

HOME ECONOMICS

GUIDE



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The Generation Gap: Myth or Fact?

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Kingsley-Davis¹ identified the generation gap more than a quarter of a century ago. He described two elements that tend to create distance between parents and adolescent children. One element is constant in any time or place. It's the difference between a person in the teen years and someone in, or near, the 40's.

The second element is a result of cultural change. In a rapidly changing culture such as the American, youth and middle age live in different worlds. Margaret Mead² says that the parents are immigrants in a world that is home to the young. Today's young have never known a world without the threat of nuclear war, or a world without instant communication and jet air travel.

A good case has been presented, then, for a generation gap. This leads to a widespread assumption that parents can expect problems when children reach the early teens. It's inevitable! Rebellious youth will challenge the judgment and rules imposed by parents who "don't understand" and "can't communicate."

However, a closer look at the situation shows that the concept "generation gap" is oversimplified from a complex set of circumstances. In 1970, Joseph Adelson³ suggested that the term "generation gap" could be a misnomer:

Is it an out and out alienation?
Is it rebellion against parental authority?
Or, is it a different style of pleasure seeking?

Adelson quotes a survey by *Fortune* magazine which concluded that:

- 80 percent of adolescents indicated they do not believe there are great differences between them and their parents, and
- 80 percent also considered themselves "traditional," but the group was sharply divided.

Consider two 16-year-old teenagers. They may differ in race, sex, religion, political outlook, and socio-economic status. One might be black, one white; one might be Catholic, the other secular; one might be factory bound, one Princeton bound; one joins a radical youth organization, the other joins Young Americans for Freedom; and one is male, the other female. These differences are likely to be more important than generation differences. More attention should be given to difference between teenagers. The institutions that train, serve, contain and support teenagers should be studied. Yes, a 16-year-old is different in many ways from a 40-year-old, but don't overlook the more significant elements.

Adelson identified three typical conceptual errors made about adolescents.

- **Studies have been too narrow.** The college elite is too often the only group studied and consequently may become the model for all. For example, during the 1972 election a number of college students supported McGovern. Some people misinterpreted this to mean that the newly-franchised 18-year-olds were going to put McGovern in the White House. They did not.
- **Adults believe that the actions of the young are indicative of future life styles.** Events of the last decade (youths returning to established, more conservative lifestyles) should have dispelled this notion. Until dissipated, this concept may cause parents much concern.
- **Differences between young and old are exaggerated.** Not all younger people believe all new ideas, and not all older people adamantly maintain all old ideas. As many differences exist between one parent and another as there are between two youths. Exaggerated concepts and stereotypes tend to inhibit

children. Sometimes, too, there are real differences that cause problems between parents and children. These should not be minimized.

There's pretty good evidence that, for the most part, the kinds of things teenagers "fight" with parents about are "tremendous trifles," such as styles of dressing and pleasure-seeking. While these seem important issues to a youth stretching for adulthood, they too may seem important to parents for similar reasons. Eda LeShan⁴ identified "middlence" as a period in the life of parents that coincides with their children's adolescence. In this stage, parents too face an identity crisis of sorts. They seek new beginnings, but often find life meaningless. To lose control over a child at this time may be just too much for some parents.

Comparison to another culture may help put these ideas into perspective, parent-adolescent relationships in the U.S. to those of Denmark produced some thought-provoking differences.⁵ In general, American parents treat their adolescents more like children than Danish parents do.

The study showed the following differences:
United States:

- parents are more authoritarian
- parents set more rules with fewer explanations
- children are unable to behave according to parents' wishes without rules

Denmark:

- homes are more democratic
- problems are discussed more
- children are treated more like adults
- children would disregard parents' wishes if they felt strongly about an issue

Both groups of adolescents claimed that feelings of independence are associated with closeness and positive feelings toward parents—far from rebellious.

The study indicated these differences were related to early child-rearing practices in each country. Danish parents were more restrictive in early childhood while U.S. parents were more permissive.

What can parents do to lessen the likelihood of a serious communications gap between them and their adolescent children? Professional and popular writings have emphasized the following two considerations:

- **Listen.** Eda LeShan says that a teen often feels in jeopardy when expected to listen. When parents lecture and scold, they are taking advantage of their superior verbal skills. The adolescent feels threatened by this show of "force". If parents could improve their listening skills, they may find that teenagers feel better about listening to them.
- **Treat adolescents with respect.** Remember their dignity as human beings.

These suggestions will not make parents look like push-overs. They may help bring out the best in the adolescent. Success with this approach could help narrow the "generation gap" be it real or imagined.

¹Kingsley-Davis, "The Sociology of Parent Youth Conflict", *American Sociological Review*, 1940.

²Mead, Margaret, *Culture and Commitment*, Natural History Press, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1970.

³Adelson, Joseph, "Why Generation Gap" *New York Times Magazine*, January 28, 1970.

⁴LeShan, Eda, *The Wonderful Crisis of Middle Age*, David McKay Company, New York, 1973.

⁵Kandel, D., and Lesser, G., "Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Adolescent Independence in the United States and Denmark", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, May 1969.