



NEWS

Why Teenagers Are Growing Up So Slowly Today

BY **PO BRONSON** ON 11/5/09 AT 8:59 PM EST



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Here's a Twilight Zone-type premise for you. What if surgeons never got to work on humans, they were instead just endlessly in training, cutting up cadavers? What if the same went for all adults – we only got to practice at simulated versions of our jobs? Lawyers only got to argue mock cases, for years and years. Plumbers only got to fix fake leaks in classrooms. Teachers only got to teach to videocameras, endlessly rehearsing for some far off future. Book writers like me never saw our work put out to the public – our novels sat in drawers. Scientists never got to do original experiments; they only got to recreate scientific experiments of yesteryear. And so on.

Rather quickly, all meaning would vanish from our work. Even if we enjoyed the activity of our job, intrinsically, it would rapidly lose depth and relevance. It'd lose purpose. We'd become bored, lethargic, and disengaged.

In other words, we'd turn into teenagers.



This is the metaphorical vision of adolescent life Dr. Joe Allen paints in his insightful new book, *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*, coauthored with his wife, Dr. Claudia Worrell Allen.

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Allen has concluded that our urge to protect teenagers from real life – because we don't think they're ready yet – has tragically backfired. By insulating them from adult-like work, adult social relationships, and adult consequences, we have only delayed their development. We have made it harder for them to grow up. Maybe even made it impossible to grow up on time.

Basically, we long ago decided that teens ought to be in school, not in the labor force. Education was their future. But the structure of schools is endlessly repetitive. "From a Martian's perspective, high schools look virtually the same as sixth grade," said Allen. "There's no recognition, in the structure of school, that these are very different people with different capabilities." Strapped to desks for 13+ years, school becomes both incredibly monotonous, artificial, and cookie-cutter.

As Allen writes, "We place kids in schools together with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of other kids typically from similar economic and cultural backgrounds. We group them all within a year or so of one another in age. We equip them with similar gadgets, expose them to the same TV shows, lessons, and sports. We ask them all to take almost the exact same courses and do the exact same work and be graded relative to one another. We give them only a handful of ways in which they can meaningfully demonstrate their competencies. And then we're surprised they have some difficulty establishing a sense of their own individuality."

And we wonder why it's taking so long for them to mature. The old explanation used to be they needed time for the wave of raging hormones to dissipate (more on this tomorrow). The newer explanation is that their brains simply aren't developed yet: their prefrontal cortex hasn't converted from gray matter to white matter, their amygdalas have a surfeit of oxytocin receptors, and their reward centers have a paucity of dopamine receptors. Few can say for sure yet how these anatomical features actually interact and create modern teenagers, but the gist of it is quite simple – until their brains are finished, they're not ready for real life.

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"Most parents will tell you that this idea of the immature teen brain is one of the few notions that truly provides them comfort," says Allen. "They feel like it gets them off the hook – that it's biological, not a fault of parenting." But Allen speculates that our parenting style may indeed be causing their brains to be this way. Brains of teens a hundred years ago might have been far more mature. Without painful real-life experiences, modern teens' brains never learn to tell the difference between what they should fear and what they shouldn't. Without real consequences and real rewards, teens never learn to distinguish between good risks they should take and bad risks they shouldn't. "We park kids on the sidelines, thinking their brains will develop if we just wait, let time pass, as if all they need is more prep courses, lessons, and enrichment courses. They need real stress and challenges."

As for the risk behavior we associate with adolescence, Allen cautions that "We don't give teens enough ways to take risks that are productive." So they turn to drinking, drug use, delinquency, and the like – because those are the only things thrilling. "According to Allen, teens aren't naturally passive – their environment makes them passive. We're writing them off at exactly the time we need to bring out their potential.

Allen came to this perspective partly from his scholarly research on teens, which we've written about before, and partly from his clinical practice with individual teens. His book tells the stories of a dozen patients who came to him in trouble. At first, these teens all manifested their problems differently, and seemed to have different symptoms. Sam was uncommunicative, unwilling to ever talk (she was forced to see Allen by the rules of her group home). Perry was a high-achieving boy who became an anorexic. Tim was pushing himself to success, when suddenly he dropped out to draw comic books. Tonya was a small, shy student on path to get pregnant and drop out, like her sister.

But what helped all these kids – Sam, Perry, Tim and Tonya – was a taste of real life. They found a way to do something meaningful in real life, interacting with adults, outside the realm of the high school artificial bubble, and outside the hovering control of their parents. For some, it was volunteering at organizations that really needed their help – where they felt they were making a real contribution. For others it was tutoring younger kids. For others, exploring a passion without regard to its value to their college application. Or it could be a job (not a McJob) where they interacted with adults. A little went a long way.

I hear often from parents whose teenagers are disengaged or withdrawn. They have a hard time caring what other kids think, or what society expects of them. They're having a hard time playing the game of resume-building for a far-off future. Now I have the perfect book to recommend: *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*.

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The U.S. Intelligence Community still doesn't have a definitive conclusion for how the COVID-19 pandemic began and there are a number of questions that have to be answered.



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Hospital Removes Paper Angels for Deceased COVID Patients as Toll Increases

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