

***A PROPOSAL TO REINVENT ADOLESCENCE:
COMBINE RITES OF PASSAGE & CITIZENSHIP
EDUCATION***

“The teen years need to be what they used to be: a time not just of learning, but of learning to be responsible adults.
~ Dr. Robert Epstein

“Remember, adolescence is not for everyone.”
~ John Harris Loflin

“Like its politicians and its war, society has the teenagers it deserves.”
~ John Boynton Priestly

“Adolescence is a structurally induced period of enforced leisure.”
~ Sullivan, from *“Getting Paid”: Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*

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**REINVENTING ADOLESCENCE:
COMBININE RITES OF PASSAGE AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

Puberty, rites of passage, and student voice: Introducing students to adulthood and citizenship

A rite of passage is a ritual that marks a change in a person's social or sexual status. Rites of passage are often ceremonies surrounding events such as childbirth, menarche or other physical changes of puberty, coming of age, weddings, and death (“Rite of passage,” 2008).

Idiocy or puberty?

Walter Parker in *Teaching Democracy* (2003) notes the Greek’s definition of “idiocy” was a state of being overly concerned with one’s own self-interests, ignoring the needs of the community, and declining to take part in public life.

To the Greeks, puberty was not limited to the process of physical changes by which a child’s body becomes an adult body capable of reproduction. *Puberty was the transition to public life.* It was a process of bringing youth into and through “puberty”—that is, to introduce them to public life, cultivating citizenship and concern for the *polis*.

Public schools: Our introduction to society and the problems of living together

Parker goes on to assert that public schools could be the first place the variety of Americans comes into contact with society in the public arena, *sharing the same space*. Schools are not private places like homes, he writes. The diversity of children in public schools runs the gamut: language, religion, ability, intelligence, color, class, gender, sexual orientation, or so-called disability. These are places where multiple perspectives and personal values are brought into face-to-face contact around matters that “are relevant to the problems of living together.” In Parker’s mind, these are mutual collective concerns, not yours or someone else’s, but “ours.” These arise in public places—places such as schools. *This, he asserts, is why public schools can, like no other place in society, nurture “puberty.”*

Introducing students to adulthood and citizenship at the same time

In “Walkabout” Maurice Gibbons (1974) explains how schools can provide the experiences needed in rites of passage from childhood to initial adulthood by a curriculum built on 5 challenge areas:

- *Adventure*: a challenge to the student’s daring, endurance, and skill in unfamiliar environments
- *Creativity*: a challenge to explore, cultivate and express imagination in some aesthetically pleasing form
- *Service*: a challenge to identify a human need for assistance and provide it; to express caring without expectation of reward
- *Practical Skill*: a challenge to explore a utilitarian activity, to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to work in that field, and to produce something of use
- *Logical Inquiry*: a challenge to one’s curiosity, to formulate a question of personal importance, and to explore an answer or solution systematically

Also, students advance through 6 stages in developing their challenge areas: (1) Teacher directed learning, (2) Incidental self-direction, (3) Independent thinking, (4) Self-managed learning, (5) Self-planned learning, and finally, (6) Self-directed learning (Gibbons, 2002).

Beginning at grade 6

At around 11 years of age, students are also introduced to both traditional and non-traditional rites of passage concepts: identity formation, the opposite sex, marriage and the family, the rights and responsibilities of adulthood, and in areas regarding religious, spiritual, and philosophical questions. Ideas and plans fulfilling the 5 challenge areas, guided by the 6 development stages, would begin (Isenberg, 1997; Beem, Crispin & Metzger, 2003).

Such activities as understanding the progressive stages of development with respect to the body, dealing with fear or pain, along with scenarios that are a part of the physical, psychological, and social challenges associated with the Outward Bound concept are implemented.

Along the way forward to 7th and 8th grade, students learn and practice the democratic habits of mind and heart such as how to listen, deliberate, research, determine what's fair, run meetings, and partake in actual classroom/school decision-making processes. .

Student government could be based on direct democracy. Students would also learn citizenship and politics: governmental processes, political parties, community service and change, and social justice issues through study and an actual civic engagement projects.

Finishing 8th grade would represent entering high school, adulthood, and civic life

Eighth grade graduation would signify a student passed all courses, progressively became more independent in meeting the demands of their challenges areas, more comfortable with their body and its feelings/emotions, and learned and successfully practiced the language and habits of democracy inside and outside of school. This “initiation” would introduce them to the community (*polis*) as “novice” citizens.

Reinventing adolescence for the 21st century

The adolescent is a European social construct indirectly created when James Watt's 1760s invention of the steam engine (Musgrove, 1964) made it economically and socially necessary (Gillis, 1974).

G. Stanley Hall Americanized the concept of adolescence in the early 1900s. His middle-class concept seeking to throttle precociousness, while protecting children from adults, was based on middle-class fear of immigrants and urbanization (Kett, 1977). It was no coincidence that adolescence and high school, which Hine (1999) describes as “custodial institutions for the young” were created at the same time.

After WW II, came the phenomenon of the “teenager” and a teen subculture with its own behavior, music, language, dress, and values. Young people became teenagers because we had nothing better for them to do. In the 50s, America began seeing them not as productive persons, but as gullible consumers.

