

# The angst, anguish and ambitions of the teenage years

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Most adults look back on their teenage years with the humour of hindsight, but for those young people actually going through it, it is a seriously difficult time of upheaval. Barbie Clarke explains why we must resist the temptation of seeing today's teens as latter-day versions of ourselves and shows that while the physical changes teens go through may not have altered, the context in which they happen differs enormously.

**I**N ORDER TO have insight into the teenage market, and to begin to consider ways in which one can understand them, it is, I believe, necessary to delve a little deeper and understand teenagers' psychology, their development, and a little about how they see the world. Most important perhaps, is to understand ways in which we can communicate with this highly complex age group. To help us do that it is worth looking at how teenagers communicate with each other, how they communicate, or maybe fail to communicate, with adults and especially parents, and the new ways in which they communicate that simply did not exist when we were teenagers.

## A time of change

So who exactly are teenagers? Well of course we all know just how difficult they are to define. The easy bit is age: 13–19. Or is it? That alone makes it complicated as a 13-year-old is clearly very different from a 16-year-old, and a 16-year-old differs from a 19-year-old in many ways. And then there is the difference in gender. Some youth marketers try to define this age group by aspiration, by where they live, what they wear, what music they listen to, what language they speak. But perhaps the one overall characteristic by which teenagers can be defined is by 'change'.

Immense changes occur in this age group, and mostly this takes everyone by surprise; their parents, their teachers, their siblings, and of

course themselves. I am sure we can all look back to our teenage years and remember the anguish and the angst we went through as we came to term with these changes. These years are defined by physical, emotional and psychological change.

Teenagers grow from being at the cooperative, entertaining stage of what we know as 'tweenagers' (8–12-year-olds), who on the whole have a good relationship with their parents, and other adults, to becoming something that those around them do not always recognise, and something that makes many parents despair.

Puberty normally kicks in around age 12–14, earlier for girls than boys, of course. This is characterised by confusion and questioning; the pubescent child wants desperately to be understood (how often do we hear them say to parents, or teachers, 'you just don't understand'). But equally the last thing they want is for adults to understand their world, for how then can they differentiate themselves from those older or younger than themselves. This is such an important part of puberty; there must be a sense of mystery and enigma about what they do, the way they dress, the music they listen to for them to become independent young people. This causes conflict with adults, and many younger teenagers can be positively disparaging about parents, and most adults. Boundaries are tested to the limit, and it takes extreme patience, and confidence on the part of the adults who have contact with teenagers, to remain calm and give them the

reassurance they need, when faced with such antipathy.

Especially important to teenagers is food and diet. It is frequently at this age, 12–14, that children develop real fads about food, perhaps most alarmingly developing eating disorders, or maybe opting to become vegetarian or vegan. This can come about partly to distinguish themselves from the rest of the family, but also of course because body image is very important, and often distorted, at this age. So a girl may view her developing body with fear and trepidation, alarmed at the rate at which her breasts and hips are growing, illustrating so clearly the end of childhood.

It is at this point that many parents feel they are ‘loosing’ their teenager, as, in a very healthy way, the child moves from family to friends (Figure 1). The peer group is of course paramount to the teenage years, and rejecting parental values, and moreover all adult values, allows the move towards adulthood to begin. Parents and teachers become less the source of all wisdom and knowledge, and teenagers actively seek new ways to dress, new and different music to listen to, new language, and have new and different aspirations. They need to distinguish themselves, even from their older brothers and sisters, who up to now they had probably followed and copied with awe and admiration.

A great mistake that marketers can make is to think that, because being a teenager did not seem so long ago (maybe the marketer is still in their 20s), they know exactly what it is like, and that they are close enough to understand what is going on in the teenage world. This is absolutely not the case. To a 15-year-old, a 20-year-old, let alone a 26-year-old, is on a different planet. To use a very brief example, the average person in their 20s grew up with a huge sense of apathy

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towards politics and politicians, many not even bothering to vote. Now in the UK we have teenagers walking out of school in protest against the politicians in this country and America who are demanding war in Iraq. Teenagers today feel they can, and should, take a stance on what is going on in their world, and how it is shaped in the future; something quite new and possibly not seen since the 1960s and 70s.

