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# Adolescence: Fact or Fiction?

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## **Abstract**

Adolescence is a relatively new concept that has not been re-evaluated since its beginnings. In order to understand how society's expectations of those in that life stage has changed, both fictional and non-fictional media were referenced, mainly in the form of novels, memoirs, and TV shows/movies. The aim of this paper is to examine how and if the function of adolescence has changed since its conception. And if so, how the change has affected adolescents. My research suggests that since the idea of adolescence was first conceived, its meaning has morphed over time, along with the rest of society. While it was first meant as a transition period between childhood and adulthood, it has turned into a form of quasi-adulthood, which, I believe, is partially to blame for the rise in mental health issues among adolescents. Without adding on societal pressures and unrealistic expectations, adolescence is already hard enough on its own. Biologically, it is a time when young adults are trying to figure who they want to be and what they want to stand for while also experiencing immense physical and hormonal changes. By recognizing this, we can work to reform our present version of adolescence so that it is less harmful and aids in a person's development.

*Keywords:* Adolescence, Anxiety, Mental Stress

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## **The First Section**

In the Western World, there is what seems to be a fascination with adolescence. Given that the concept of adolescence is quite new in the overall existence of the human race, that makes sense. Before the 1800s, adolescence did not exist, and before 1940, no studies had been done on it (The Invention of Adolescence). Adolescence only came about 200 years ago because there was finally room for it in society, but in the grand scheme of things, it is still very new and everchanging.

In many ways, adolescence is society's new and shiny toy. A transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, it begins at the same time as puberty, generally around the age of 12, and ends between 18 and 21 (depending on the definition you're looking at). It is also important to note that in 1850, puberty usually began around the age of 17, which means that if puberty equals the beginning of adulthood, then most people nowadays would still be in middle school at that time (The Invention of Adolescence).

As time has progressed, expectations of adolescents have risen to a point which nearly eradicates the idea of what that stage of life is meant to be; many times, the role of parent and child are reversed and adolescents are expected to solve all the world's problems. By having such high expectations of adolescents, we have forced them into a glorified version of adulthood which asks a great deal of them while granting little autonomy to a person. I believe these expectations have led to an increase in mental health disorders, namely anxiety and depression, among this age group.

I performed my research on adolescence through all forms of media and by reading data about the psychological state of adolescents in today's world. For my research, I was interested not only in how adolescence has changed, but how it is portrayed in both fictional and true stories. Media works as a mirror for society, reflecting back to the world what it looks like and

how it is functioning. In addition, media influences people's behavior, which is why looking at fictional portrayals of adolescence was my main focus.

Media often portrays adolescents as mini adults—they are equipped to solve the world's problems but can't live on their own and are not allowed to vote. So, what is that telling the adolescents of today? That they should stand up for what's right? Maybe. But then in real life, they are often being told, implicitly or explicitly, that “children are to be seen and not heard.” That only adds to the confusion, because they're being referred to and treated as children, but are still somehow expected to behave as if they are full-fledged adults.

For many teens today, adolescence includes working a job, playing a sport, and excelling in academics to get into a good college to ensure their bright futures. But it all comes at a cost. Anxiety and mood disorders have been on the rise for the past few decades, which indicates to me a need to restructure the societal pressures and expectations of adolescence.

In the popular Netflix show, *Sex Education*, many of these themes, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are explored. The main character of the show is Otis Milburn, a child of two divorced sex therapists. Otis lives with his mother, who lacks boundaries at times, which exposes him to a lot of her work. With the “expertise” that he has gained over the years from listening to her speak about her work, Otis accidentally helps a classmate experiencing “performance anxiety” by getting to the root of where that anxiety comes from. While essentially therapizing his peer, Otis is accompanied by Maeve Wiley, his grade's resident enigma and pariah. Some people find out that Otis was able to help with his classmate's sex problems and seek him out for similar advice. At first, Otis is not keen on the idea, but Maeve sees it as a lucrative business opportunity and convinces Otis to run a “sex clinic” with her. While Otis takes on the role of a

full-fledged adult by providing counseling on various sexual conundrums, Maeve runs the business side of the clinic, setting up appointments and taking care of the finances.

