Teen Views on Adolescence

Harmonising the meaning of ‘adolescence’ between young people and health researchers
Defining adolescence

The age of adolescence

'Adolescence now lasts from 10 to 24', say scientists

'Earlier puberty has accelerated the onset of adolescence in nearly all populations, while understanding of continued growth has lifted its endpoint age well into the 20s'
Defining adolescence

- Young people (YP) as a widely used term already exists
- Young/emerging adult as a widely used term already exists
- Extending adolescence to mid-20s risks underestimation of competencies
Déjà vu

Same debate from 1995, after suggestion to define adolescence as 10-25 yrs

“This age range... acknowledges that the discipline of Adolescent Medicine is applicable to the preteen[s]... to young adulthood.”

But ultimately, age is just a number:
“As a pediatric residency training director, I observe adolescent behavior in our residents ages 24 to 32, but also in our faculty, ages 30 to 65.”
Defining Adolescence: Main Observations

‘WEIRD’ population focus (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic)

‘Top-down’ definition of adolescence. Why not ask young people, too?
What we did

Workshop with ~30 young people at UCL

Open to 14-24yrs living in England, recruited through schools and social media (twitter, facebook groups, etc)

Final participants aged 14-19, mostly 16-18, more girls than boys
What we did

Overview of ‘adolescence in research’
- Adolescence Across Cultures
- Adolescent Wellbeing
- Adolescent Brain and Social Development

From Childhood to Adulthood Timeline
- Timeline of key events & experiences from childhood to adulthood
- Reflect and discuss the age of adolescence
- Discuss words used to describe adolescence

Developing a Communication Plan
- What are the key messages you want to share?
- Who do you want to share them with?
- How do you want to share them?

Delivered by: Francesca Vaghi, TCRU/SOAS; Larissa Pople, The Children’s Society; Alex Turner, The Children’s Society; Cáit Griffin, UCL Cognitive Neuroscience; Cliff Manning, Parent Zone
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In some cultures, adolescents go through a rite of passage. 

#teenlife #happypornizan #thatsgonnahurt
Summary of what they said

The meaning of adolescence

A time for “freedom to grow”

• Increasing autonomy
• Trying new things & learning new skills
• Building/expanding social network

“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”
Summary of what they said

The meaning of adolescence

A time of challenge
• Increasing responsibilities
• Uncertainties/contradictions

“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.”
Summary of what they said

The meaning of adolescence

A key life stage
• Defined by events and experiences, not age
• Foundations for adulthood

“Adolescence lasts longer these days, as people go to uni and do internships, and need more support from parents.”
“We spend most of our lives as adults, so it’s important to understand what happens before, and how it impacts adulthood.”
Summary of what they said

**Communicating adolescence**

**Want it to be...**
- catchy & simple: click baits are ok
- Pictures/emojis make it interesting
- Use social media, communicate through schools

**Word use:**
- “Adolescent” sounds formal, “teen” is informal. “Young people” is ambiguous.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Suggested Age Ranges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>0-10</td>
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<td>Pre-Teen</td>
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<td>Teen</td>
<td>13-18, 13-16/17</td>
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<td>Adolescence</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Under 25s, 25-40, 16-20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adulthood</td>
<td>26+, 25+</td>
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</tbody>
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Learnings/Reflections

For this particular group of adolescents:
Suggested age range of adolescence (10-24) broadly matched up to their own identity (13-24) – but they thought it varies between people

Many not a fan of age-based definition of adolescence. Educational/financial situation seemed to be key in defining their life stages
Teen Views on Adolescence
Findings from a one day workshop

Francesca Vaghi & Emily H. Emmott

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 cause uncertainties and anxiety.
- Educational aspects are an important marker for life transitions - from primary school childhood, into secondary school adolescence into higher education (young adults).
- Financial independence was the ultimate marker of adulthood.
- As a term, ‘young person’ is too vague - ‘teens’ or ‘adolescents’ are better expressions.

Meanings of ‘Adolescence’

What does adolescence mean for teenagers in England? We explored the context 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: breathing freely, getting your own 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 ‘transitioning your ORGAN’ as a significant event where you began making your own decisions about the future, which goes on to shape your adulthood.

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 young 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 infographics, with Snapchat and Twitter at the top of the list. Participants also expressed preference for infographics: “We don’t want loads of text!” Keeping information entertaining and snappy was seen as a way to make academic research accessible.

One group’s communication plan was a Twitter campaign to share information about adolescence (both positive and negative) using the hashtag: #teenlife

Another group worked with a clickbait title: "Teen life - just like you and me"
Adolescence can be awkward.

Being expected to act like an adult at college and work, but being treated like a child at home.

Adolescence is a time of growth.

Adolescence is a time for growth that everyone goes through. It's a step to prepare for the future.

Adolescence is a time of self-discovery.

It's a time where you find out more about yourself, and what kind of people you want to be friends with.