

The Myth of Adolescence

A magazine-style reader's edition of Alex and Brett Harris's challenge to low expectations for teenagers.

A FAITHFUL SUMMARY • NOT THE COMPLETE ARTICLE

What if the greatest limit on young people isn't a lack of ability, but a culture that expects little from them? The Harris brothers argue that teenagers often live beneath their God-given capacity because society has trained them to think of the teen years as a holding pattern between childhood and adulthood.

Their central image is a trained elephant: a powerful animal held in place by a restraint it could easily break. The physical tether is weak, but years of conditioning have taught the elephant not to test it. In the same way, lowered expectations can become invisible restraints on initiative, maturity, service, and courage.

“The young adults of our generation are the elephant.”

The argument is deliberately provocative. It doesn't deny that young people need training or continued growth. It asks whether our labels, institutions, entertainment, and habits unintentionally reward passivity and delay responsibility.

01 / The invisible restraint

When expectation becomes identity

The article begins with the difference between actual weakness and learned helplessness. The elephant has the strength to move, but its earlier experience has taught it that resistance is pointless. The authors use this as a picture of adolescents who internalize the message that serious responsibility, competence, and influence belong to a later stage of life.

A social category with consequences

The Harrises describe modern adolescence as a relatively recent social category: a space in which a young person is no longer treated as a child in every respect but is often prevented from assuming meaningful adult responsibility. Their concern isn't mainly the word itself. It's

the culture that can grow around it—one marked by prolonged dependence, low standards, and the assumption that immaturity is inevitable.

Historical counterexamples

To disrupt modern assumptions, they point to young people entrusted with demanding work. David Farragut entered naval service as a child and received extraordinary responsibility while still young. George Washington studied surveying early, worked professionally in his teens, and built substantial experience before the age at which many people now finish college.

These stories aren't offered as a demand that every teenager become a prodigy. Their rhetorical purpose is to widen the reader's sense of what is possible when training, opportunity, and expectation converge.

THE CORE CLAIM

Expect immaturity, and young people may learn to perform it. Entrust meaningful responsibility, and many will grow to meet it.

02 / The pressure of the mold

Culture teaches a script

Part 2 extends the elephant image. The animal's restraint works because the lesson was learned while it was small. Gradually, the chain can be replaced with something weaker because the animal's imagination has already been confined.

The authors argue that culture works similarly through repeated messages. Schools, entertainment, advertising, and peer expectations don't merely reflect teenage behavior; they also help define what young people believe is normal. The resulting script may permit impressive technical skill or consumer sophistication while asking very little in the areas of character, wisdom, service, self-government, and thoughtful conversation.

The tension in the argument

The essay makes a distinction between capacity and character. Young people can master complex tools and absorb adult desires, yet remain sheltered from the responsibilities that would help form judgment. The answer, in the authors' view, is not reckless independence. It is purposeful training, meaningful work, higher moral expectations, and opportunities to contribute now.

A distinctly Christian summons

The challenge is ultimately theological. Christian teenagers shouldn't take their identity from a youth culture organized around fitting in, comfort, or postponement. They should allow Scripture to renew their understanding of what faithfulness can look like in the present. The teen years can become a launching point for service rather than a vacation from responsibility.

LOW EXPECTATION	FORMATIVE RESPONSIBILITY
"You're only a teenager."	"What can you learn, carry, build, or serve?"
Consumption and entertainment	Contribution and disciplined practice
Delay maturity	Begin training for maturity now

03 / From idea to practice

Questions that break the twine

The essay closes with a call to act. Its point isn't that maturity arrives automatically when adults demand more, nor that every historic practice should be recovered. It's that responsibility can be formative, and that young people should begin faithful, difficult, worthwhile work before they feel completely ready.

For young people

Where have I accepted "I'm too young" as an excuse? What skill could I practice seriously for the next six months? What need in my family, church, school, or community could I help carry? Which habits of entertainment or comparison are shrinking my ambition for useful service?

For parents, teachers, and church leaders

Do our expectations communicate confidence or suspicion? Are we giving teenagers real work with real consequences, together with instruction and accountability? Do we praise only talent and achievement, or do we also notice reliability, courage, repentance, self-control, and love?

A balanced reading

The article's strongest contribution is its attack on complacency. Historical examples don't erase developmental differences, and high expectations should never become harsh pressure or a denial of needed protection. The better application is demanding discipleship: age-appropriate responsibility, close mentoring, permission to fail honestly, and a vision of maturity rooted in love of God and neighbor.

READ THE ORIGINAL

Alex and Brett Harris, "Myth of Adolescence (Parts 1 & 2)," The Rebelution, republished August 28, 2024.
therebelution.com/blog/2024/08/myth-of-adolescence-part-1/

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