

Before you read, as a class, discuss the basic values, beliefs, and goals of teenagers today.

As you read, write down three points or observations that reflect how you feel about the world. Add three more of your own.

"It is the best of times to be a young teenager. And the most difficult of times."

Designer Teens

by IAN HAYSOM

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

The three 13-year-old boys are huddled around a video game in an arcade in a suburban bowling alley, their eyes glued to the screen as characters in army fatigues battle one another with kicks, punches, machetes, machine guns, and rocket launchers.

"Kill him, kill him," cries one of the three, a gangly red-haired boy in a Nike sweatshirt, as a yellow-clad opponent tries to flatten the action hero. The smallest of the three boys, the one at the game's controls, coolly dispatches the enemy with an axe.

"I kicked his butt," he says, unsmiling. "I really HATE that jerk."

A similar scene is playing around the arcade, in other arcades, in front of home computers and on TV screens across Canada. Today's pre-pubescent boys get some of their biggest kicks blowing up enemies in such war games as Doom, Die Hard, Command and Conquer, and Mech Warrior 2 that horrify parents.

The blurb on the cover of Mech Warrior 2 is especially disquieting to any baby-boomer parent who grew up in a peace and love era: War is Life. And Death is the only True Peace.

Later, when the boys are asked why they play the game, they offer few profound insights. "It's neat." "It's fun." "It's challenging." Do their parents like them playing the games? All three roll their eyes. Like, who cares?

We have never seen anything like the teens and pre-teens of today. If the 1950s created the teenage phenomenon, complete with its own language—square, daddy-o, far out, cool, and creep—its own music and its anti-anything adult philosophy, the 1990s have brought us an increasingly sophisticated,

savvy, high-tech, designer-dressed, and independent form of the species.

Today's young people possess some of the most sophisticated consumer skills in the



country, care passionately about clothes and about their body image, and fret about their self-esteem. They yearn for \$120 Nike Air shoes, insist on such designer labels as Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Nautica, DKNY, and Polo. The girls want to be skinny. The boys want to muscle up.

They play video games, mostly violent, preferably on Sony Playstations, watch *The X Files*, *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, and *The Simpsons* on TV, and Jim Carrey, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Demi Moore in the movies. The average Canadian teenager sees 30 000 TV commercials a year.

They use computers and access the Internet with consummate ease. They listen to the Beastie Boys, the angst of Alanis Morissette and PJ Harvey, gangsta rap, and by the age of 15 have usually travelled to at least one exotic holiday destination.

They want stuff. Lots of stuff. Lots of brand new stuff. In the 1960s, teenagers rebelled against materialism. Today, their kids are embracing it with a passion.

It is the best of times to be a young teenager. And the most difficult of times.

Today's pre-pubescents are confronted with the most challenging problems of any teenage generation in the last 40 years: AIDS, drugs, violence, abortion, urban crime, broken families, pollution. And, perhaps, the scariest of them all, fear of an uncertain future.

In the 1960s, few teens worried about getting jobs. Today, it has become an obsession. Where will they work? Will they work? Twenty years ago, nobody talked about teenage suicide or teenage self-esteem as pressing social issues. Today, they are part of the fabric of growing up. Everything's bad for you.

Diane O'Connor, a psychologist with the [Toronto] Board of Education, says today's teenage society has more stress and less meaning than ever before.



"It worries me what we're doing to young people. There are very few places for them to go except in front of a TV or a video screen, where they're exposed to increasingly violent images, where materialism is the most important value that they are continually presented with.

"I think that we have to look at our overall values in respect to teenagers. We have told them that \$100 Nike running shoes are the norm. We have allowed violence to pervade TV screens.

"We have removed the relaxing atmosphere from life. We give our children very little peace, very little simplicity. We just keep giving them more and more. I think it's time we started looking at our values as a society when it comes to teenagers. We've let it get out of hand."

Alan Reynar, director of Active Parenting, a Medicine-Hat-based national parenting program, agrees. Too many teens and preteens are raising themselves, he says, with diminishing parental involvement. Two parents working and single-parent families—another phenomenon almost unheard of 30 years ago—have put enormous pressures on today's teens, he says.

"Parents have to get involved in their children's lives again. We have to help them make realistic, wise choices. Nowadays,



teenagers' friends have a greater influence than any parent."

Reynar echoes the disquiet many parents feel about today's teenage trends: the obsession with body image; the massive importance of fashion; the increasingly violent and sexual TV and video images; increased drug and alcohol use; the questionable content on the Internet; the increasing materialism that is creating what he calls "the designer child."

