

Tweens: the new teens

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We can add a “new” category to the list of children, teenagers, and adults: tweens. Tweens are people between the ages of about eight and twelve, and they are marketers’ latest target. Kids in this age bracket are spending more money than ever before, and marketers were among the first to recognise and capitalise on this trend.

In North America, the age of puberty has been creeping down in recent years. In 1999, the average age of puberty for girls in the U.S. was 10, compared to an average age of 15 at the turn of the 20th century (Kantrowitz 68). This shift has been attributed to improved health and diet, and the downward creep of the age of puberty is one of the factors affecting tweens today.

Another factor affecting tweens is increasing parental absence. As more parents are absent from tweens’ lives more of the time, tweens are often left without

adult guidance just when they need it the most. Parents see their tweens acting like miniature adults or taking on a lot of responsibility, and they take a step back, thinking the tweens have become self-sufficient (Hymowitz). Tweens, however, are at a stage of development when they look for guidance, and if they’re not getting it from their parents, they’re getting it elsewhere.

Peer groups have immense power, and for tweens the peer group is vital. Fitting in is very important to tweens, and judgement for those who do not fit in is quick and harsh. Appearance has become the key way to fit in for today’s tweens, and having the right brand of clothing or shoes can make all the difference.

Tweens are very suggestible. As one marketer put it, “the great thing about them is that their memory banks are relatively empty so any message that goes in gets retained” (Cohen 8). These ‘empty memory banks’ translate into a need for guidance which is normal, and as long as tweens have positive role models and a

strong sense of self, they'll be fine. The danger arises when marketers are the ones providing those role models and that guidance. Marketers' *raison d'être* is to sell stuff. They know that they need to make people believe their lives are empty without product X. This is why branding is so effective: a brand comes to represent a lifestyle or an attitude. It's no longer about running shoes; it's about youth, energy and athleticism... and, of course, fitting in. Tweens need to feel like individuals, but they are always individuals within a pack. Fitting in is the key, and marketers understand this.

Teens and tweens have always wanted to grow up quickly and leave childish things behind. It is easy to associate "coolness" (self-confidence and poise, style and fashion) with adulthood, and we all know that teens and tweens want to be cool! This desire for sophistication and "coolness" translates into tweens acting and dressing much older than their actual years. Marketers have capitalised on this by pushing older products at younger kids. Eight-year-olds now wear crop tops and

mini-skirts, and girls as young as four worry about having flat bellies so they can bare them like Britney does (McCarroll 2).

Why are marketers so interested in tweens? Tweens have cash, and they spend it. Marketers "discovered" the tween segment (i.e., their spending power) in the 80s, and they've been creating 'tween culture' ever since. It's not just the money tweens



spend, either; it's the amount of influence they have on their families over purchases like cars and computers. Tweens influence and spend about 170 billion U.S. dollars a year (Ko 36). Marketers are aware of this, and are reacting accordingly.

There has been much concern over the years about advertising aimed at children. In the 70s, Americans discussed banning ads aimed at young children, and recently the same issue was brought up in Sweden (John 190). Tweens are much savvier than their four- and five-year-old brothers and sisters, but they still lack many of those critical thinking skills that we develop as teens and young adults. Today, advertising and marketing that is aimed at tweens play on their insecurities and their desire to be part of the group. Clothing lines like the Olsen twins' are being marketed as "just for tweens" – and include slinky items like crop tops and mini-skirts. Stand-alone stores like Limited Too and Girl Heaven are similarly designed "just for tweens," and they are also filled with cool clothes and products that can be quite adult (Tode 8).

The obsession with growing up and being "cool" has translated into an army of tween girls who wear crop tops and thong underwear. The sexualisation of today's tweens is an issue that the girls themselves often don't see as a problem, but many adults do. Marketers who push these products to tweens have been called



"childhood snatchers," and it does seem that way when girls are leaving childish things behind at the ages of seven and eight to wear perfume called "Follow Me Boy" and body glitter (Hymowitz).

Also, as tweens adopt older clothing styles and older attitudes, they are adopting more "high-risk" behaviours that have traditionally been associated with teenagers and young adults. These include drug and alcohol use, and sexual activity.

Experimenting with these might seem a natural part of growing up, or a rite of passage in today's society, but as ever younger children are exhibiting these high-risk behaviours, we all need to be concerned (Hymowitz).

What lies ahead for today's tweens?

Psychologists say that the veneer of sophistication that tweens adopt is literally only skin-deep and is not imparting any real values that help kids navigate in



society. Tweens can mistake surface sophistication for the real thing and may not ever really grow up or develop adult responses to the world (Kantrowitz 63). Their tastes and values are moulded by their peer groups and ad executives, they can feel deserted by their parents, and they desperately want to "grow up" without understanding what that actually means. Kay S. Hymowitz, in her article "Tweens: ten going on sixteen" says: "Thus tweens,

far from being simply a marketing niche group, speak to the very essence of our future. They are the vanguard of a new, decultured generation, isolated from family and neighborhood, shrugged at by parents, dominated by peers, and delivered into the hands of a sexualized and status- and fad-crazed marketplace."

What can the library do? Well, having positive programming is always a good idea, especially media-awareness programs. Providing good role models is important, and let's not underestimate the power of books. Getting tween girls reading about these issues can be a powerful force in their lives. Let's snatch those childhoods back.

In the last two years, cosmetic surgery rates for teens have gone from 1% to 3% of the total 4.6 million surgeries performed each year. Teen liposuction has doubled; breast augmentation has increased by almost a third in the last five years.

Source: Branded, Alissa Quart

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