



Teen Views on Adolescence

Findings from a one day workshop

Francesca Vaghi & Emily H. Emmott



Introduction

What is ‘adolescence’?

This is a question we put to 28 teenagers aged 14 to 18 this summer. On the 28th of June 2018, a group of teenagers and researchers came together at a workshop at UCL to share their views and opinions about what adolescence means to them.

Adolescence is commonly viewed as a time of pivotal development, when individuals go through a number of important physical and social transitions. But adolescence as a life stage can also be ambiguous and unclear, which has led to academic debate around the meaning of adolescence. Some have suggested that ‘adolescence’ should span the ages of 10 to 24,¹ coinciding with the physical, behavioural, and social changes that happen to us during this time. But social scientists have also shown – mainly through cross-cultural comparisons – that the cut-off point between childhood and adulthood is not always so easily defined by age.²

Although this interest in defining and understanding adolescence has

existed for decades³, very rarely have adolescents themselves been included in these debates. So, we set out to address this gap by asking teenagers what adolescence means to them, and in turn, how researchers should talk about this life stage.

The result was a day of lively conversations, brilliant ideas and stimulating reflections. The workshop began with research talks followed by two co-creation activities – making a timeline from childhood to adulthood, and exploring ways to communicate research findings to young people.

This summary report outlines the key views and opinions shared with us during the workshop, focusing on two themes: Meanings of ‘Adolescence,’ and Communicating Adolescence.

Our aim is to reflect what these young people said, spreading their voices into the research community and beyond. We believe adolescents are experts of adolescence, and their voices are worth listening to.

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¹ Sawyer, S. M. *et al.* (2018) ‘The age of adolescence,’ in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 2 (3).

² Schlegel, A. & Barry, H. (1991) *Adolescence: An anthropological inquiry*. New York, NY, US: Free Press.

³ Curtis, A. C. (2015) Defining adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent and Family Health*, 7(2), 2.

Key findings: Teens at the workshop said...

- Adolescence is a phase of **growth and freedom**, but also **increased responsibility**.
- Adolescence can be an **awkward time**, somewhere between childhood and adulthood- which can lead to uncertainties and anxiety.
- **Educational progress** is an important marker for life transitions – from primary school (childhood), into secondary school (adolescence), into higher education (young adult). **Financial independence** was the ultimate marker of adulthood.
- As a term, ‘young people’ is too vague – **‘teens’** or **‘adolescents’** are better expressions.

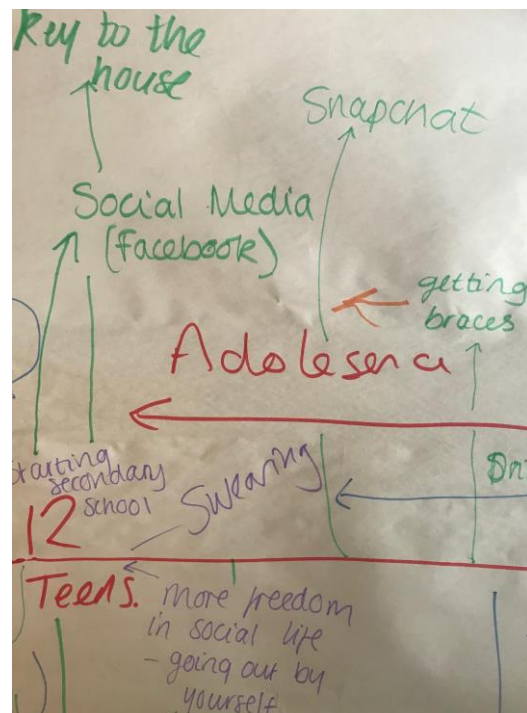
Meanings of ‘Adolescence’

What does ‘adolescence’ mean for teenagers in England? We explored the concept of adolescence in small groups, by building a “timeline of childhood to adulthood” and discussing key events based on individual experiences.