"We are not allowing children to be children any longer," he says. "Kids are growing up more quickly now than at any time in recent history. Too many parents are allowing young minds to become endangered without setting guidelines, without giving some kind of perspective.

"I find the present situation scary. I think society has to take a major step back and examine what we're doing to our children."

Yet today's teens have inherited some of their parents' social activism. Widespread vegetarianism among teens is a phenomenon of this decade. While the commonplace 1990s teenage stereotype may suggest a high-tech,

fashion-and-money obsessed cyberteen, thousands of young Canadians are going to youth workshops, participating in environmental cleanups, joining music and drama groups, working hard at school and on weekend jobs at shopping malls and service stations.

The discomfort many of today's parents feel about their kids may just be part of the nature of things. Didn't 1950s parents worry about boys on motorbikes and 1960s parents worry about girls on the pill? Every generation has its challenges and its generation gaps.

Deborah Senior, coordinator of the Youth Action Network, a Toronto-based national youth organization, says, for instance, that tens of thousands of teens will participate in 1500 events—from highway cleanups to human rights youth conferences—in Youth Week across Canada this May.

Young people, she says, are more informed than any of their predecessors but have a growing mistrust of the systems and processes in Canada.

"Many of them are worried about getting meaningful work in the future. That's probably the biggest concern of all."

Senior says that the current obsession for materialism is understandable "because that's where many teenagers feel a sense of validation. It's an escape.

"For us, the challenge now is to get teenagers to think of themselves as global citizens, as having a role to play in the future, not just about the here and now."

Oprek Kang, a 19-year-old student who sits on a youth advisory council for the McCreary Centre Society, a Vancouver-based youth health organization, says today's teenagers are living through a much more difficult period than their parents imagine. They are given little respect. And they feel they're not an important part of society's agenda.

"Youth doesn't fit into one overall stereotype. There are many subcultures now. Mainstream youth. Gay youth. Immigrant youth. But all youth, to some extent, feel discriminated against, mistrusted."

For instance, she says, few young people can go into a mall today without feeling that they're instant shoplifting suspects. Her advisory council has prepared pamphlets it will give to store operators that asks them to treat teens with respect.

"Nowadays, teenagers have plenty of concerns their parents didn't have to worry about. They have major job concerns. They worry about safety, about getting from one place to another without being harmed.

"They worry about body image. Girls are encouraged, almost forced, to look incredibly slim by the images on TV and in magazines. Boys have to head for the gym to get big muscles.

"Teens are also part of an increasingly wealthy society. They expect to wear name brands, expect to have their own cars when they're 16. There's nowhere for them to hang out, very few places that offer safe fun."



For all that, she says, youth are having a good time. "I can't honestly say it's an overwhelmingly bad time. It's just more difficult than it's ever been before."

Forty years ago, teenagers worried about acne. Today's kids should be so lucky.

"You're always pressured to get the new clothes," says 13-year-old Tomas Bush of Vancouver, sporting a Nike track suit.

"You're kind of a geek if you aren't wearing the latest trend. You've kind of got to fit in. That's what it's all about, isn't it?"

You take it from here ...

Responding

1. **Make Connections** In a small group, share the observations you noted while reading. Arrive at a consensus of five key values, beliefs, and goals of teens today. Share these with the rest of the class.
2. **Discuss Advertising and Marketing Influences** With a classmate, discuss specific brands referred to in this selection. What are some other ones that are popular with young people today? In what way are brand names or designer labels status symbols? Can you tell what a person is like by the logo on their shirt, jeans, or shoes? Comment.

3. **Focus on Context** In a small group, discuss the following questions:
- According to the article, how are young people today different from the 1960s generation?
 - What are some social and ecological problems that need to be addressed? What are some positive steps being taken?
 - According to Diane O'Connor, is our society becoming too violent? Is violence having a negative impact on youth today?
 - According to Alan Reynar, what pressures are put on teens?
 - Summarize Deborah Senior's opinions on youth.
 - How do Oprek Kang's views on young people differ from those of the other people interviewed? In what ways does she speak on behalf of teens?

GROUP ASSESSMENT

- What did you learn about using support from the text to back up your opinions?
- How did you stay on task when a disagreement occurred?

Extending

4. **Have a Panel Discussion** With two or three other students, prepare a panel presentation to the class on the main problems facing youth today, and suggest some solutions.
5. **Compose a Poem** Write a poem or lyrics expressing your own views and feelings about what it means to be a teenager today.
6. **Draft a Letter to the Editor** This selection originally appeared in a newspaper. Draft a letter responding to the article for the newspaper's Letters to the Editor page.