare to become wage earners.³ This is not to say they were any less loved or appreciated or adored. But having no economic value tied to occupation, work skills, or craft while growing up made future employment and family life uncertain.⁴ On the other hand, children in smaller families became the extension of the wishes and goals of their parents the embodiment of what parents had wished for themselves. Continuing education through high school and on through college became a requirement for that fulfillment.

Many teens today are uncertain about the future and have little clear knowledge of what they want to do for a living. They rarely show interest in the tens of thousands of diverse jobs in society. Instead, many hope to become sports stars or lawyers, two occupations with a small

proportion of available jobs but given great prominence by the media. Thousands find themselves working jobs where they can only earn pocket money and cannot move up the career ladder. Flipping burgers is the most common symbol of career ambivalence; a job not essential to the family but one that produces money to spend as one sees fit.

Whether this is good or bad in the long-term development of teens is a question for debate.⁵ What is clear is that this confuses the relationship between work, the development of valuable personal skills, and the value of money. Combined with a growing shortage of good jobs, the situation has teens and post-teens in a longer-than-ever period of economic and social dependency (as in the case of increasing numbers of young adults still living at home). A new type of “adolescence” is continuing through college, and now even through grad school, as late as until ages twenty-three to twenty-five.

FINDING A BETTER WAY

Teenagers who are preparing for the future, and especially for work, should possess three strengths. First, they need to continually improve their computer skills. Second are communication skills: the ability to speak and write clearly, as well as be sensitive to differences in people’s body language and behavior, in order to be an effective listener. Third is social sensitivity, as teamwork and an awareness of customer or client behavior is crucial to the survival of small and large businesses.

In preparation for family life, teens need to understand *new* patterns in family responsibility and the new economics of households. In an interesting experiment some years ago in one Midwestern high school, students were paired up as “married

couples” and given simulated jobs. They had to plan to start and maintain a household. This included all aspects of family life (except for sexual relations).

Let us say Charlie was going to be a truck driver, or go on to college to be a physician, or join his father’s business; and Mary was going to be a homemaker, or go on to college to become a forester. They had incomes appropriately allocated for their choices after high school. They had to spend their time and money accordingly. Participants learned the blending and melding of roles. They came to understand that caring for children and doing household chores were not necessarily his or her exclusive job. Many later told researchers that making a go of marriage required far more sensitive and creative attention than they had expected.

AND TOMORROW?

Your future as today’s teens and that of teenagers in the near future, say in the decade of the 2020s, is by no means the same. By the 2020s, it is likely today’s new immigrants (from Asia, Central America, Eastern Europe, and Mexico) will be more completely acculturated into society. Racial and ethnic barriers will continue to fall, as they have over the last several decades, and families will be somewhat smaller.

School, particularly high school, may involve much more distance learning and the use of computers. It is also likely, unless there is radical improvement in public schools, there will be more full- or part-time home schooling. Preparation for work will include more effective counseling, either within or outside the school system.

Teens are likely to be more sexually active, with the concurrence and assistance of parents. There will be much more effective and realistic schooling in mate selection, i.e., in choosing future marriage partners.

In short, as best as can be forecast, and with an eye looking back at the history of teenagers from colonial times to present, it seems highly likely that your as-yet-unborn offspring, when in their *own* teens, will live in a strikingly different world a quarter century from now.

NOTES

¹ Father was the center of the household with the primary responsibilities for the maintenance and operation of the farm. Mother was responsible for feeding the family, caring for all aspects of the home, and for the conversion of some of the raw materials into useful products. Her skills were cooking, cleaning, housekeeping, making soap and candles, spinning wool or other fibers, weaving fabrics, and cutting and making clothes. Families who lived in colder climates skinned animals to make leather and garments. The family also built the modest infrastructure that the farm required: digging a pond, damming a creek, and shaping a road. The farmer cut lumber for fuel and building material.

² A marvelous account of this is available in your local video store. It is called *The Jolson Story* and tells about an extremely popular entertainer—the Michael Jackson of the early twentieth century. From an old-country Jewish family, Al Jolson broke away and was constantly balancing the desire to please his parents and earn their approval, with his desire to become an entertainer.

³ On a personal note, my own parents, each born in 1895, never completed high school. My only brother, eleven years older than I, dropped out of high school for work and to enter the army in World War II. I was one of the first members of my extended family to attend college and perhaps the first one to go on to graduate school. My wife has a similar story. Not quite the first one in her extended family to go to college, she now has three degrees, including a doctorate. Our

children are all college graduates, with some having earned advanced degrees.

⁴ Increasing prosperity throughout the twentieth century had a biological effect—earlier physical and sexual maturity. Girls a century ago had their menarche, that is, their first period, as late as sixteen, while now it is common at the age of twelve and not unusual at ten. It is harder to see the biological landmarks of maturation among boys.

⁵ One side note on the problems of contemporary teens is the explosive development of “blogs”—web logs. Some ten million people now have them, half of whom are between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. For many, the blog is a way of expressing discontent, uncertainty, lack of moorings, and the absence of clear values and goals.

FURTHER READING

Coates, Joseph E, John B. Mahaffie, and Andy Hines. *2025: Scenarios of U.S. and Global Society Reshaped by Science and Technology*. Greensboro, N.C.: Oakhill Press, 1997.

Sloane, Eric. *Diary of an Early American Boy: Noah Blake, 1805*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.

The Jolson Story (film). Columbia Pictures, 1946.