

The Peter Pan Syndrome?

Kidults - Adolescence Is Permanent

Social scientists have discovered a new category of age: adulescence. TIME Magazine announces in its January 2005 cover article 'Meet The Twixters:' "In the past people moved from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood, but today there is a new, intermediate phase along the way. The years from 18 to 25 and even beyond have become a distinct and separate life stage, a strange, transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that threatens to crash down on them"

These "kidults" still live with their parents and hop around from job-to-job and relationship-to-relationship. They lack direction, commitment, financial independence, and personal responsibility. They are boomerang kids, adult teenagers, and they are much more than a generational hiccup or a temporary fad.

In fact, according to sociologists, psychologists, and demographers they are a permanent trend. So much so that many countries have already named them: they are called "Kippers" in England, "Nesthockers" in Germany, "Mammones" in France, and "Freeters" in Japan. In many countries they comprise over 20 percent of their age group, and the numbers are rising rapidly. In Italy, for instance, over 50% of young people over age 20 still live with their parents.

In America the percentage of 26-year-olds living with their parents has doubled since 1970, from 11% to 20%. That means one in five American 26-year-olds lacks the financial independence, personal responsibility, or courage to leave the shelter of their parent's roof.

How do we explain this? Unfortunately, we can almost predict that the world is going to say something like: This is OK! Irresponsibility is good!

In fact, several of the prominent social scientists that have studied this new life stage see it as a positive development. They argue that these "adulescents" aren't lazy; they're just reaping the fruit of decades of American affluence and social liberation. They believe that "this new period is a chance for young people to savor the pleasures of irresponsibility, search their souls and choose their life paths."

Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist at the University of Maryland says, "It's too easy to write them off as overgrown children. Rather, they're doing important work to get themselves ready for adulthood. This is the one time in their lives when they're not responsible for anyone else or to anyone else. So they have this wonderful freedom to really focus on their own lives and work on becoming the kind of person they want to be."

Only a culture with exceedingly low expectations of young people can view the existence of these twentysomething Peter Pans as a positive thing. A proper look at the situation will lead us to the conclusion that whatever cultural machinery used to turn kids into grownups has broken down and that

their replacements: adolescence, and now, adulescences, create “adults” without the moral backbone and financial wherewithal necessary to take their place in the adult world.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that putting off responsibility does not prepare us for responsibility. And that only radical action will allow us to escape the irresponsibility and ill preparedness our culture cultivates and expects.

Peter Pans That Shave

There are only two major differences I can see between Peter Pan and most kidults. The first is that Peter Pan looks as young as he acts and the second is that Peter Pan can fly. However, once those differences are out of the way I can easily see most adulescents crowing gleefully with Pan, “I want to always be a little boy and have fun!”



To put it bluntly, nearly 20% of Americans ages 18-28 are no more than Peter Pans that shave (I never thought I'd find a picture to illustrate this point, but the slightly disturbing picture on the right does so).

The sad truth is that American adolescences are preoccupied with fun and consequently grow into adults who—you guessed it—are still preoccupied with fun.

A culture's priorities can be measured by looking at two things: how it spends its time and how it spends its money. The fact that our culture throws time and money after fun is proved in many areas, but for the sake of brevity I'll focus on just one: gaming.

In America last year over seven billion dollars were spent on video and computer games, more than double what it was in 1996. 239 million games made it into the computers and gaming consoles of American households in 2003 and a recent study by Purdue University and Boston College showed that American eighth-graders spend an average of 17.5 hours per week playing video games; boys average 23 hours a week and girls 12 hours. Furthermore, the girl's average should be expected rise as game developers continue their recent strategy to create games that specifically appeal to female gamers.

If our obsession with video games is indicative of our culture's priorities we can conclude that American adolescents will grow into adults that spend large amounts of time and money on "fun" activities and products. That being the case, we can also expect that there are myriads corporations and advertisers who prefer that adolescents stay the way they are: tractable, exploitable, pre-adultish—living at home, spending their money on toys.



David Morrison, President of Twentysomething Inc. admits, "[Kidults] are the optimum market to be going after for consumer electronics, Game Boys, flat-screen TVs, iPods, couture fashion, exotic vacations and so forth. Most of their needs are taken care of by Mom and Dad, so their income is largely discretionary. Many [kidults] are living at home, but if you look, you'll see flat-screen TVs in their bedrooms and brand-new cars in the driveway."