For Otis, the sex clinic is essentially a hobby, but for Maeve, it is how she keeps her heat and lights on; Maeve does not run the clinic as a way to make money on the side so she can afford frivolous things. Instead, she does so because she is the only person in her life upon whom she can depend. With two absent parents, Maeve lives on her own in a trailer, supporting herself financially, while also excelling in school. In the middle of her adolescence, Maeve has no one to care for her but herself, forcing her to function as an adult, yet the world around her still treats her like a naïve child.

Another prime example of the portrayal of adolescence is Bianca Piper, the protagonist in *The DUFF* by Kody Keplinger. At first glance, Bianca lives a relatively uneventful life. In actuality, however, Bianca lives at home with her father as her mother travels the country as a motivational speaker, which puts strain on both her and her father. Bianca's mother is absent the majority of the time, attempting to run from her own demons. When she finally does come home about halfway through the novel, Bianca ends up playing the role of the parent by giving her a pep talk so that she will go speak to Bianca's father about the divorce she is asking for. What she does not mention to her mother until much later, however, is that she has also been playing the role of the parent to her father.

Bianca knows that her father is a recovering alcoholic, but she does not experience what is like to see him drunk until he receives the aforementioned divorce papers because he has been sober for nearly her entire life. After receiving the papers, Mr. Piper drinks to the point of inebriation and makes a mess in the house, including breaking the empty alcohol bottle and leaving the shattered pieces on the floor. Mr. Piper does all this while Bianca is out of the house,

but when she returns home the next morning, she finds the mess he left and cleans it up. She tells no one what happened, nor does she mention it to her father. Like a parent covering for their child's mistakes, Bianca covers for her father.

Perhaps what is most glaring about *The DUFF* is that while still an adolescent herself, Keplinger wrote this story about a 17-year-old high school student. As a high school student, Keplinger concocted this very realistic story that reflected the world around her.

Another novel about adolescents, written by an adolescent, is *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. In Hinton's novel, Ponyboy lives in a world with virtually no adult supervision; his parents are both deceased, leaving him under the care of his two older, teenage brothers. Ponyboy's living circumstances—and the general cards dealt to him in life—force him to grow up faster than he likely would have otherwise. Early on in the story, Ponyboy and Johnny go to a neighborhood park where they run into the Socs, the rival gang of the Greasers, to which they belong. A Soc named Bob tries to drown Ponyboy, prompting Johnny to stab Bob in order to save Ponyboy's life. Since the boys live in an unforgiving world, Johnny and Ponyboy expect the worst in punishments from the law and decide to go on the run with the help of one of the older Greasers, Dally.

After hiding in a church for some time, Dally comes to check on Ponyboy and Johnny and treats them to a proper meal. When they get back to the church, the boys see that the church they were squatting in is on fire. Ponyboy immediately turns to Johnny and says, "I bet we started it" (Hinton 70). When Ponyboy learns that there are children in the church, he runs into the burning building with no hesitation, because whether or not the fire is his and Johnny's fault, he feels a responsibility to be the hero—to be the *man* the Greasers taught him to be—never mind whether any actual adults are present (Hinton 70). In fact, what might be most interesting,

is that Jerry, one of the adults in charge of the school children, does not attempt to go into the church until after he hears Ponyboy say that he will run in to rescue them (Hinton 70). Fate grabs hold of the situation, though, and prevents Jerry from getting into the Church. Ponyboy is only at the tender age of 14, yet, with no oxygen mask or protective clothing, he runs in as if he can handle anything and come out unharmed—as if he is superhuman, completely invincible. The notion of invincibility is quite common for adolescents; however, it is extremely untrue. Despite this glaringly obvious fact, not a single adult tries to stop Ponyboy or Johnny, telling them to wait for the professionals, who are actual adults.

