

"Being 13"--*TIME* Takes a Look at the New Adolescents

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"What does it mean to be 13, back stage adults, watching on tiptoe, waiting to go onstage?" That question sent *TIME* Magazine and a team of its reporters into an extended investigation of the lives of America's youngest teenagers--contemporary 13-year-olds. The magazine's report will at times shock, inform, and interest America's parents and all others concerned with the nation's young.

The age of 13 has always held a special and symbolic significance. In many traditions, reaching age 13 represents something like an initiation into the world of adulthood. At the same time, any sane parent recognizes that a 13-year-old boy or girl is more child than adult. What's going on here?

TIME gets right to the heart of the issue. In the magazine's cover story, "Being 13," reporter Nancy Gibbs suggests that the age of 13 is about magic, mystery, sexuality, innocence, and a host of other conflicting experiences. As she explains, the 13th year "is the age of childhood leaning forward and adulthood holding back, when the world gets suddenly closer, the colors more vivid, the rules subject to never-ending argument."

Of course, 13-year-olds present an almost unprecedented array of diverse personalities and varying levels of maturity. Just listen to Gibbs' way of describing this diversity: "Ask 13-year-olds what they want for their birthday, and the answers range from a puppy to a laptop to getting their bellybutton pierced to 'my girlfriend's virginity.'" While teenagers delight in shocking and offending their parents, the reality is that many of these teenagers are involved in activities and lifestyles that would truly shock and alarm their parents. Growing up in a culture of overt sexuality and constant erotic stimulation, these children entered puberty just as the society decided to lose its mind over issues of sex.

Gibbs is certainly on to something here. "Thirteen-year-olds have more power than discipline, more weapons than shields," she observes. "They demand more respect from their parents and show them less." She suggests that the Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA] "understood the nature of the age when it invented the PG rating--parental guidance suggested--as though it knew that from here on, parents can guide, they can suggest, but kids are making more decisions, taking fewer orders."

In many families, this is undoubtedly true. Anyone who works with teenagers knows that many are simply under-parented and under-supervised. Whether because of exhaustion or a misunderstanding of the age, many parents seem to assume that, even as their children reach age 13, they are ready to face the world on their own, more or less.

TIME and its team of reporters conducted a massive research project based on a survey of 501 thirteen-year-olds. They found that this generation seems to be almost uniquely pessimistic about the future. Almost half believe that when they reach their parents' age, the country will be a worse place to live than it is now. The vast majority said that being a teenager is harder now than it was for their parents. As Gibbs observes, "It's fair to ask whether any teenage generation has ever thought otherwise, but every age has new anxieties." Indeed, surveys indicate that this generation of 13-year-olds is considerably more pessimistic than those who reached the same age just five or ten years ago.

We should keep in mind that this generation of 13-year-olds is old enough to remember the shock and horror of September 11, 2001, much like previous generations of older children and young

teenagers came to moral awareness and an understanding of the world in the context of Pearl Harbor, Vietnam, Watergate, or similar national crises.

There is good news as well--some of it quite surprising. Many readers would be fascinated to know that 53 percent of the 13-year-olds surveyed indicated that they had "excellent" relationships with their parents. By the same percentage, the kids indicated that their parents are "very involved" in their lives, knowing "just about everything that goes on." In other words, just over half of these teenagers report that they have actively engaged parents with whom they have very satisfactory relationships. That is profoundly good news.

On the other hand, that leaves just under half reporting less satisfactory relationships and less--sometimes much less--parental involvement in their lives. Only seven percent of the 13-year-olds indicated that their parents are "much too strict," and exactly 50 percent believe their parents to be "a little too strict."

When it comes to dating and sex, only 30 percent reported a belief that teenagers 13 and under should be involved in dating relationships. As a matter of fact, the majority of these teenagers offered responses that indicate a rather conventional and traditional sexual morality. Fully 60 percent believe that a couple should wait until marriage to have sex. Nevertheless, the definition of what "sex" means may be open to interpretation among some young teenagers.

TIME offers what amounts to a series of articles and special features related to their cover story. The magazine and its reporters consider what age 13 means in terms of education, entertainment, consumer preferences, and spirituality. Beyond this, the magazine also acknowledges that basic physiological changes appear to mean that today's 13-year-olds are physically advanced--in terms of both physical size and sexual maturation--than previous generations. If that is not scary enough, the magazine also acknowledges that "teens are growing up in a culture that sexualizes children and immerses them in adult images."

TIME's cover story and related features should remind Christian parents that 13-year-olds are more child than adult. Nevertheless, a child's arrival at age 13 announces to parents that their hardest work now lies immediately ahead--and that time is running out for the kind of parental involvement, oversight, discipline, and encouragement that young teenagers desperately need.

The cultural invention of adolescence is something unique to our times. In previous generations, 13-year-olds might well be getting ready for marriage, even as many would already be involved in the workforce. Today's parents must understand that young adolescents need more--not less--parental time and attention. With the advent of adolescence comes the capacity for abstract thinking and a host of related anxieties, fantasies, and issues. For the first time, these young adolescents are able to imagine different lives, different beliefs, and different realities than the ones they have always known. It is an age of unusual vulnerability, even as it is also an age of incredible wonder, imagination, and promise.

I read *TIME's* cover story with something more than remote detachment. For me and my wife, this means more than cultural observation. We have a 13-year-old son who is a living, breathing, and constantly exhilarating reminder of what age 13 really means. This age represents a season of both promise and danger, and God expects parents to be up to the challenge. When I get home, I'm going to give my son an especially tight hug--and watch him like a hawk.

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