### Stages of development

In a physiological sense, teenagers’ bodies are growing and developing at a huge rate, and the kid who popped out of bed at 7 a.m. bright-eyed and cheerful, often to the despair of exhausted parents, now has great difficulty in getting out of bed in the morning. Teenagers become lethargic, inward looking, and spend a long time working things out: who they are, where they stand in the world. Daydreaming reaches its peak at puberty,

**Figure 1 Communication**

<p>'She used to be my little girl. We did things together, she came shopping with me, she'd tell me what to wear. Now all she wants to do is stay in her bedroom when she's at home, or spend all her time with her friends. I just don't know her any more.'</p> <p>Mum of girl, 14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Teens are searching for an identity and finding out who they are</li> <li>■ They constantly look at their peers and at celebrities near their age, as role models</li> </ul>
<p>'He never speaks. All you get now is a grunt. He finds us really embarrassing.'</p> <p>Mum of boy, 16</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Their form of communication is different</li> </ul>

and less energy means that physical play is substituted by being generally inactive, with many girls especially giving up physical activity and sport. The lack of physical activity is substituted by inactive pursuits, such as an increase in listening to music, watching TV, etc.

Teenagers are constantly searching for an identity, in the need to find out who they are. It is common for instance for a group of peers to dress in the same way, and I recall that in the school where I worked for some years as a school counsellor, there was a bunch of girls in Year 9 (13–14-year-olds) who all wore purple eye make-up, and who all looked, as far as they could in their school uniform, as ‘grungy’ as was possible. All, irrespective of their true hair colouring, had their hair dyed black. But then, they may have gone on to change this look overnight, perhaps some branching off from that particular group of friends. Having a completely new look, and falling out and arguing is also characteristic of this age group, as they search and explore to find their own personality, and that of their friends. Role models are important of course, especially celebrities and soap stars, and they will often have an influence not just on how teenagers dress, but on behaviour also.

## Communication

Above all, what those of us wishing to understand this age group must remember is just how different their form of communication is from anything that has ever happened before. At Kids and Youth we run sessions with teenagers on behalf of clients in which we track language, dress, and music preferences.

When we consider communication of course we are not just thinking about language. I have written and said it many times before: today’s teenagers really are the first generation

*Teenagers are becoming the marketing decision-makers in the family, consulted by parents on internet connections, channels, games, mobile phones*

to know more, technologically, than their parents. Connecting and communicating through technology holds no fear whatsoever to this age group, and has in fact become global as teenagers connect across the world, creating what I’ve previously described as ‘the global youth club’. Today’s teenagers have grown up on a diet of computer games, the internet and email, and of course mobile phones.

Anyone over 20, and especially a parent, is largely excluded from this highly techno-literate market, and in many ways teenagers are becoming the marketing decision-makers in the family, consulted by parents on internet connections, channels, games, mobile phones. Not only have the internet and computer games revolutionised the way teenagers communicate, but also there are more and more opportunities to communicate, such as picture messaging through photo phones (cleverly using David Beckham to promote Vodafone), and the recently launched ‘G’ (Hutchinson 3G).

In a world where we fear for the safety of the planet, and with the threat of terrorist attack hanging over us, it is interesting to pause and consider how global communication may change the course of events as teenagers actively strive to connect with each other across the world. For most of us growing up, our world as children and teenagers was fairly limited to our immediate environment, family, school, friends, maybe having an annual holiday or two ‘abroad’.

Now, it is far more likely that many young people will travel, and will have friends they have made on the internet through chat rooms, who are living in other countries. In recent research carried out across Europe by Kids and Youth, we discovered that around 10% of teenagers in the UK now have access to the internet in their bedrooms (a figure that stood at around 3% a couple of years ago). But while this might seem high figures in Germany, where broadband is widely used, will be higher still.

The mobile phone of course has been the main way in which teenagers communicate with each other with the unprecedented use of text messaging. If we look at the youngest teenagers, 13–14, our research finds that the UK leads with mobile phone ownership at 81%, closely followed by Holland at 79% and Germany at 76%. We all know that the mobile phone has been adopted by teenagers, but in fact it is parents who have adopted them, buying their son or daughter a phone once their children reach secondary school in the belief that that their child will be much safer as a result.