Adolescence and the ‘freedom to grow’

Young people talked about adolescence as a time of **increasing freedom** and **independence**: travelling by yourself, getting a smartphone, having keys to the house, and joining social media were some of the things that young people considered positive

changes when reflecting on adolescence as a life stage. One group talked about “choosing your GCSEs” as a significant event where you begin making your own decisions about the future, which goes on to shape your adulthood.



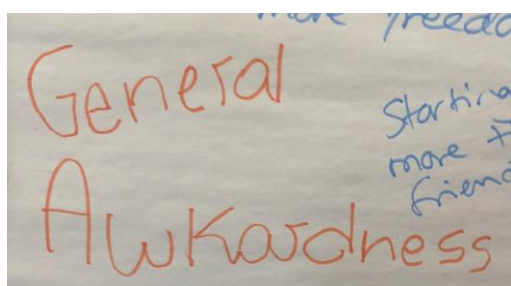
Snippet of a group's timeline activity.

With this increasing freedom, adolescence was also seen as a time of exploration and self-discovery. New experiences and pushing boundaries – such as smoking, vaping, drinking, and having sexual relationships, were identified as central to the teenage experience and a sense of being ‘grown up’.

Building and expanding your social network was also an important part of adolescence. One teen remarked that adolescence is a time when **“you start to spend more time with friends over family.”** One girl said:

“It’s a time where you find out more about yourself, and what kind of people you want to be friends with. There are changes in your friendship groups as you fall out with people and make new friends” – age 16

Challenges of adolescence



Snippet of a group’s timeline activity.

Despite the perks of adolescence, young people at the workshop did not view this stage in their lives as always easy. Many spoke about adolescence as an **awkward time**, with uncertainties and contradictions around what to do and how to act. Negotiating these contradictions can be challenging. One girl wrote:

“The bad thing about being my age is being expected to act like adults at college/work, but being treated like a child at home” – age 17

Increasing freedom also meant increasing responsibilities, particularly at school and college – which was sometimes met with stress and anxiety. One group talked about having to manage their school work and timetables, which is something they had to get used to. Studying for GCSE and A-Level exams was particularly stressful.

Overall, teens in our workshop generally recognised both the positives and negatives of adolescence. Adolescence was not viewed as an inherently negative stage in life – contrary to the stereotypes, which often focus on adolescence as a time of ‘storm and stress’.

“Adolescence isn’t a negative word, it’s the words around it that are negative, like immaturity and lack of independence.”

One boy made it clear, **“we’re not lazy!”**

Adolescence as a key life stage

“Forget about age! Age isn’t accurate enough...”

What defines adolescence as a life stage? Teens at the workshop thought that age mattered less than big life transitions in determining the end of childhood. It was the events and experiences that defined adolescence as a life stage. Given this, many thought adolescence was getting longer. One girl said:

“Adolescence lasts longer these days, as people go to uni and do internships, and need more support from parents.”

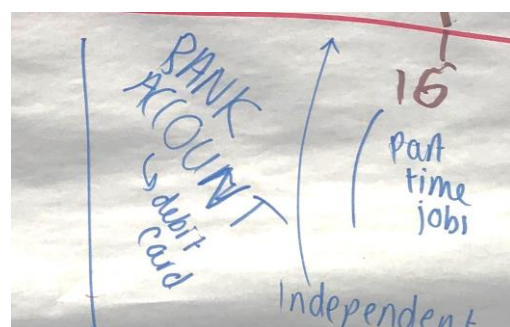
Education was an important marker of transition for teenagers at the workshop. Several people in the group linked the

jump from childhood to adolescence with the beginning of secondary school, with adulthood beginning after completing a university degree.

“‘Student’ is a good term to apply to 18 to 21-year olds, even if not everyone in this age bracket will be in education...”

