



Episode 1,050: How State and Society Invented Adolescence, and Screwed Up Young People

Guest: Dr. Robert Epstein

WOODS: This is obviously quite a controversial set of claims you're making here, and what's very interesting about it is that the endorsements that you've received are extremely diverse in terms of the ideology of the people offering them. So you've hit on something that has wide appeal, even though what you're saying is extremely countercultural. And it has to do with the way we deal with the — I think what you would say — the manufactured phenomenon of adolescence. So just to situate people in your thesis, try and give me just maybe a *precis* of what your overall argument is. Then we'll look at some of the moving parts.

EPSTEIN: Well, I think you summed it up quite nicely. Adolescence is indeed manufactured. It was manufactured largely in the United States following the beginning of industrialization, the end of the Civil War. It's grown over time to become a monstrous phenomenon, but the bottom line is that the turmoil that we see during the teen years is caused by our culture. It is entirely unnecessary. It is completely absent still in more than a hundred cultures around the world. And there's simply no need for us to be doing the damage we're doing to young people and to our families by continuing to keep this unnatural phase of life going.

WOODS: I have a feeling that my audience is very, very largely in sympathy with what you've just said. I want to skip ahead to the punchline, if I may, to exactly how you would prefer to see what we now call adolescence treated, what kind of responsibilities they ought to have, what kind of expectations we ought to have of them, and then we'll spend the rest of our conversation getting from A to B. So what, if you could somehow design society, even though it doesn't work that way — what would be the way we would handle these years? How would we think about them and how would we treat them?

EPSTEIN: Well, first of all, it does work that way, Tom, because I wrote a book. That's the whole point.

WOODS: [laughing] Well, that is true, but you need some fertile soil for it to take root.

EPSTEIN: Sure. Well, sure, in the ideal, I would press the button which would be attached to my book, and lo and behold, we would be looking at young people as individuals, which of course, what do you know? They actually are. And we would be

encouraging them to enter the adult world as soon as they show us that they're ready in some respects, in terms of competence and maturity. There'd be no roadblocks based on age. And so that young people who currently have no way to enter the adult world would be entering the adult world, which, believe me, they would love to do rather than being stuck where they're stuck now.

And in so doing, we would be returning to what has until very recently always been done historically. We would be returning to what is still done in many cultures around the world. So it's simply a matter of knocking down these roadblocks, looking at young people as individuals, and allowing them to enter the adult world based on signs of competence and maturity, looking at them one at a time and making that determination and letting them move forward and encouraging them to move forward.

WOODS: So that's how you handle the objection that, hey, I know a lot of teens and they don't seem like they could run their own lives at all. I mean, there are more than one way of handling that objection, but one would be there are plenty of adults who don't know how to manage their lives; we just evaluate it on a case-by-case basis.

EPSTEIN: Of course. And in fact, this notion that we suddenly become competent to function as adults on midnight of the day we turn 18 – or pick another age, if you like. Pick 21. It doesn't matter. That's absurd. In fact, young people who are mature at 19 or 20 or 25, a lot of them were just as competent, just as mature when they were 15. They don't suddenly become competent. It just doesn't work that way. So you have to look at them one by one.

Just to give you one piece of data here from a big study of mine that I will be publishing next year – this was with 80,000 people from ages 10 to 90-something, so it covers a whole age range. About 30% of the young people in this study – that is, people between ages 13 and 17, so teens under 18. About 30% of them turn out to be more competent than the median adults across a wide range of adult competencies. More competent than the media adult, meaning more competent than half of adults across a wide range of adult competencies. And yet, we dismiss all young people as if they're equally incompetent, immature. And that simply isn't true. They differ, one from another.

WOODS: I want to get into a couple of controversial areas that for my audience won't be that controversial, but I'm interested to hear them advanced in your book. And in particular, what I have in mind are child labor and compulsory education, because here we think – I think people are thinking in terms of 8-year-olds in factories, and yet these laws tend to apply to 15-year-olds doing things that are not particularly oppressive and that would teach them a lot of valuable things in life. So let's start there with child labor. If you try to talk about that, that's such a sacred cow, people's defenses go up. They think here's a case where we do need adult paternalism. So what's wrong with thinking that way?