## Teenage angst

For many of us, our abiding memory of the teenage years is connected with anxiety and uncertainty. Last year Kids and Youth carried out research with teenagers and their parents on behalf of the Carphone Warehouse. The research was for the charity Get Connected, a free UK-wide helpline for young people. Get Connected volunteers have access to a vast database of information, and will provide young callers with the best source of information and advise. It also provides a free connection to the service, and can text important information to the caller's mobile phone. It was originally associated with helping homeless young people,

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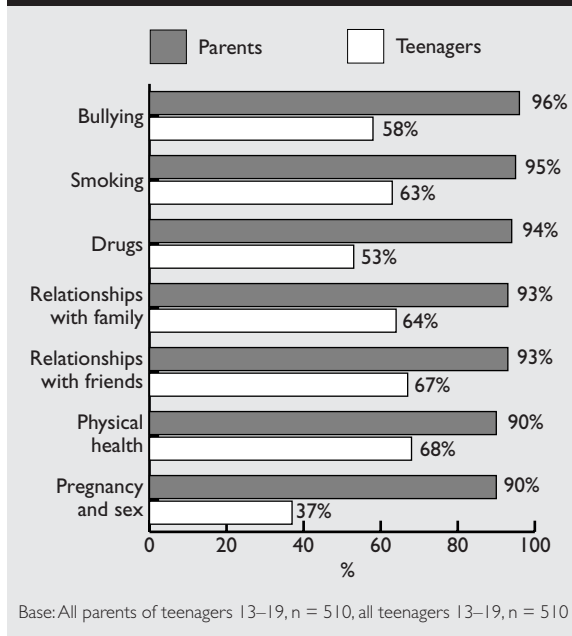
although it now helps and advises on a wide range of topics that affect teenagers.

The Carphone Warehouse is Europe's largest independent mobile communication retailer with a market share of 22%, and has over 1100 stores in 12 international markets. Get Connected is based at The Carphone Warehouse head office in Acton, London, and The Carphone Warehouse has taken the unique step in fully integrating the charity within its organisation, rather than just providing funding, as many of the skill sets for the charity are similar to those necessary for the Carphone Warehouse, including of course call centres.

Essentially the research Kids and Youth carried out on its behalf was about communication with teenagers. The overall objective was to find out about how teenagers and their parents to talk to each other, and to assess the differences between what actually concerns teenagers, and what parents think teenagers are concerned about. A total of 510 teenagers aged 15–19 were interviewed in the UK, and 510 parents of teenagers aged 15–19 were also interviewed, although these parents were not related to the teenagers interviewed. Representative quotas were placed on age, sex, social class and geographic region.

We asked parents what they thought teenagers were most likely to call a telephone helpline about. Parents thought that the top three reasons would be abuse (70%), pregnancy and sex (69%), and bullying (68%). After that came drugs (57%), followed by suicide and self-harm (50%), and relationships with family

**Figure 2 Subjects parents and teens would feel comfortable talking to each other about**



(49%). We asked both parents and teenagers what they thought the *most important reason* was to call a helpline, and we received quite a different picture. What parents thought was quite different from the reasons teenagers cited for calling a helpline.

By far the most important reason to call a helpline cited by teenagers aged 13–19 was drugs, at 43%. But only 8% of parents thought this would be the most important reason.

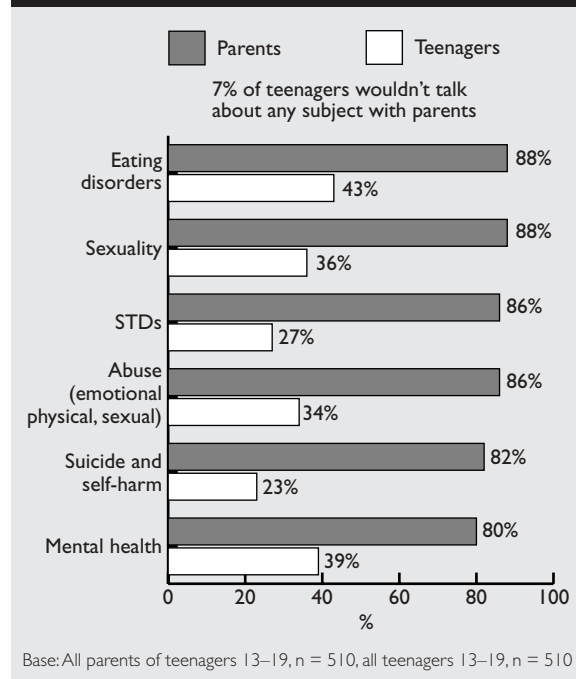
Abuse, which as we saw above was thought by parents to be the most likely reason a teenager would call, came out at only 4% by teenagers, compared to 31% by parents.

