

What Does It Mean to Be 13?

By Nancy Gibbs

What does it mean to be 13, backstage adults, watching on tiptoe, waiting to go onstage? Some things about this age of change are unchanging. If childhood is about magic, 13 introduces mystery: Joan of Arc began hearing celestial voices when she was 13. Into the age of innocence, 13 brings sexuality: early versions of the Little Red Riding Hood story were tales of seduction in which her cape was a symbol of menstruation. Shakespeare's Juliet was 13, unready for love perhaps but, by the standards of her age, more than ready for marriage. Tom Sawyer is thought to have been 13 when he got "engaged" to Becky Thatcher. It is an age of prodigy: Anne Frank received her diary as a present on her 13th birthday; Bobby Fischer was 13 when he became the youngest player ever to win the U.S. Junior Chess Championship--within two years he was an international grand master. It 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.

Ask 13-year-olds what they want for their birthday, and the answers range from a puppy to a laptop to getting their belly button pierced to "my girlfriend's virginity." New ballet slippers. My own room. Cash. Thirteen-year-olds have more power than discipline, more weapons than shields. They demand more respect from their parents and show them less. The Motion Picture Association of America 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. They have absorbed the family's values because the years of Total Parental Control are coming to an end.

TIME set out to study what life at 13 is like in 2005, what has changed and what hasn't, what helps 13-year-olds and what haunts them--and where they see themselves headed. In a TIME poll of this age group, in which 501 were surveyed online, two-thirds said being a teenager is harder for them than it was for their parents. It's fair to ask whether any teenage generation has ever thought otherwise, but every age has new anxieties. In a shift from just five years ago, when the new-millennial teens were generally optimistic about the future, years of war and terrorism have left their mark. Almost half, or 46%, believe that by the time they are their parents' age, the U.S. will be a worse place to live in than it is now. In their responses, the fears and pressures and appetites seep through, as does the gap between how their parents see them and how they perceive themselves. That may be the one aspect of 13-year-old life that never changes. It's tricky even to talk about teenagers before 1941, when the term is believed to have first appeared in print (in an article in *Popular Science Monthly*). Our notions of childhood are relatively recent innovations, and when parents lament that today's children "grow up too fast," it is worth asking "Compared with when?" For centuries, children were valued more for their economic than emotional contribution to family life. As late as 1708 in Britain, a child of 7 could be hanged for stealing, and some of the most dangerous factory jobs could be performed only by children because of their size. The whole idea of adolescence as a period of turmoil and rebellion, historians note, could take root only once children were safe from the fields and factories and were growing up in a sheltered setting.

A childhood spent at school and play, while a modern idea, used to end more abruptly than it does now. The biggest year for teenage births in U.S. history was 1957--not because of some epidemic of premarital sex but because the median age for marriage was 20, and many brides were teenagers. A 13-year-old leafing through the pages of *Seventeen* magazine in the mid-1950s would have been paging through ads for furniture because she reasonably expected to be married and starting a family within a few years. So while today's 13-year-olds are exposed to "adult" images earlier, they often delay actual adult experiences and responsibilities until much later than their parents and grandparents did. It is encoded somewhere deep in the parental psyche to worry in whole new ways about kids of this age and wonder if their moral moorings will protect them from gusting temptation. That may be especially true for today's highly "parented" 13-year-olds, whose own moms and dads grew up largely ignorant of car seats, bike helmets, antibacterial soaps and childproof locks and who certainly misbehaved in far greater numbers than today's teens. Today's 13-year-olds are less likely to smoke, drink, do drugs, get pregnant, commit a crime or drop out of school than those of their parents' generation in the 1970s. The birthrate for girls under 14 has been cut in half since 1953. But that record does not prevent every new

generation of parents from fearing the worst. "We seem to have moved, without skipping a beat, from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children," observes Thomas Hine, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*. "We want them to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we've never managed to break."

