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# A World without Adolescents

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## A World without Adolescents

Robert Epstein, *The case against adolescence: Rediscovering the adult in every teen*, Quill Driver Books, Sanger, CA (2007) ISBN: 978-1884956-70-6 (cloth), 490 pp., \$24.95.

Roger J. R. Levesque, *Adolescents, media, and the law: What developmental science reveals and free speech requires*, Oxford University Press, New York (2007) ISBN: 978-0-19-532044-2 (cloth), 345 pp., \$65.

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Robert Epstein believes American teens are in chaos. They drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, abuse a variety of other drugs, have eating disorders, contract sexual diseases, and get pregnant. They carry weapons, join gangs, and commit all manner of crimes. They partake of a mindless peer culture. They are angry, violent, depressed, and suicidal. Not all of them, of course. But disproportionately, Epstein argues, compared to other age groups, other societies, and previous periods of history, American adolescents are in turmoil and out of control. We'd all be better off, he maintains, in a world without adolescents.

This part of the argument might lead one to picture Epstein as a grumpy old guy who hates adolescents, but in fact Epstein believes that teens themselves would be better off if we didn't classify them as adolescents. What Epstein decries is not *adolescents* but *adolescence*, the cultural construction that produces people like those described above. Epstein lauds the competence and defends the rights of teenagers—that is, people who are numerically in their teen years (13–19). The problem with adolescents, he insists, is that they are capable people who are treated as if they were children. The cultural construct of adolescence, Epstein argues, must be dismantled in its entirety. If his mission succeeds, there will be a world without adolescence, and thus without adolescents, because those we now classify as adolescent will simply be young adults.

This, Epstein reminds us, would be nothing new. On the contrary, most teens in most societies for most of human history have been deemed adults, albeit young ones. In Judaism, for example, the Bar Mitzvah has for many centuries marked 13 years as the age when a boy becomes a man, with full rights and responsibilities. The current conception of adolescence as an extension of childhood, increasingly taken for granted around the world, evolved around the turn of the 20th century and was famously defined and delineated in G. Stanley Hall's (1904) magnum opus, *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion, and education*. Since then, we have come to see adolescents as children, subject to an extraordinary variety of parental and governmental decisions that would constitute major infringements on their legal rights if they were adults. They are forced to go to school even if they find it useless, are severely restricted in taking jobs for which they are competent, and are prevented from taking control of their lives through multiple restrictions on their liberty, privacy, and autonomy.

Notwithstanding their social demotion, Epstein argues, adolescents are generally capable thinkers, or at least no less capable than those we deem adults, who are far from perfect. They can be creative, tough, loving, and responsible. Of course they often fall short of these ideals, but so do people of all ages. With regard to basic information processing capacities, they are reaching the human pinnacle, after which it is downhill all the way through adulthood. Appealing to Piaget's conception of formal operational reasoning, which can be seen about age 11 or 12, Epstein concludes that there is no basis in cognitive or developmental psychology for positing a stage of maturity beyond what is achieved in the early teens.

Should teens, then, be free to do as they please? Of course not, replies Epstein. Nobody has such freedom. We all live within social networks that encompass a variety of expectations, responsibilities, entitlements, and liberties, including basic rights of personhood recognized by the state. Teens would be better off if they were fully integrated into multigenerational social networks rather than marginalized within oppressive secondary schools and an artificial adolescent culture. They should exercise the same rights and be subject to the same constraints as adults of all ages.

Take driving, for example. Can anyone drive a car? No. The right to drive is and should remain contingent on demonstrating the necessary knowledge and skills to get a license and on maintaining a satisfactory record as a driver. Those who meet and maintain these standards should be permitted to drive regardless of age; those who do not should be deemed too great a danger behind the wheel, regardless of age. More generally, says Epstein, we should eliminate age requirements and replace them with competency requirements as a matter of law and social policy.

In summary, Epstein's argument is this: Teen problems result from the fact that, since the turn of the 20th century, we have been treating them as children; the solution is to recognize them as adults. We need a new conceptualization of teenagers, or rather a return to the historic conceptualization.

One difficulty for Epstein's argument is that research on adolescents, including American adolescents, shows that most of them are doing just fine, thank you very much, though of course people of all ages, including adolescents, have problems. Positive findings about adolescent behavior, relationships, and development have been sufficiently consistent to lead to a general debunking of the stereotypical storm-and-stress view of adolescence. On the other hand, research on conflict with parents, mood disruption, and risk behavior does show age trends and cultural differences consistent with Epstein's claims (Arnett, 1999). Even if Epstein overstates his case, he may be right that American teens have problems specific to adolescence. He may also be right that these problems are due, at least in part, to their infantilization since the rise of the concept of adolescence around the turn of the 20th century. Contrary to biological and psychoanalytic views of the early 20th century, adolescent difficulties probably have more to do with their peculiar social status than with anything intrinsic to the teen years.

A second problem with Epstein's argument, which also turns out to be minor, is the uncritical reliance on Piaget's classic 1950s stage analysis as a general conception of cognitive development. Research on problem solving, decision making, judgment, inference, inquiry, self-regulation, metacognition, argumentation, and epistemic cognition over the past 40 years has provided a more differentiated and complex picture of advanced cognition that undermines traditional views of cognitive development as a sequence of general and universal stages (Jacobs and Klaczynski, 2005; Kuhn, 2005; Moshman, 2005a). Epstein provides snippets of research supporting his view of adolescent competence but fails to acknowledge the nature and scope of current research.