Hinton loosely based her novel off of the town she grew up in, making her story much closer to reality than most people would probably like to admit. *The Outsiders* was released in 1967, yet 53 years later, the book is still read regularly, and not just because it is considered a classic. Hinton was able to recognize the incredible pressures on adolescents during their high school years, which still remain today.

In the world of fantasy, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reigns supreme as TV show which portrays the adolescent experience in very real ways. As a high school student, Buffy Summers is the latest of fate's "chosen one" among a line of vampire slayers. In the pilot episode, Buffy, along with her mother, moves to Sunnydale after getting expelled from her previous high school. The reason for her expulsion was the direct result of her burning down the school gym, which was actually a heroic act on her behalf to slay multiple vampires, but she cannot tell that to her principal—it would sound preposterous.

Within her first few days in Sunnydale, Buffy learns that she has moved to a Hellmouth, which means that it is essentially a town that attracts more supernatural beings than a normal town would. Living in the Hellmouth, vampires and other monsters are constantly coming after

Buffy, because they know that she is the “chosen one.” As the slayer, it is Buffy’s responsibility to protect Sunnydale and the people in it, forcing her to constantly thwarts against her life, as well as threats against the lives of those around her. During her adolescent phase, Buffy is quite literally charged with protecting the safety and fate of the world—all with very little help, and in secret. To the outside world, Buffy is a regular teen who gets into trouble, and so she is treated as a bit of a troublemaker and like a child, but in many ways, she is more of an adult than anyone else because of the protective role she plays.

A superb real-life example of the portrayals of adolescence is Jeannette Walls’ memoir, *The Glass Castle*. In the memoir, Walls tells the story of her nomadic childhood, which she sought to escape as an adolescent by educating herself enough that she could go Barnard College on scholarship. The adults in Walls’ life did not look out for her or her education the way she would have liked, not to mention the way the Western world expects, so she took it upon herself to be her own parent and her own advocate.

Between the fictional and true stories, there are endless examples of portrayals of adolescence in the media, most of which depict adolescents as adults. By seeing these examples, adolescents are essentially taught that instead of dipping their toes into the water to test out adulthood, they are must dive headfirst into the deep-end, but should not expect to have complete autonomy, because they are still children in the eyes of the law and society. The portrayals and expectations come at a cost, though: anxiety and mood disorders have been on the rise for the past few decades.

The rise in mental health issues has been a hot topic for several years, and with good reason. There was a study published in 1988 that looked at psychiatric admissions for adolescents between the years 1980 and 1984. What the study found was astounding to me:



“although the under-18 population actually declined from 1980 to 1984, adolescent admissions to private psychiatric hospitals increased—450 percent” (The Invention of Adolescence). There is often rhetoric that says we, as a society, are doing better than in centuries past because we have more technology, longer life spans, and healthcare. But something seems to be getting lost in translation in that definition of progress because the reality of life for most adolescents includes far more mental distress than in those times.

The stories that adolescents see on TV and read in books—both real and made-up—are dramatized versions of life for the average teen. Even though most people tend to know this, it is information that seems to live in the back of the mind. On the one hand, that is effective storytelling: when viewers and readers are invested in the world of a story and believe it, it is because it is a compelling story. On the other hand, however, this is the behavior that society is teaching children, adolescents, and adults alike, that being an adolescent should look something like what they see in those stories.

Fiction is likely more dangerous than non-fiction, because there is no disclaimer to tell people that that is not what a healthy life should necessarily look like. When true stories get attention, it is usually because they are out of the ordinary, which is made abundantly clear. Fiction, however, uses the fact that by definition it is not true, as its disclaimer, yet that does not seem to be enough.

Plenty of adolescents’ behaviors get chalked up to “teenage angst.” But what if that is society’s way of staying in denial about the real problem at hand? To an extent, there is truth to the angsty teen trope because it is a stage of development in which one’s hormones are going wild. Hormones have been given too much credit (The Invention of Adolescence). There must be

a point, however, at which we stop and ask, “Is this normal behavior? Or should this be concerning?”

