

## The Teening of Childhood

*By Kay Hymowitz – Excerpted from “Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future - and Ours”, by Kay S. Hymowitz, pages 103-131, The Free Press. Kay Hymowitz is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a contributing editor to City Journal, and an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values. Her articles have appeared in The New Republic, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and numerous other publications. She is married with three children.*

Nowhere has the rise of media education been more dramatically apparent than among eight-to-twelve-year-old “teens”. The teening of those we used to call preadolescents shows up in almost everything kids wear and do. The

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market aimed at this age group has skyrocketed in recent years, and many new products, particularly those specifically targeting these children, appeal to their sense of teen fashion and image consciousness.

It should be clear that the pose the media has in mind for children - cool, tough, and sophisticated independence - is

that of the teenager. The media’s efforts to encourage children to identify with the independent and impulsive consumer teen - efforts that began tentatively, with Barbie - have now gone into overdrive. Teenagers are every where in children’s media today. Superheros like Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are teenagers.

By populating kids’ imaginative world with teenagers, the media simultaneously flatters children’s fantasies of sophistication and teaches them what form those fantasies should take. Thus, the media’s “liberation” of children from adults also has the mischievous effect of binding them more closely to the peer group. In turn, the peer group polices its members’ dress and behavior according to the rules set by this unrecognized authority. In no time at all, children intuit that teens epitomize the freedom, sexiness, and discretionary income - not to mention independence - valued in our society. Teens do not need their

mommies to tell them what to wear or eat or how to spend their money, nor do they have sober responsibilities to restrain them from impulse buying.

One marketing research company found that kids make brand decisions by the age of four. Marketing to and Through Kids recounts numerous stories of kids under ten unwilling to wear jeans or sneakers without a status label. At Nike the percentage of profit attributable to young children grew from nothing to 14 percent by the early nineties.

Movie producers and directors are finding it increasingly difficult to interest children this age in the usual children’s fare. Tweens go to *Scream*, a horror film about a serial killer, or *Object of My Affection*, a film about a young woman who falls in love with a homosexual man. Companies like Limited Too, Gap Kids, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Gymboree have opened stores for six-to-twelve-year-olds and are selling the tween look - which at this moment means miniskirts, platform shoes, and tank tops. These images are offered on TV, the Internet, in store displays, and in the growing number of kid magazines.

The seduction of children with dreams of teen sophistication and tough independence, which began with Barbie and intensified markedly in the last decade, appears to have had the desired effect: it has undermined childhood by turning children into teen consumers. This new breed of children won’t go to children’s movies and they won’t play with toys.

Cosmetic companies are finding a bonanza among this age group. Lines aimed at tweens include nail polish, hair mascara, lotions, and lip products like lipstick, lipgloss, “lip lix”. Sweet Georgia Brown is a cosmetics line for tweens that includes body paints and scented body oils with come-hither names like Vanilla Vibe or Follow Me Boy.

Marketers point at broad demographic trends to explain these changes in the child market, and they are at least partially correct. Changes in the family have given children more power over shopping decisions. For the simple reason that fewer adults are around most of the time, children in single-parent homes tend to take more responsibility for obtaining food and clothes. Market researchers have found

that these kids become independent consumers earlier than those in two-parent homes. Children of working mothers also tend to do more of the family shopping when at around age eight or nine they begin to get to the store by themselves. By the mid-eighties, market research revealed that more and more children in this age group were shopping for their own clothes, shoes, accessories, and drug-store items.

And there is another reason for the increasing power of children as consumers: by the time they are tweens, many children have simply learned to expect a lot of stuff. Many of them have been born to older mothers; the number of first babies born to women over thirty has quadrupled since 1970, and the number born to women over forty doubled in the six years between 1984 and 1990. Older mothers are more likely to have established careers and to be in the kind of financial position that allows them to shower their kids with toys and expensive clothes. Also, grandparents are living longer and more comfortably, and they often arrive with an armload of toys, sports equipment and fancy dresses. Divorce has also helped to inflate the child market: many children divide their time between parents, multiplying by two the number of soccer balls and Big Bird toothbrushes they must own.

Important as they are, demographics by themselves can't explain ten-year-olds who have given up dolls for mascara and body oil. The teening of children has been a consummation the media devoutly wished - and planned. The media has given tweens a group identity with its own language, music, and fashion. It has done this by flattering their sense of being hip and aware-almost teens rather than out-of-it little kids dependent on their parents. On discovering the rising number of child customers, Jordache Jeans did not simply run ads for kids; they ran ads showing kids saying things like, "Have you ever seen your parents naked?" and "I hate my mother. She's prettier than me."

The rise of the child consumer and the child market itself is compelling evidence that children will always seek out some authority for rules about how to dress, talk, and act. Today's school-age children, freed from adult guidance, turn to their friends, who in turn rely on a more glamorous and flattering media for the relevant cultural messages. Recent studies have found that children are forming cliques at younger ages than in previous years and those cliques have strict rules about dress, behavior, and leisure.

A diminished home life and an ever more powerful media constitute a double blow against the conditions under which individuality flourishes. While simply turning

off the TV would help, at this point television is only one part of the picture. Kids learn of their sophisticated independence from retail displays and promotions, from magazines and direct mailings.