Here's the hard fact: The entertainment industry doesn't want us to grow up. Their affluence depends on our immaturity.

Unfortunately, millions of American teenagers have gone along with the program. Where are they today? They're adultescents. They're Peter Pans that shave. And they're still playing video games.

Peter Vorderer, a professor of communications at the University of Southern California, shares, "The thought for a long time was that the kids who played games would grow out of it. But that seems not to have happened. Instead we have seen a continuous increase in the average age of the gamer."

According to industry estimates, that average age is now 29.

Mr. Vorderer continues, "[The fact that gaming] is a primary tool of youth and adolescents means it will have tremendous impact on how the next generation or two plays itself out."

That's exactly what we're doing Mr. Vorderer: playing ourselves out.

Ruining Our Lives With Fun

Moe is a stereotypical American teenager who enjoys multi-annual vacations, has a computer and television in his room, and spends 32+ hours per week playing video games and watching television. Not only that, but nearly all of his income is discretionary, with Dad and Mom underwriting most of his

expenses. He shoulders the burden of a job only in order to pay for expensive activities he enjoys and all the while his culture blares the message of a retired Pepsi commercial: "You're young! Have fun! Drink Pepsi." He is irresponsible, carefree, and has all the toys he needs to be happy. Life is grand when you're a stereotypical American teenager.

Fast-forward ten years. Moe is now 27-years-old. He spent over five years to complete college and still owes the institution \$15,000. He graduated with a brand-spanking-new degree in cognitive science but is working as a waiter in a local restaurant and says he's just getting started on finding the career he wants. He's had three addresses in the past five years and though he's two years away from the average age for first marriage he sees marriage as a decidedly post-30 milestone. He spends more than the average person on clothes, going to/renting movies, computers and software (including games), and eating out. A perceptive observer might conclude that Moe is either having trouble or just plain doesn't want to grow up.

Why? Well, let's ask Matt Swann, a real person, and another 27-year-old. Matt is very similar to Moe, he spent 6 1/2 years to complete college, received a degree in cognitive science, works as a waiter in Atlanta, Georgia, and is just getting started finding the career he wants. When interviewed for a TIME Magazine article entitled, "Meet The Twixter's" and asked if he was looking forward to marriage, family, and owning a home, Matt replied: "I don't ever want a lawn. I do not want to be a parent. I mean, hell, why would I? There's so much fun to be had while you're young."

The reason for Matt's predicament is found in that last sentence: There's so much fun to be had while you're young. It seems as if that old Pepsi Commercial had a great effect on Matt's pubescent mind. Whatever other feelings he has towards adult responsibility we at least know this: he doesn't think it's very fun.

My questions are these: Who said life was about having fun? Who said adolescence was about having fun? Who said adulthood was about having fun? Does the truth of the Bible teach it or does the lying tongue of our culture spread it? Did spending his teen years having fun prepare Matt for the rest of his life? And since the answer is obviously "no," could it be that "just having fun" is a distraction from what's supposed to be going on? Could it be that "just having fun" is a hindrance to the character and competence that should be developing while we're still young?

At the root of many of our culture's problems, including our generation's problem with growing up is this idea of fun. You can't get away from it. It's hammered into our heads through by every kind of media; it's even enforced by "understanding" and respectable adults who have also bought into the lies of our culture. We live like the Nike slogan: Just Do It. We have tons of fun while we're young.

Granted, there's nothing wrong with enjoying yourself, but if it detracts from your development and preparation for the future it's gone too far. Dr. Mel Levine, author of "Ready or Not, Here Life Comes," advises parents: "Don't overindulge kids with spectacular vacations, opulent material possessions and relentless tides of programmed activities after school and during the summers. Avoid creating hyper inflated egos living within protected spheres that will burst in early stages of a career when supervisors

won't care how gorgeous your kids are or what "cool dudes" they've become or what great ballplayers they were in high school."

Dr. Levine's message is clear: overindulgence in "just having fun" will not prepare you for life. You will reap no benefit from making childhood an impossible act to follow. Rather, you will find adult responsibility dull and unappealing. But guess what? Adult responsibility was originally intended to make up 70% of your life! What a waste to ruin the largest portion of your existence on earth by buzzing yourself numb during childhood!