Each generation writes its own story. Considering the average age at which people have kids, the parents of today's 13-year-olds were typically 13 around 1978, their grandparents that age around 1953. That year the median household income was \$3,733 (about \$27,000 in today's dollars), the average family home was a modest 1,100 sq. ft., and just 22% of married women worked outside the home. The new toys of choice were Slinkys and Silly Putty. By 1978, average income was \$15,064 (about \$45,000 today), the average family home was 1,755 sq. ft., and 62% of mothers with children ages 6 to 17 were in the work force. The hot toys: Star Wars action figures and the Atari 2600. Today, while real household income hasn't expanded (it's \$43,318), houses have--to an average 2,340 sq. ft.--and 70% of mothers living with children ages 6 to 17 are in the workplace. It speaks to both the technical advantages and the discretionary spending of 13-year-olds that today required gear ranges from iPods to PlayStations to Xboxes ... and a deck of cards, as poker takes over middle school.

Parents are worried about kids growing up faster, and that is physiologically true: 13-year-olds are more mature physically than they were a generation ago. From 1963 to the early 1990s, the age at which a girl got her first period dropped by about one month every decade, to 12.1 years for black girls and 12.6 years for whites. While that may not sound like a lot, says Marcia Herman-Giddens of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who has been studying the onset of puberty in American children for more than a decade, "there's no evidence that the age of menses has stopped falling. When will it stop? When girls are 9?" There is no consensus about the cause: some scientists blame exposure to certain plastics and insecticides, which degrade into substances with estrogen-related physiological effects. Diets high in meat and protein are associated with earlier puberty. As for boys, Herman-Giddens notes that they are reaching their adult heights at younger ages, which suggests that they too are maturing earlier.

Meanwhile, teens are growing up in a culture that sexualizes children and immerses them in adult images. In 1953 the song that held the top spot on Billboard's chart for 10 weeks was Percy Faith and his Orchestra's *Song from Moulin Rouge*: "Whenever we kiss/ I worry and wonder/ Your lips may be near/ But where is your heart?" One of this year's top singles, by 50 Cent, is *Candy Shop*, which sounds innocent enough until you actually listen to it: "I take you to the candy shop/ I'll let you lick the lollipop/ Go 'head girl, don't you stop/ Keep goin' til you hit the spot."

But before parents despair about the models kids absorb from the culture, they can take heart from the messages 13-year-olds seem to be taking from their parents. In *TIME*'s poll, more than half described their relationship with their parents as being excellent, better than with their teachers or classmates or siblings. A majority described their parents as being very involved in their lives and knowing just about everything that went on, while fewer than 10% described their parents as uninvolved and clueless. They may disagree a bit about when it's appropriate for boys and girls to start going out together: the majority of 13-year-olds say 12 to 15 is the right age, but most parents say 16 to 17 is more like it. But three-quarters have not started dating yet, and 60% say people should postpone sex until marriage. That suggests that however grown up 13-year-olds wish to appear, they don't yet want to act the way they look. Even as kids are exposed to more adult messages, they seem to be acting on them less. For all the headlines about an epidemic of oral sex in middle schools, the evidence does not back up the anecdotes. For instance, a *PEOPLE*/NBC News poll of teens, conducted early this year, found that 12% of 13- and 14-year-olds said they'd had oral sex, but three times that many admitted they didn't know what oral sex was.

"Parents can only advise their children or point them in the right direction," Anne Frank wrote in her diary in 1944. "Ultimately people shape their own characters." Today's 13-year-olds, growing up in a world more connected, more competitive, more complex than the one their parents had to navigate as kids, so far show every sign of rising to the challenge. --With reporting by Amanda Bower and Jeremy Caplan/ New York

Being 13 Questions

1. In the opening paragraph of this article, Nancy Gibbs describes the average teenager. How does she do this (be specific) and is she accurate?
2. Do you agree that it is harder for you to be a teenager than it was for your parents? Why or why not, be specific?
3. In what ways is the term "adolescents" a new term?
4. What are some of the differences that Gibbs describes in the teenagers of the 1970's vs. today's teens?
5. This article gives some solid examples of ways in which kids are growing up too fast. In your opinion, are those examples accurate?
6. Do the statistics given about teen and their feelings about dating and sex represent the average teenager? The average Marin teenager?
7. In your opinion... being a teenager is the best or worst time of your life because...