Most young people at the workshop agreed that financial independence was a decisive marker of the end of childhood. Making decisions about what and who you want to be was also seen as important. One boy said adolescence ends and adulthood begins **“...when you decide which way you must follow.”**

In this way, adolescence was seen a life stage to set yourself up for adulthood.



Snippet of a group’s timeline activity.

The bad thing about being my age

is... (write your age!)

TOO old in some situations but not old enough in others - 17

Being expected to act like an adult at college/work etc. but being reminded/treated as a child at home; wondering how I should behave - 17

having to make so many life-changing decisions in a short amount of time - 17.

Paying adult prices but not getting paid the same, & just uniform for wearing a teenager. (17)

The good thing about being my age

is... (write your age!)

You have time and you have chance.

More freedom (18)

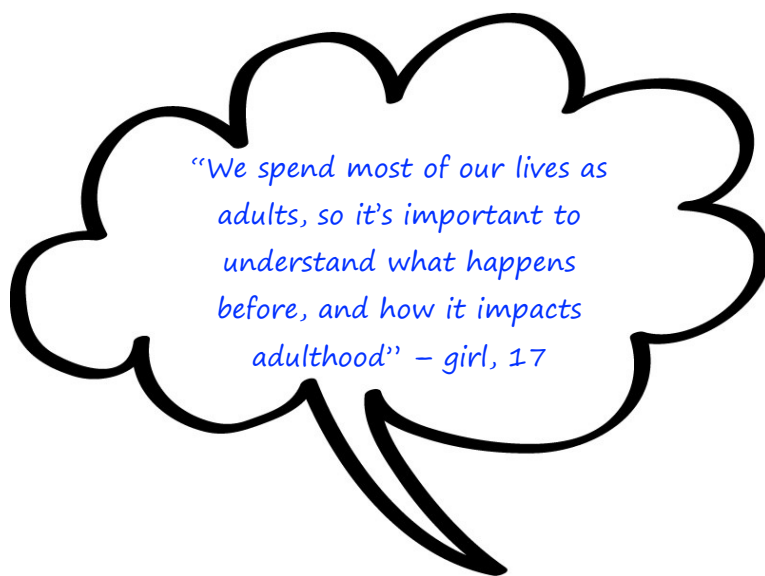
Most things are cheaper than if I was an adult

you can start taking driving lessons - 17

Old enough to help out with siblings - 17

You can work and earn money.

university discount (17)



What does "adolescence" mean to you?

A time to find out who you are

A transition period

A period of change.

Growth Experience

It is a step to prepare for future I think!

An incredibly important period in which a child transition into early adulthood

Being a teenager

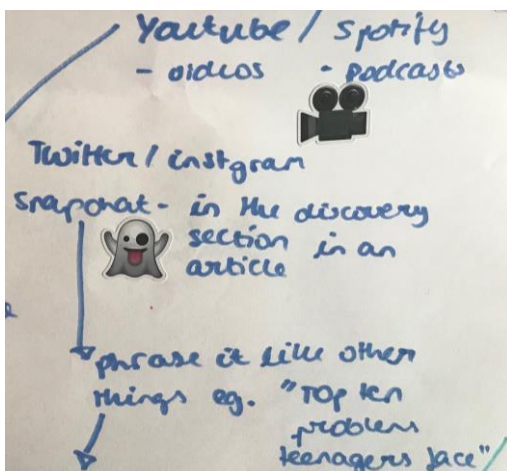
Learning to have the responsibilities of an adult. Would consider it mainly to be during secondary school