If only we knew how our culture was shortchanging us by telling us to spend our teenage years just having fun! If only we knew the joys of committed marriage, of fatherhood & motherhood, of faithful stewardship and eventual leadership that are being gutted by the miscellaneous notion that life is about fun.

Here are a few practical steps to "save" the joys of adulthood:

1) Stop viewing your teenage years as a time to goof off before you have to settle down and be responsible. Putting off responsibility does not prepare you for responsibility. The teen years offer the best time of preparation you'll ever have. No other time in your life will allow you such undistracted preparation. No other time in your life is as pivotal to what you will become as these years.

2) Don't separate what you are now from what you will become. If you hope to be a stay-at-home mom someday but at age sixteen can't stand sitting around at home for two days straight then there's a problem! If you won't be able to play 20+ hours of video games per week after you're married, don't play that much now. Don't expect extreme transitions to be made smoothly. Your best chance is to become now what you want to be then.

3) Begin establishing deadlines for yourself, assigning yourself responsibilities, and setting priorities. Anything that helps you develop self-discipline and responsibility. These characteristics are markers of maturity.

4) Limit your time spent playing video games, watching television, randomly surfing the web, and listening to music with headphones. All of these activities tend to isolate you and prevent you from the developing the kind of personality and character that makes living with you enjoyable. Work at simply interacting with people more, better yet, organize an activity (besides watching a movie, playing video games, etc.

Choosing To Grow Up

In the late 90's hit single, "Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen)," Baz Luhrmann offers sage advice in a unique and catchy graduation-ceremony-put-to-music format. He begins by telling his listeners to wear sunscreen, because the benefits are "well-documented by scientists." The rest of the advice, he tells us, "has no source more reliable" than his own "meandering experience." (If you didn't notice this guy has a sense of humor.)

I must admit that I love this song. It's like a 5-minute version of Self-Improvement 101, and it's catchy! Unfortunately, sandwiched in between his reminders to stretch and get plenty of calcium, Mr. Luhrmann throws in this piece of advice:

"Don't feel guilty if you don't know what you want to do with your life. The most interesting people I know didn't know at twenty-two what they wanted to do with their lives. Some of the most interesting 40-year-olds I know still don't."

My initial reaction to that would be: Ouch! This is exactly what we don't need! We do not need to be encouraged to lack direction and purpose. That's what we're already doing! Rather, our generation needs a kick in the pants that says, "Wake up! The stakes are high! The time is now! Get going!"

But then I realized that while Mr. Luhrmann advice was bad, he was also responding to one of the other reasons that our generation is having trouble growing up: We are overwhelmed with the responsibility of figuring out what in the world we're going to do with our lives.

After all, we already live in a world of overwhelming choice: there are 40 kinds of coffee beans at Whole Foods Market, 205 channels on DirecTV, and 15 million personal ads on Match.com. And guess what? Unless you expect to find your life's mate online those are all relatively insignificant choices!

What seems to trip many young people up are the 800,000+ career choices on Monster.com. It was all so much easier back when you were simply "destined" to be a blacksmith just like your father, and his father, and his father's father, and his father's father's father, and his fath . . . you get the point.

But seriously, the question of life purpose weighs heavily on many young people and some of us just don't want to deal with it. Marshall Herskovits, producer of the television show *Thirtysomething*, explains, "When you talk about this period of transition being extended, it's not what people intended to do. But it's a result of the world not being particularly welcoming when they come into it. Lots of people have a difficult time dealing with it, and they try to stay kids as long as they can because they don't know how to make sense of all this."

What is Mr. Herskovits referring to when he says "all this?" He talking about those questions: What are you going to do? How are you going to do it? Where are you going to go? How are you going to get there? Those questions that seem to jump you out of the blue and then plague your subconscious with their persistent nagging.

But don't worry. I've been there too. I know the paralysis that comes with big decisions. However, I've also learned that the only way to avoid being overwhelmed with the big choices (and everybody has to make them) is to start moving. Just start putting one foot down after another.

Here's why I say that: I think that the reason these 20+ year-olds are paralyzed by questions of direction and purpose is because they failed to start moving on these decisions when they were teenagers.

So here's the practical application: Start planning now! Starting thinking about what you're going to do after high school and after college. Start thinking about career paths and what you want in a marriage

partner. Better yet, start praying about these things. You can't cram on this test. The consequences are long-term.