School alone causes some of the most mental distress that adolescents experience because already-high standards continue to raise; there are still only 24 hours in a day, but adolescents continue to be asked to complete more and more within that time period—and not once in a blue moon, but regularly. Education was not always a problem, but as the period of adolescence extended, so did education, “which has created a problem entirely novel in the animal kingdom—physically mature creatures living with their parents, and for more years than sexually mature offspring ever have in the past” (The Invention of Adolescence). Adolescents naturally seek more autonomy because of their physical and mental maturation, however, the process of maturation is not complete and that is important to remember. In many homes in the Western world, it is not uncommon for parents to have high expectations of their children when it comes to school, and universities can be even worse. Is it worth it, though?

During the school year, suicide rates of students are double what they are during the parts of the year when school is not in session (Brooks). A normal school day tends to range somewhere between six and eight hours, but “when the school day is over, it hardly matters; the hours outside school are more like school than ever. Children spend afternoons, weekends, and summers in aftercare and camps while their parents work” (Brooks). These hours outside of school often translate to more work, which can include homework from school and various learning activities—it truly is not all fun and games.

What these expectations and reams of work translate to are adolescents who can feel that they have the weight of the world on their shoulders, and who can blame them? All forms of media are telling them that that is normal and to be expected. Society asks so much of

adolescents, but do not necessarily nature them in a way that also makes them feel supported. Instead of adolescence being a transition period in which the training wheels of childhood are taken off and replaced by a parent running alongside to make sure their child does not crash or fall, the training wheels come off and adolescents are expected to know how to ride a two-wheel bike with extremely little to no guidance.

So, with all of this in mind, how surprising is it, really, that rates of anxiety and mental distress continue to rise? It should not be surprising at all. Rather, it should be expected. If society expects to mentally work adolescents to the brink, society must also be prepared for adolescents to break. This is not to say that adolescents need to be treated as though they are delicate Fabergé eggs, but they still need attention. Even machines get checked regularly to make sure that they have everything they need to function optimally. Why is the same not being done regularly for adolescents?

Mental health is extremely important, but there is still stigma attached. Even still, stigma can be placed aside because the bigger problem is not even that people do not know how or are afraid to ask for help, the bigger problem is that many of these disorders could likely be avoided or have lower severity if the period of adolescence was treated with more care.

The absolute biggest problem, I believe, is that the world has grown nearly blind to this issue. With technology comes an expectation for more work to get done because it no longer takes as long to do work as it did when everything was done manually. But that is the problem. Without giving children and adolescents their childhoods back, this problem can never be fixed.

What would adolescence look like then if more care and awareness were brought to it? In the case of Buffy Summers, she would not be eligible as the “chosen one” until after she finished school. Buffy would have had time to practice normal socializing, she would have likely been

able to spend all four years of high school in one place and would have witnessed much less death. Buffy would have been able to have normal worries and hobbies, but instead she lost sleep over the safety of her loved ones, sometimes because she was actively protecting them.

If Bianca Piper had been able to perform her adolescence appropriately, someone would have been there to take care of her dad and she would have been able to focus more on herself. Mrs. Piper would have been mature enough to speak to her own husband and not made her daughter responsible for her feelings. Bianca's job should not be to take care of her parents. It should be her parents' job to help take care of her as they teach her to take care of herself.

In *Sex Education*, Maeve Wiley would also be able socialize normally, do a reasonable amount of schoolwork, and have a real support system. Instead, she must fend for herself without being given any of the respect that an adult doing the same would receive.

Adolescence *should* be a transition period between childhood and adulthood. Placing the expectations of an adult on a person who is not fully matured is not only unfair but damaging. If we continue to tell these stories and place unreasonable expectations on adolescents, gasoline will only be thrown onto the already-raging fire.

My hope is that by bringing attention to the enormous amount asked of adolescents and how it can negatively affect them, people will become more conscious of how they treat adolescents and ask what could be conceived as a reasonable rather than superhuman amount. My hope is that by raising awareness on this schools can begin to ratchet back their expectations of students because that is where some of the most harm is being done.

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