EPSTEIN: Oh, it's completely wrong. The first child labor laws in the United States were laws requiring young people to work. So that was in the 1700s. So the notion then was that idle hands will cause the devils to get going, or whatever that expression is. In the first laws that restricted labor among young people, they came about in the mid and then late 1800s. The very first law in the United States making

education compulsory was passed in Massachusetts in the 1850s, but that was a competency-based law. In other words, it said you had to send your offspring to school if they didn't know A, B, and C. If they simply didn't know a certain basic thing, then you'd have to send them to school. It was competency based; it wasn't age based.

So you have to look at the history here and see where these laws came from and what the rationale was for the laws in the beginning. And yes, early on, we were trying to some extent to rescue young people from some pretty horrible jobs, working in mines and so forth, but in so doing, we swept up all young people who had been working side-by-side, often with their parents on farms or working as apprentices in all kinds of trades, and we swept them all up and we said, no, none of you can work, no matter how much you want to work and how competent you are, and you all must go to school, no matter how useless that is for you and no matter what you know. It doesn't make any sense.

WOODS: All right, so then I think what's also tied up in this is compulsory education. That's the other side of the coin, because that strongly implies that education and schooling, that's what kids ought to be doing. That's where they ought to be. And again, I think the average person might think, well, but that is where kids ought to be, and they're not in a position to judge the relative merits of education as versus pursuing some trade at that age, so we ought to force them to be educated because otherwise kids will follow the path of least resistance and they won't pursue their education. I mean, I know this is not anything you haven't heard before, but these are the kinds of things that, if my listeners were to go around talking about your arguments, this is what they're going to hear.

EPSTEIN: Well, before I answer your question, which is perfectly sound, let me point out that you just called young people across a very wide age range "kids." You said it twice. "Kids."

WOODS: Woops.

EPSTEIN: Now, a kid is actually a young goat. It's a goat that hasn't reached puberty yet. But once a kid reaches puberty, the farmer no longer calls it a kid, and neither does the Bible. The Bible has separate words for a kid – that is, a goat before puberty – and a goat. And we keep calling young people who have passed puberty, we keep calling them kids or children or boys or girls. It's demeaning. It's not accurate. In fact, they are young adults. Now, in terms of what their abilities are after they reach puberty, that's where again you have to go one by one. And in terms of school, I would say past puberty school makes no sense, absolutely no sense whatsoever, especially these days, because what young people learn in school tends to be outmoded by the time they've learned it.

School made sense when mass schooling was invented in the U.S. in the late 1800s, early 1900s. It did make sense then because you could cram everything a young person needed to know into the first few years of life and then send them out into the workforce and they'd be fine. They wouldn't need any more education. That's no longer true. Now education must be spread over the entire lifespan. It must be. But we're still trying to cram it into the early years. The main thing young people are learning in school is to hate school. They all celebrate the very moment when school

ends, and they don't want to go back, generally speaking. Of course they're forced to more and more, but that old model of cramming all learning into the early years just doesn't make sense anymore. It's absurd.

Now, there's also a problem with corralling as if they were cattle all young people together in big buildings, all roughly the same age. That also makes no sense. In cultures around the world and through most of human history, during the teen years young people worked side by side with responsible adults. They were apprentices. They worked on farms. And those are the critical years when young people should be associating mainly with responsible adults, not with peers, and it's still the case today in developing nations at least that young people in their teens spend about 5 hours a week with peers. Here, they spend about 65 hours a week with peers, who are the last people on earth they should be associating with.

WOODS: Well, but that may seem odd to people. They would think that those are precisely the people they should be associating with.

EPSTEIN: Well, that's of course the model that people have bought into, but again, it's not true. If you look at history and you look at other cultures around the world even today, it simply makes no sense. There's a program in Scotland that I learned about a few years ago in which young people of high school age who were getting into trouble are taken out of the school system and they are apprenticed to tradespeople of all sorts. Now, that could be electricians. That could be plumbers. But these days, it could be computer scientists. It could be programmers. So they're pulled out and they're apprenticed, and they straighten out instantly. This program has an extremely high success rate, because it makes sense. Again, those are the years when young people should be working side by side with adults learning to be adults. Those are the years when they learn most easily and most quickly, and what they should be learning is to be an adult, not to be more and more like their peers.

What's happened is we've created this bizarre mess called teen culture, and teen culture is controlled entirely by specialized divisions of the fashion and media industry. So there are executives every day making decisions about how 20 million teens in the U.S. should think, what they should wear, which icon they should idolize this week. Again, there's nothing natural about that. Again, the more you look at it, truly the more absurd the system is.