Feel free to change your mind 200 times or even 200,000 times. But having a foggy idea of what the future holds does not bode well for you.

In closing, I know that we all get tired of people asking us, "So what are you doing after high school?" But the truth is, "There's few better questions for them to ask!" The reason we are often unprepared for our future is that we haven't spent enough time thinking about and planning our future.

Sorry, Mr. Luhrmann. We don't want to be "interesting" 40-year-olds or even "interesting" 22-year-olds for that matter. We are called to a higher standard.

In the comment section I want each of you to answer to one or more of the following prompts, but please don't limit yourselves to what I have provided:

1.) At this point in time I plan to attend the following college . . .

If you are not planning on attending college don't feel badly. College is not always necessary, advisable, or affordable.

2.) At this point in time I plan to pursue the following career . . .

Ladies, "wife" and "mother" are both suitable and admirable answers.

3.) At this point in time I desire the following characteristics in a spouse . . .

Please specify (if it is not already clear) whether you are describing a husband or wife.

Remember, the idea is simply to get you thinking about these things. Expect these answers to change over time, but if you don't have an answer to one of the question it is likely that you lack direction in that area.

Also, you must realize that this is far from a complete list. Believe it or not, before you can start figuring out answers to purpose-related questions you must first figure out what all of those questions are! I would advise that you start developing a list of questions you want to have answers to.

I Won't Grow Up & You Can't Make Me!

Has this ever happened to you?:

"Today one of my friends and I were talking after school... At one point he said, "What if I don't want to grow up? What if I want to stay a kid for the rest of my life? I just want to have fun." Immediately this made me think of what you wrote on this post. I wasn't quite sure what to say. What is a simple argument for a comment like that?"

This isn't the first time I've heard this.. A few weeks ago someone said, "Since the people who read this article probably already agree with you, how are you going to get the message out to people who really need to hear it? How will you convince those who disagree with you?"

In essence, my readers want to know how to respond to someone who has grown up believing the the old Pepsi commercial, "You're young! Have fun! Drink Pepsi!" How should you respond to someone who just wants to have fun? How do you encourage someone to pursue adult responsibilities when they don't want to grow up?

Here's what I'd do if I were confronted with a statement like the one Lauren's friend made (i.e. "What if I don't want to grow up? What if I want to stay a kid for the rest of my life? I just want to have fun."). I'd be thinking: This guy doesn't share my views about what's important.

This is a simple observation but a critical one: this guy values "just having fun." I value responsibility, maturity, and accomplishment. Polar opposites. This means that for me to say "But responsibility is grand!" will have little to no impact on him because his Gameboy is grander.

He's like a greedy little caterpillar who "just wants to eat," and doesn't want to become a butterfly because he wouldn't be able eat grass and leaves anymore. If he was a customer and I was a salesman, he wouldn't want my product because he believes that what he has is better. That is the dilemma.

Alex and I will soon be embarking on a new series that will answer the questions: "How did he get this value system?" and "How do we change it?" We'll talk about how our peers need the opportunity and the social pressure to change, and about how we can provide that opportunity and pressure.

However, in this post I'd like to share with you a simple strategy for getting his attention: 1) convince him that growing up is inevitable, and 2) get him to think about the consequences of not being ready.

You see, at this point he doesn't think he needs to grow up. He thinks he could happily spend the rest of his life just the way he is. And you won't convince him to "grow up" until you convince him that he can't avoid it. This argument is crucial because once he admits that growing up is inevitable he will be forced to ask himself the question, "Will I be ready?"

Well, it sounds good. How do you do it? It's actually pretty easy. No one can argue with the fact that every 365 days we're older by a year. Neither can they argue with the fact that someday they will have to support themselves financially (for some people this won't happen until Mom and Dad are gone, but it will still happen), and that the cost of living is getting higher and higher.

They most likely hope to get married "someday" and will probably agree that a committed relationship requires greater levels of sacrifice and deeper communication than they're capable of. And, if you push them, they will probably admit that their future bosses and supervisors won't care how gorgeous they are or what "cool dudes" they've become or what great ballplayers they were in high school.

The point you're trying to make is that even if they feel like little Peter Pans they don't live in Neverland! They're going to grow up. Adult responsibilities are going to come. Therefore, the only question is, "Are they going to be ready?"

