Today's Teens Far Cry from 'Fast Times at Ridgemont High'

By Lila Abassi — September 20, 2017

Just in case any parents out there were worried their precious offspring would cease being babes in the nest, they can rest assured as it would seem they have a few more years yet.

A recent study conducted by researchers at San Diego State University and Bryn Mawr College, published in the journal Child Development, reveals data showing that kids are taking longer to grow up. In categories such as obtaining a paying job, driving, having sex, and drinking, this new generation of teens are less Fast Times at Ridgemont High and more Hogwarts.

The authors write that in modern U.S. culture, certain activities are rarely or never performed by children but are frequently performed by adults such as having sex, dating, drinking alcohol, working for pay, going out without one’s parents, and driving.

Researchers looked at data from seven large surveys of 8.3 million 13- to 19-year-olds between 1976 and 2016. The surveys were nationally representative, reflecting the population of U.S. teens in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic region. Responses from each decade were compared to other decades and interestingly, it revealed that adolescents in the 2010s are less likely to work for pay, drive, date, drink alcohol, go out without their parents, and have sex than adolescents in previous decades.

Despite the increasingly sexualized and provocative marketing geared toward youth apparently it seems not to be selling. Furthermore, being bombarded with constant, limitless information and blunting of maturation appears somewhat of a contradiction - to me, at least.

"The developmental trajectory of adolescence has slowed, with teens growing up more slowly than
they used to," explains Jean M. Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University and the lead author on the study. "In terms of adult activities, 18-year-olds now look like 15-year-olds once did."

There are multiple reasons that can account for these changes. The slowing of transition into adulthood reflects the shifting paradigm of parenting and the family dynamic. Society went from younger parents to couples waiting to have kids, placing careers first. There are fewer kids per family compared to previous decades. There are more double-income families, no longer ascribing to the "traditional" view of the mother as the homemaker.

In 1960, 30% of 25-year-old women and 77% of 30-year-old women had completed all five major transitions to adulthood [3] (finishing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child). In 2000, in contrast, only 6% of 20-year-old women and 46% of 30-year-old women had done so. Much of this has to do with pursuit of higher education beyond high school and college.

Between 1970 and 2002, school enrollment increased for all age groups between 16 and 34. The increase was largest for people in their late teens and early twenties, and was very small for people age 25 and older. By 2000, around 60% of 18–19 year olds, half of 20–21 year olds, and 25% of people age 22–24 were enrolled in school. This trend is inversely proportional to the proportion of people getting married – either delaying it or just not getting married altogether. Societal views on unmarried couples co-habiting have remarkably relaxed.

Older parents, higher degrees of education, fewer kids in the family, the advent of the internet/smartphones/tablets have contributed to a generation of children that are perhaps more coddled and more isolated.

As the authors of the study mention, these findings are neither good nor bad. They are simply a reflection of how society has changed over time.