Thus adolescence, this “...structurally induced period of enforced leisure...” (Sullivan, 1990), has widened to age 10 and up to 30 (Unte, 1996). Younger kids are now acting older, while those physically grown wish to extend adolescence, thus postponing adulthood (Bly, 1996).

If adolescence was invented, it can be reinvented (Loflin, 1993)

Indeed, many youth may need an extended period of dependence and leaving home later to prepare for a career. While an affluent society can afford an artificially prolonged (Psychology Today, 1980) adolescence, there is no reason why it should (Sowell, 1987). Most youth seem “stuck” in adolescence, vacillating between dependence and independence. Others must assume adult roles at home: helping the family survive by taking on jobs or doing housework, and/or “parenting” siblings.

Rites of passage get rid of “adolescence”: Moving on to adulthood--one way or the other

Socially sanctioned rites in America such as Bar/Mat Mitzvah, confirmation, Quinceañera, acquiring a driver’s license, paying adult admission fees, or marriage signify the beginning of adult freedoms and responsibilities.

Yet, for most youth, society does not provide socially approved ceremonies and consequently youth, who must show themselves and others they are not children anymore, create their own. Unsanctioned “rites” such as consuming alcohol/nicotine/drugs, shoplifting, dropping out of school, having sexual intercourse, becoming a teen mother or father, joining a gang/getting jumped, taking death-defying chances (Ponton, 1997), or going to jail and making it through may not bring official/legal adult status, but do signify the end of childhood on the street. The issue is these acts are anti-social and dangerous for the person and everyone else—and *would not be necessary if America provided, at the minimum, the same opportunity so-called primitive societies do for their coming-of-age youth through their rites of passage ordeals and ceremonies.*

From a dysfunctional to a democratic adolescence

Robert Epstein in his book, *The Case against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (2007), believes that adolescence as it is known is dysfunctional. American teenagers are highly capable—in some way more so than adults—but are “infantilized” by how they are portrayed in the media and treated by public institutions, especially high school. He suggests society can “rediscover the adult in every teen” by giving young people adult authority and responsibility as soon as they can demonstrate readiness.

This implies society must provide a variety of ways youth can do this “demonstrating.” After puberty, America must offer a variety of socially sanctioned ways to adulthood beyond traditional ceremonies. Having very well thought out pathways that regard all the physical, psychological, social, political and spiritual questions, needs, and experiences youth have, allowing them to assume adult status at 14, 15, 16, or 17 would eliminate the necessity of a prolonged adolescence and anti-social rites of passage.

Epstein’s research provides criteria for adult readiness in 14 domains. See the Epstein-Dumas Test of Adulthood at www.drrobertepstein.com/EDTA-unabridged or <http://www.howadultareyou.com/>

At the Roots Activity Center in Washington, DC, after 8th grade graduation, youth are put into apprenticeship programs for those Director Dr. Bernida Thompson says “...who don’t have the patience, interest, temperament, or circumstances to stay in high school for 4 years” (B. Thompson, personal communication, July 13, 1998). One year later, at the end of what would traditionally be 9th grade, if students pass their apprenticeship and GED, they are graduated. They may go into entry-level positions or pursue further education.

The current Middle-College High School concept provides another avenue to post-high school status while being in high school. See www.middlecollege.org

In conclusion: Adolescence is not for everybody

Epstein (2007) argues that adolescence is an unnecessary period of life that society is better off without. His theory shows that teen turmoil is caused by outmoded systems put into place a century ago which destroyed the continuum between childhood and adulthood--leaving youth isolated from adults, while learning everything from their media-dominated peers.

Allen & Allen (2009) in their book, *Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old* agree with Epstein. They argue that adolescents are actually two people in one--a regressed child and an emergent adult. For too long they say, parents and experts alike have concentrated on the former to the detriment of the latter. Thankfully, the Allens have refocused attention back to what matters most for teenagers today--the emergent adult they are striving to become.

America must lead the industrialized nations, where the social invention of adolescence is the most relevant, in showing all of its youth that society cares. We cannot continue to let youth, by default, grow up alone in their self-developed, self-regulated subculture menagerie which was situated over 100 years ago.

What is problematic, currently, American society treats adolescence as though it has always existed, written in stone, and natural. The adolescent is not natural. *Adolescence is not for everyone.*

The alienation, horrible peer pressure, bullying, depression, suicide, and the appeal of gang initiation alone are enough reasons to abandon this well meaning, but misguided invention. Puberty is natural, but what happens after this biology depends on society--a society that has the power to re-invent the current one-size-fits-all transitions and “personalize” adolescence.

Dr. Epstein (p. 375) puts it this way, “The teen years need to be what they used to be: a time not just of learning, but of learning to be responsible adults.”

To get more information go to “REINVENTING ADOLESCENCE” at www.vorcreatex.com. For a comprehensive review of rites of passage, see the 450 page *Crossroads: The quest for contemporary rites of passage* by editors Louise Madhi, Nancy Christopher, and Michael Mead published in 1996 by Carus Publisher. A comprehensive international perspective is given by editor Klaus Hurrelmann’s 466 page *International Handbook on Adolescence* published in 1994 by Greenwood Press.

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