Relationships with friends, thought to be the most important reason by just 7% of parents, came out at 21% by teenagers. And pregnancy and sex, thought by 19% of parents to be

most important, was cited by just 9% of teenagers.

We asked both parents and teenagers what they would be most comfortable talking to each other about, and as you can see from Figure 2, we received quite a different picture from each. Parents were confident that they would be comfortable talking about all subjects, including bullying, smoking, drugs, relationships with family, relationships with friends, physical health, and pregnancy and sex, rating all these subjects in terms of ‘feeling comfortable’ in the range 90–96%. But there was a marked difference in what teenagers themselves thought. Take drugs, for example: the reason teenagers gave as the most likely reason to call a helpline. While 94% of parents

**Figure 3 Subjects parents and teens would feel comfortable talking to each other about**



believed they could talk to their teenage son or daughter about drugs, only 53% of teenagers felt they would be comfortable in talking to their parents about this.

Equally, pregnancy and sex: 90% of parents thought they would feel perfectly fine about talking to their teenage child about this, but only 37% of teenagers said they felt happy in talking about this 'embarrassing' subject to their parents.

If we go down the list (Figure 3), we see marked differences in what teenagers think they can talk about to their parents, and what parents think their teenagers can communicate to them. And in many ways this chart is the most poignant, as these are very serious issues affecting teenagers today, but it seems they mostly feel unable to communicate their feelings or concerns to their parents. Eating disorders are a big problem with young people, especially girls, but only half as many teenagers as parents thought they could talk about this – 43% compared to 88% of parents. And so it goes on: mental health, sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, abuse, suicide.

In the research we carry out weekly with this age group, through groups, workshops, ethnography, and through quantitative research, we find time and again a difference between what adults, and by that I mean anyone over 21, think teenagers want, or think concerns them, and the reality of the issues that are actually of concern to them. We find that teenagers are incredibly open about issues relating to sex, sexuality, contraception, pregnancy; in fact they are highly mature in their attitude and their knowledge, but they are still worried about self-image, what people think of them, and their relationships with others. We are also

discovering, over the last months, a real and deep concern about the world, and the state and future of the world around them, much influenced by September 11 of course, and re-enforced with the Iraqi conflict.

### **Teenage ambitions and hopes**

Living for today and not considering the future, something that might recently have characterised teenage years, is now becoming less of a truism. The combination of pressure to pass exams, much in evidence in the UK, but also across Europe, the uncertainty of having a career that will last, perhaps seeing their parents struggle to maintain jobs, and the general fear that currently surrounds terrorism, is having a profound effect on young people.

And the teenager's world is shrinking. They can and they do communicate with each other in a way that was never possible before; they can find out for themselves what is happening in the world. They are prepared to travel, in the holidays, and on gap years, to further their knowledge. The Bali bombing last October was perhaps the most poignant act of terrorism for this age group. Full of back packers, it hit at the very core of their lives – the nightclub. And although it occurred on the other side of the world, it had a real impact on young people in the West.

### **Conclusion**

I believe that teenagers are becoming more altruistic; the selfishness that characterised the teenage years is being replaced by a growing sense of the world, and what is happening in it.

For the first time in many years young people are displaying an interest in politics. They are beginning to realise that their lives, and those of their peers, are affected by world events. They are increasingly taking issue with, and questioning, factors that affect people their age, in particular drugs, homelessness, sexually transmitted disease. In a sense a new morality is creeping in. Not one that sees a return to Victorian values, but one that is steeped in the growing ability of teenagers to communicate

with each other on a global scale, through technology. And it allows them to feel they should, and do, have a say in what happens in the world.

To communicate with this age group, we must acknowledge their growing ability, and wish, to make their own decisions, and to retain their autonomy. Above all we should never patronise, nor expect them to behave in exactly the same way as teenagers a decade ago.

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