

The Invention of the Teenager

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In the 19th century,

the American world consisted of children and adults. Most Americans tried their best to allow their children to enjoy their youth while they were slowly prepared for the trials and tribulations of adulthood. Although child labor practices still existed, more and more states were passing restrictions against such exploitation. The average number of years spent in school for young Americans was also on the rise. Parents were waiting longer to goad their youngsters into marriage rather than pairing them off at the tender age of sixteen or seventeen. In short, it soon became apparent that a new stage of life — the TEENAGE phase — was becoming a reality in America. American adolescents were displaying traits unknown among children and adults. Although the word teenager did not come into use until decades later, the teenage mindset dawned in the 1920s.

From Courtship to Dating

The single greatest factor that led to the emergence of the independent teenager was the automobile. Teens enjoyed a freedom from parental supervision unknown to previous generations. The courtship process rapidly evolved into dating. In earlier times, young boys and girls spent their first dates at home. The boy would meet the girl's parents, they would have a sitting in the parlor, followed by dinner with the entire family. Later in the evening, the couple might enjoy a few moments alone on the front porch. After several meetings, they could be lucky enough to be granted permission for an unchaperoned walk through town. The automobile simply shattered these old-fashioned traditions. Dating was removed from the watchful eyes of anxious parents. Teenagers were given privacy, and a sexual revolution swept America. Experimentation with sexual behaviors before marriage became increasingly common. Young Americans were now able to look beyond their

own small towns at an enlarged dating pool.

Impact of the Automobile

Automobile technology led directly to the other major factor that fostered a teenage culture: the consolidated HIGH SCHOOL. Buses could now transport students farther from their homes, leading to the decline of the one-room schoolhouse. Furthermore, Americans were realizing the potential of a longer education, and states were adding more years to their compulsory schooling laws. As a result, a larger number of teenagers were thrown into a common space than ever before. It was only natural that discussions about commonalities would occur. Before long, schools developed their own cultural patterns, completely unlike the childhood or adult experience. School athletics and extracurricular activities only enhanced this nascent culture. The American teenager was born.