WOODS: And this whole teen industrial complex, we might say, also sets extremely low expectations for them. Like they're expected to be dopes who look like slobs and don't care about anything, which is the way they're portrayed everywhere we turn around. All right, quite a lot more to ask Dr. Epstein about, and we'll continue this conversation after we thank our sponsor.

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You know, we were saying at the very beginning that the kinds of angst and anguish that we all kind of associate with teen years interestingly enough is not a universal phenomenon. It's not a phenomenon we observe all over the world. It's altogether absent in some cultures, and the provocative suggestion of your book is that this has something to do with our whole cultural apparatus surrounding adolescence, that we

are actually making these years much, much more difficult on kids, especially from a mental health point of view, than they need to be.

EPSTEIN: Okay, once again you've called young people –

WOODS: Oh, right, okay –

EPSTEIN: – kids. I'm sorry, I apologize for – but the point is I do keep account of such things. And now imagine, speaking of the impact this has on young people, imagine being a young, highly competent person who might be more competent than a lot of adults around him or her, who might be more competent than the teachers in his or her school, who's stuck smack in the middle of something called teen culture or what you've now labeled the teen industrial complex. I love that phrase. The fact is you're being held back. You have no property rights, no privacy rights. You're treated like a child long past the time when you were a child.

Well, that doesn't go over very well with a lot of young people, and in fact, a lot of them become depressed, become suicidal. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among our teens in the United States. And according to a large national study, about 50% of teens in the United States are diagnosable with at least one behavioral, emotional, or substance abuse disorder. At least one. This does not happen in other cultures. We are holding people back, mainly in two ways. one is we infantilize them – that is, we treat them like children when they're not. And again, some get angry and depressed. And the other is we isolate them from responsible adults and trap them with their peers. So we have indeed created this. It took me a long, long time to figure this out. It definitely flies in the face of all the silly stories we're told. But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. In fact, I have absolutely no doubt that I'm correct.

WOODS: So I get that this phenomenon came about during the process of industrialization, but how exactly did it? It's interesting that you mention in your book *Jane Addams of Hull House*. I think back in graduate school I read *20 Years at Hull House*, but that's a long time ago. So I wouldn't have realized the role that she played in American culture in bringing this about. So give us a little *precis* on the construction of adolescence as a phenomenon, at least in the American case.

EPSTEIN: Well, Jane Addams was a Nobel laureate – I think the first female Nobel laureate if I'm not mistaken, or a very early one – who was a social reformer. She operated out of Chicago and she operated an institution there called the Hull House and this was in the late 1800s. And she attracted intelligent, highly competent women from around the country to come and spend time there and learn her ways. And a lot of those women were responsible for putting in place three major systems that led to the creation of what we now call adolescence.

What were the systems? Well, number one was the system of laws that made education compulsory for older and older and older people. So that still exists now so that now in most states you have to go to school until you are at least 16, again, whether you know the material or not and whether you profit from such education or not. It doesn't matter.

Second was the juvenile injustice system – oh, I'm sorry. It's called the juvenile justice system. But actually, it is the juvenile injustice system because if you look at the history of it, young people before that system existed who committed crimes had all of their constitutional rights. All of them. The right to an attorney and so on. But when that system was put in place, young people in our country lost all of their constitutional rights. This system, the juvenile injustice system, was set up to sweep young people off the streets, because there were so many immigrants here, especially in the first decade of the 1900s, and steps had to be taken, draconian steps had to be taken. The juvenile injustice system was the second major step.

And the third one were the child labor laws. And we've talked about those a bit, but again, older and older competent people were now restricted, now prevented from working, no matter how competent they were, no matter how good they were at their jobs.

And in my book, I trace the history of all three of these systems. A lot of them can be traced, it turns out, to Jane Addams and her associates at Hull House. A lot of these systems were first put in place, in fact, in Chicago or in the state of Illinois and then spread around the country. So in a nutshell, that's how adolescence was created. That's how young people became treated more and more like children even though they no longer were children. And that's how they become more and more isolated from responsible adults.

WOODS: Your book is organized into three parts, and the second part, which is quite substantial, is on the capabilities of young people. And of course, in the interest of time, it's difficult to do it justice. So how would you help people to maybe reprogram what they expect young people to be capable of given that what we might call the myth of adolescence has caused us to have rather low expectations?