A more systematic overview, however, largely confirms the general picture Epstein presents. Research on cognitive development beyond childhood supports Piaget, and thus Epstein, on three crucial points: (1) about age 11 or 12 most people begin to show formal operational competencies that are rarely seen in younger children; (2) these competencies are inconsistently applied even by adults; and (3) no higher level of development is generally achieved (Moshman, 2005a). This is not to say that 12 year olds are mature or that there is no development beyond childhood. The point is that cognitive development beyond childhood proceeds at differing rates in multiple directions such that, beyond about age 12, age rapidly becomes useless as a predictor of competence or behavior. If you want to know about someone's reasoning and judgment you have to know about that person as an individual.

Epstein recommends sweeping revisions of laws, social institutions, and cultural expectations to recognize the full personhood and associated rights of adolescents. He seems unjustifiably sanguine, however, about the efficacy and fairness of testing as a general basis for determining who can do what. The driver's license paradigm may not work in other areas. Some 14 year olds follow political issues more closely than many adults and have well-informed political preferences, whereas many individuals in their 20s, 40s, or 60s have little knowledge of or interest in political matters. But Epstein's proposal to base voting rights on passing a competency exam raises serious constitutional, ethical, technical, and practical questions. Can we really measure the competence to vote in a psychometrically valid and politically neutral way? Even if we could, would it be constitutional to make the right to vote contingent on passing such a test? Wouldn't there inevitably be charges of discrimination based on demographic patterns in the test results? At least with regard to voting and other fundamental rights, it may be better to set the age of full personhood at the end of childhood, about age 12, rather than attempt individualized assessments of adults.

These critiques and suggestions do not detract from what I take to be Epstein's key point: Teenagers should be deemed to be adults, albeit young ones, and treated as such by those around them and by social institutions at all levels. There is no need for a special category of "adolescents" and no need for the corresponding concept of "adolescence," except as a reminder of the pathological phenomena observed in teenagers when we treat them as children.

And now, a riddle: What would you get if you took Epstein's sprawling and lively defense of teens and transformed it into a systematic, academic, multi-volume, up-to-date scholarly review and analysis of adolescence in connection with, to paraphrase Hall (1904), its psychology and its relations to law, media, sex, crime, religion, and education? The answer is a series of volumes published over the past decade by Levesque (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). Not knowing either author, I cannot rule out the possibility that "Levesque" is Epstein's academic pen name or, alternatively, that "Epstein" is Levesque's popular *nom de plume*.

Throughout his work, Levesque provides far more detail and nuance than Epstein, as would be expected by his academic audience, but the conclusions he reaches, if somewhat less radical, are much the same (see also Hine, 1999). In *Adolescents, media, and the law*, in particular, he provides detailed reviews of media effects in relation to adolescent aggression, body image, smoking, and sexuality. His conclusion is that media influence everything but determine nothing. Adolescent behavior and development are deeply and thoroughly influenced by the media within which they are immersed but particular experiences do not cause particular results. Adolescents, Levesque concludes, are active agents working their way through a maze of media. We can best help them not by picking out what shouldn't be allowed to impinge on their allegedly innocent young minds but rather by promoting their ability to engage with media productively.

Levesque then analyzes the bases for free speech in U. S. First Amendment law. Case law since the 1920s has recognized at least three major justifications for freedom of expression. First, freedoms of speech and press are necessary to the functioning of democratic government. Second, intellectual freedom within the marketplace of ideas is central for intellectual and social progress. And third, freedom to express one's beliefs and identity are central to human dig-

nity and development. Without claiming any equivalence between adolescents and adults, Levesque notes that civic engagement, participation in the market of ideas, and expression of one's emerging beliefs and identity are all at least as important for adolescents as for anyone else. Developmental considerations, he concludes, reinforce constitutional considerations in mandating the protection of intellectual freedom for adolescents (see also Moshman, 2005a, and books reviewed in Moshman, 2005b).

Current law provides some support for this view of adolescents as persons with rights, but also, as Levesque acknowledges, many counterexamples (Moshman, in press). Good precedents exist for future decisions recognizing the importance of free speech to adolescent development, but there are all too many bad precedents that provide diverse rationalizations for governmental control. Regarding adolescent access to media, Levesque concludes that we should rely neither on government censorship, which is unjustified and counterproductive, nor on parental control, which is futile beyond childhood. Rather, he highlights the promotion of media literacy among adolescents as part of a general concern for their development.

Levesque seems less inclined than Epstein to abolish the category of adolescence but no less concerned about the unjustified and harmful restrictions we impose on teens. Of course Epstein and Levesque are well aware that there will be resistance to reconceptualizations of adolescence. We have long forgotten how teenagers behaved in a world in which teenage rights and responsibilities were taken for granted. Common sense notions of adolescent irrationality are reinforced by legal conceptions of adolescents as minors, parental conceptions of adolescents as children, cultural conceptions of adolescents as trouble, and loose talk of adolescent brains.

Levesque's massive reviews remind us that adolescents are active agents navigating complex informational and social environments, not passive recipients of bad ideas. We should assist them by supporting and promoting their dynamic self-determination; we undermine this goal when we restrict them on the basis of their alleged immaturity. This cautious, research-based conclusion falls not far short of Epstein's more radical call to save adolescents from adolescence by (re)creating a world in which teenagers are simply young adults.

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