Learning

Communicating Adolescence

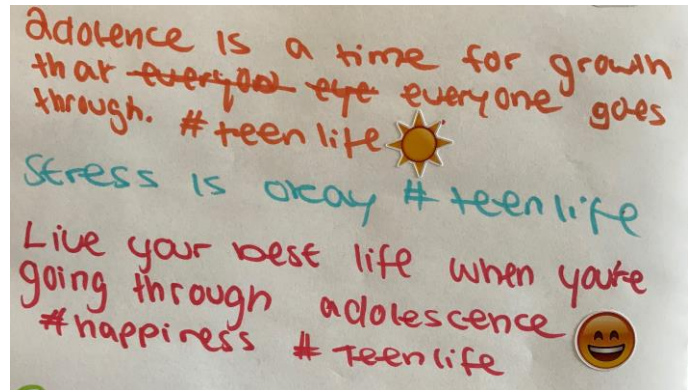
Teenagers in our workshop came up with a range of ideas on how to communicate research about adolescence. They agreed that there is a need for research findings to be communicated to both young and older people. Engaging adults in conversations about younger people's experiences was seen as helpful to fight stereotypes of teens being lazy or selfish.

Social media naturally came up as one of the preferred ways of accessing information, with Snapchat and Twitter on top of the list. Participants also expressed preference for infographics: "We don't want walls of text!" Keeping information entertaining and simple was seen as a way to make academic research accessible.

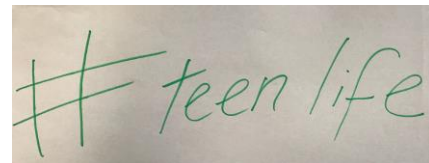


"How to communicate research to young people"

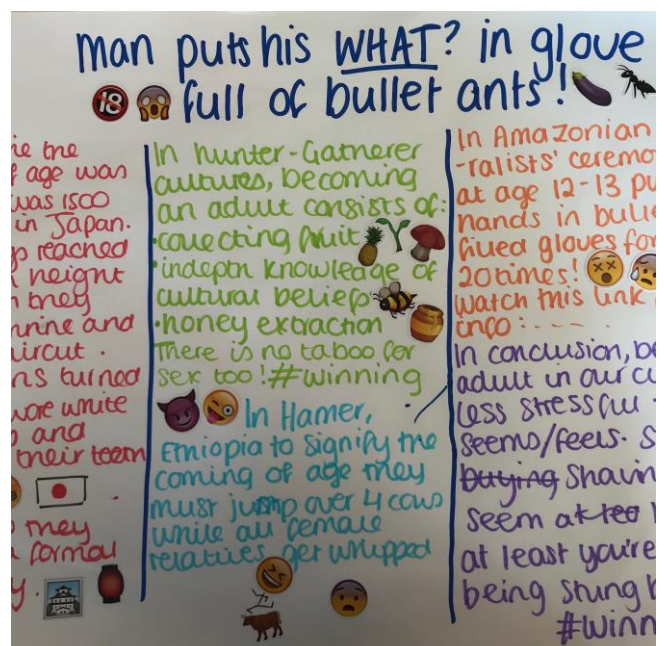
One of the groups designed a communication plan using a clickbait headline. Clickbait headlines were seen as acceptable, "As long as it's tasteful." Over-using emojis was discouraged.



One group's communication plan – a Twitter campaign to share information about adolescence (both positive and negative!) using the hashtag:



Another group worked with a clickbait title:



We also explored if the words used by researchers to categorise life stages and adolescence were meaningful for teenagers. Together, young people discussed the different age ranges which went with different terms relating to a life stage. Below is a summary of what they said:

Words	Suggested Age Ranges
Childhood	0-10
Pre-Teen	11-12
Teen	13-18, 13-16/17
Adolescence	13-16, 16-24, 13-21, 14-17
Student	18-21
Youth	Under 18s
Young Adult	16-18, 18-26, 18-25, 22-25
Young People	Under 25s, 25-40, 16-20
Adulthood	26+, 25+

“Teen” or “Teenage” was a term with most consensus, with everyone agreeing it started at 13 years and ended between 16-18 years. One group talked about the word “teenage” being associated with negative characteristics, such as less respect towards authority.

“Adolescence” was talked about as a developmental period, and it was difficult to attribute to an exact age. One group agreed, **“It’s from around 13 to 24, but it varies from person to person.”** Adolescence was seen as a

formal term, associated with puberty and developmental changes.