EPSTEIN: Well, first of all, you have to put on your critical thinking cap when looking at some of the messages that we're getting. We're getting messages all the time which are underwritten by major drug companies saying that there is something wrong with the teen brain. Okay, that's absurd. That's preposterous. Again, the fact that there is no teen turmoil to this day in more than a hundred cultures around the world, that tells you there is nothing inherently wrong with the teen brain. The teen turmoil that we see in our country is created by us, by our culture. So start there, begin to look at things critically.

And then you've got to try to look at your own offspring as individuals, looking at how capable they are. I do have an online test at HowAdultAreYou.com that people can take. And again, let me just give you just a couple of quick numbers again to show you how shoddy our thinking is on this issue. When adults – that is, over 18, and in this case up to people in their 90s in studies that we've done. When adults take this online test of adult competence, they score on average about 92%, because it just looks at very basic adult skills. When you ask adults how high teens will score on this test, they estimate that teens will score 48%. That's how we view teens in this country. But when I look at scores of young people ages 13 to 17 – and again, tens of thousands have taken this very same test – they score about 90%. They score almost as high as so-called adults do, and in some subcategories on the test, they outscore so-called adults.

So our thinking is wrong. Our preconceptions are wrong, and now we have to correct that and look at young people, especially our own offspring in our own homes – we have to look at them one by one by one. So I do this now with my own teen offspring and I still have three in their teens, and I do this, so it can be done. And the two most important words I use now in my own parenting are, "You decide."

WOODS: Very interesting. Okay, very, very interesting. I mean, I wonder what you think about the Love and Logic idea of parenting – I just ask parenthetically. Are you familiar with that series?

EPSTEIN: I am. I'm familiar with all kinds of parenting strategies and schemes, and there's nothing that even comes close to what we should be doing, in my opinion, because again, you have to start by throwing away all of the mainstream ideas that we're bombarded with, again, many of which are underwritten by pharmaceutical companies. And Love and Logic doesn't even come close. You've got to wipe the slate clean and think fresh about young people, and we've got to even change the language that we use when we describe young people, when we refer to them. They're not kids. They're not children. They're not boys and girls. Past puberty, they are adults.

WOODS: So then let's finish up with an overview of the final section, which is what needs to happen. How must society change? Obviously, it's easiest to start with the lowest hanging fruit. What do you think is the easiest entry point to get people to – the easiest change you can see that could be made that would be beneficial? And then go from there and tell me what would be better and better.

EPSTEIN: Well, of course we have most control over our own lives, and to me that means again taking a fresh look at your own offspring and at their capabilities and trying to become a guide guiding them into adulthood, not controlling their lives and holding them back. So that's where we can start, and that means in many cases that the first thing you've got to do is think about homeschooling, because as soon as you send them off into those corrals where all the cattle are, you will do irreparable damage to them, almost certainly. So you've got to think about looking at them as individuals. You've got to think about homeschooling. You've got to think about ways of raising them in a way outside the mainstream methods that are used to raise young people in our culture. It's tough.

Now, beyond that, of course you've got think about informing legislators. You've got to think about helping to change laws that restrict young people. It's a big task. If anything, our country is moving gradually still in the wrong direction, so this is a big task, a lot of misconceptions out there. It's going to take a lot to turn things around.

WOODS: Now, apart from HowAdultAreYou.com, is there another website you'd also like to direct people to for more information, in addition to reading the book, of course?

EPSTEIN: Well, HowAdultAreYou.com certainly is a great place to start. If you go to Teen20.com, there's some information about my book, which does have an unusually wide range of endorsements and it was cited by the Supreme Court in 2010 actually in a decision that was co-written by Antonin Scalia. So there are people who love this book who are on the right. It did win an award from a libertarian organization. And

there are lots of people on the left who love it as well. So people can look for the book or they can get the book online, certainly through Amazon.com or going to Teen20.com. And there's more. There's lots more, too. So if people go to my main website, which is DrRobertEpstein.com and go to the section on adolescence, there are lots of other resources there, as well.

WOODS: All right, I will collect all these websites on today's show notes page. This is Episode 1,050, so TomWoods.com/1050 will have those sites, plus a link to the book we've been discussing, which is *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families From the Torment of Adolescence*. We'll link to that there, as well. Well, Dr. Epstein, I appreciate your time. Of course we could talk for hours, but my view is let's get people reading the book, because it's going to get them thinking in new and exciting ways. Thanks again.

EPSTEIN: Thank you, Tom.