The reason I share this approach with you is because too often we put the cart before the horse, so to speak. Allow me to use an analogy to explain this:

Imagine that you've gone to see the doctor. You get in the office and he sits you down and says, "You need to start taking these large pills twelve times a day in order to avoid getting smallpox." [Note: For those who don't know, smallpox is virtually non-existent today.]

You'd probably think he was crazy! Why would you go to all the trouble to swallow those huge pills when there was barely any possibility that you would contract smallpox and when you'd already had your smallpox vaccination? You might politely take the bottle of pills with you when you left, but you definitely wouldn't take any.

Now, imagine that instead of just telling you to take the pills the doctor told you that smallpox was spreading rapidly all over the world, that even people who were vaccinated were contracting it, and that unless you took these pills twelve times a day it was almost inevitable that you would contract the disease and die.

Guess what you'd do? You'd take the pills! You'd hug the doctor! You'd probably ask him for a Dixie cup and take one that very minute! You'd make sure you received an adequate supply of the pills and you'd faithfully take them every day.

Do you see the difference that occurred once you knew 1) that the disease was coming, and 2) that your vaccination wouldn't save you?

The same is true when it comes to your friends. Until you can convince them that growing up is inevitable and that what they're doing now won't prepare them for it, they won't see the need to change anything.

In the comment section at the board, please answer one or more of the following questions:

- 1.) Do you think young people in general have an unrealistic view of how long they can avoid adult responsibility?
- 2.) Have you ever had a friend talk about "staying young" and "just having fun?" Did you say anything to them about it? If so, what did you say?
- 3.) Whether its speaking to your friends about white nationalism have you fallen into the trap of telling people all about the "pills" and failing to adequately explain the nature and danger of the "disease?"

The Inevitable

The reason that growing up can be so scary is because it's inevitable. Every 365 days, we're older by a year. However, what we need to remember is that growing up is also completely natural and good. It does require preparation, but that's exactly what the childhood and teen years are for. The habits, personality, and character we choose to develop during this phase of our life, decide what kind of adults we become. We can't keep from growing up, but we can choose what kind of grown up we will be.

Therefore, the solution is not to avoid responsibility and maturity (just look at the adolescents), but to start developing it now. You don't learn to effectively deal with added responsibility by avoiding it, but by becoming accustomed to it, bit by bit. It's like working out. When you first go to the gym, you never go straight to the heaviest weights you can find. You wouldn't be able to lift them, let alone control them. Instead, you start small and work your way up.

In the same way, if you want to be able to deal with responsibility when you grow up, you must start building up your "muscles" right now. One reason many grown ups lose their sense of humor and their ability to spend time interacting with young people, is because they're overwhelmed when responsibility comes. They failed to adequately prepare themselves when they were younger, and now all their attention is focused on trying to manage this "weight" that is far too heavy for their untrained arms. The problem is not that they grew up, but that they weren't ready for it. And when they aren't ready, important things are inevitably neglected.

So what are ways that we can work up to the responsibilities of adulthood?

1.) Learn to manage your current responsibilities. Do you let stress in one area of life spill over into your interaction with younger siblings and family members? If you can't keep your sense of humor and interest in others during the stresses of homework, don't expect to be able to when the stresses of college, marriage, career, and family weigh on your shoulders. He who would be faithful in much, must first prove himself faithful in little. Learn and practice good time management skills to allow time for the truly important things. Cut back on activities and pastimes that isolate you and absorb large amounts of time but accomplish little. Things like TV, surfing the web, reading magazines, watching movies, etc... Remember that God does not give us conflicting responsibilities.

2.) Choose your companions wisely. Spend time with the type of grown ups you would like to become. Surround yourselves with friends who understand the importance of learning responsibility at an early age and encourage one another in your pursuit of maturity. Remember that your companions are not limited to people.

3.) Pursue progressively greater responsibilities. In a society where responsibility is not expected, young people are rarely given the opportunity to develop the maturity necessary to become a responsible adult. Discipline yourself to pursue and accept progressively greater responsibility. This is the way we grow.

Growing up spoils childhood, only if childhood is misunderstood. If childhood is about having everything you could possibly want, with no responsibility, the result is adolescents, who avoid "growing up" at all costs. But if childhood is about preparation, as it has historically been defined, the result is great men

and women who define adulthood as it should be defined: As the fulfillment of childhood. With such an understanding, growing up is not to be avoided, but pursued.