“Young people” was taken to be about age, but there was little consensus on what the age range was. In general, teenagers in our workshop did not relate to the term. One boy said, **“It’s just someone who’s not old. I don’t really know what it means.”** One person was not sure if the phrase was a positive way to describe teenagers, and thought it could be patronising: **“Is young a good word to use? It relates to immaturity and lack of experience.”**

One group reflected on the implications of researchers putting adolescents into certain categories:

“Young people don’t know they are being categorised in particular ways, but this might have consequences on the medical care they get, for example” – girl, 16

“Age could be used as a useful marker for research, but not to quantify development” – girl, 17

Lessons Learnt

The key aim of this workshop was to invite adolescents, as experts of their own lives, to engage with and share their perspectives about some of the long-lasting debates on the meaning of adolescence.

By contributing their experiences and views during the day, these teenagers challenged common preconceptions about adolescence, particularly its negative aspects. Adolescence was a time of growth and self-discovery. They were not lazy, nor selfish.

Yet, they also explained why adolescence can be lived as a time of ambivalence, given the increasingly long time span adolescence occupies. This was a time of transition, with an unclear boundary between childhood and adulthood. In some aspects of their lives, adolescents were expected to “be adults,” while in others, they were constrained into childhood. Both could be a source of stress and conflict, with anxieties about increasing responsibilities, and frustrations over lack of autonomy.

It’s important to note that, while teenagers in the workshop valued freedom and autonomy, this didn’t

equate to less support. Rather, teenagers were explicit about needing to be supported throughout adolescence, and that having support was key in addressing their stress and anxieties. What they wanted was to be supported in a different way from when they were children. As one girl put to us, **“I want to be supported to make my own decisions and mistakes.”**

With this in mind, how should researchers define and talk about this life stage? One clear message we picked up is that adolescence is about development and transitions. In that sense, a rigid age-range of adolescence is likely to conflict with how adolescents view adolescence. Another point is perhaps the need for researchers to focus on the positives as well the negatives of adolescence – looking at the benefits, not just the risks.

It needs to be noted that the teenagers who took part in the workshop were of a particular demographic: most were of a middle-class background, were female, and had aspirations to pursue higher education qualifications, as well as highly paid jobs thereafter. To gain a broader view of adolescence, future participatory activities must include a much more diverse group of people, so that the variety of concerns and

experiences that adolescence encompasses can be better gauged. This will further help challenge some of the assumptions researchers make about adolescents, refine the scope of the questions they seek to answer, and make space for the voices of those who are being researched.

With these caveats in mind, we hope this short report provides some useful insight to *Teen Views on Adolescence*. We have endeavoured to reflect their opinions and experiences as accurately as possible, focusing on summarising rather than analysing. We hope our work provides an example of how we can involve teenagers as partners rather than the subjects of research, showing also how to innovatively communicate research to wider, and younger, audiences – where it, arguably, matters the most.

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About the workshop

Young people aged 14-24 living in England were eligible to attend the workshop, with the event being advertised through social media and schools. In total, 28 teenagers aged 14-18yrs took part in the workshop. The workshop began with presentations by researchers on *adolescence across cultures* (Dr Emily Emmott), *adolescent wellbeing* (Larissa Pople) and *adolescent brain development* (Cait Griffin). This was followed by an afternoon of small-group activities: building a timeline from childhood to adulthood, and developing a communication plan on topics from one of the presentations.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the 28 teenagers who came to UCL to take part in the workshop, and the schools and parents who supported them to attend. The event was led by Dr Emily Emmott (UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit) and supported by Francesca Vaghi (UCL Thomas Coram Research Unit), Prof. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience), Cait Griffin (Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience), Larissa Pople (The Children's Society), Dr Alexandra Turner (The Children's Society) and Cliff Manning (Parent Zone). The event was funded by UCL Grand Challenges Adolescent Lives 2018.



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