**Adolescence and the school**

**Australia, 1880-2014**

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The words, adolescent and adolescence came into scientific and popular use at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were assisted by the publication in 1904 of [G. Stanley Hall’s](http://www.jeffreyarnett.com/articles/Arnett_2006_HP2.pdf) remarkable study, *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education*. This book, though American, was noticed in Australia. In South Australia, the 1907 Report by Director of Education, [Alfred Williams](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/williams-alfred-9107), recommending the establishment of public high schools used Hall to help make the case.

Hall argued that adolescent youth were vulnerable. Alfred Williams phrased the argument thus: ‘the significance of adolescence is coming to be more clearly understood, and it is realised that at this critical period of life the boy or girl needs suitable occupation, wise guidance and help more than at any other period of life’. The idea was that with the transition from childhood to adulthood came profound psychological and social transitions as well physical. ‘Storm and stress’ was how adolescent lives were frequently typified. There was a fair chance that without guidance adolescents would readily adopt adult vices, would have a difficult entry into the adult labour force, could become sexually promiscuous, could be lured into criminal activity and similar. This was thought tragic because adolescents, according to the argument, were capable of high-minded idealism, of religious enthusiasm, and again, given wise guidance, could develop as exemplary citizens.

The beginning of the twentieth century in the Australian cities at least was an age of the male larrikin. Too many unemployed youth appeared to roam the streets, haunting the back entrances of businesses, thieving, smoking and gambling, and showing little respect to churchgoers as they filed out of services on Sunday. The problem of the adolescent and the problem of the larrikin came together.

**Historiography**

An argument occurs in the historiography as to whether modern adolescence was *invented* or *discovered*. The argument for *invention* rests on the social circumstances brought into being by new urban environments and changing structures of families and labour force during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The case for *invention* occurs in Philippe Aries’ 1960 book, *Centuries of Childhood*. Soon enough social historians interested in age relations were finding plenty of evidence that youth had a long and distinctive history stretching back at least to the mediaeval period: an argument for re-*discovery* rather than *invention*. Nevertheless, the argument for an apparent youth/boy crisis towards the end of the nineteenth century across the western world was persuasive enough for governments, churches and other organisations to seek solutions. Numerous histories of childhood, youth and adolescence were published internationally from the 1960s. In the United Kingdom there was Frank Musgrove’s *Youth and the Social Order* (1964). John Gillis’ *Youth and History* (1974/1981) provided a classic statement of the history of adolescence in Europe. Joseph Kett’s *Rites of Passage* (1977) addressed the United States. In Australia Bob Bessant, Craig Campbell, Jan Kociumbas and Julie McLeod developed broad arguments about the history of adolescence with reference to the role of the school.

**Managing adolescence**

The argument that poorly managed adolescences would prove not only a danger to adolescents themselves but to society in general was rapidly accepted by a range of governmental and non-governmental organisations. The consequence was new policy and institutions. Areas affected included health, education, sport, religion, town-planning, justice and more. A list follows of some of the effects of new thinking about adolescence. There were related forces at work as well, such as the related [eugenics](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/eugenics-backward-child/) movement, or the [new liberalism](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/#NewLib) with its justifications of more active state interventions in social life. The recognition of adolescence as a life stage requiring special treatment led to the invention of new institutions, such as juvenile courts and reformatories, as well as schools. It also gave work to new social science professionals. Educational psychologists by the middle of the twentieth century dominated the field of adolescent studies as it related to managing youth in education and schools.

**Education and schooling**

It was argued from the end of the nineteenth century that adolescents required their own separate schools to meet their specific educational, psychological and social needs. In the process the school leaving age was raised. During the early twentieth century [government secondary schools](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/public-high-schools-foundations/) were established, usually enrolling youth from the age of 12. School leaving ages were raised to 14, then 15 years. In the early twenty-first century all youth were expected to be in some form of education or training through to 17. Through the twentieth century progress through secondary schools was based less on the results of assessments and examinations, and more on age. Social, age-based promotion, was increasingly seen as vital for the psychological and social well-being of adolescents. A consequence was that differentiated courses were introduced to manage the consequences. (See the definitions of *streaming*, *setting* and *tracking* at the conclusion of the entry on [*Differentiated schooling*](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/differentiated-schooling/).)

Low enrolment numbers in sparsely settled areas meant that separate secondary schools were not always possible. Higher elementary, central and area schools that included primary and secondary classes continued, or were formed as a consequence.

It was not until the 1970s that [comprehensive government high schools](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/comprehensive-government-high-school/) were routinely provided for adolescents regardless of their likely vocational destinies, social class backgrounds and gender, nor was it until then that school leaving ages rose to the point that some 75 per cent of adolescents remained at school to year 12.

The secondary school was expected to achieve more than education in the narrow sense. It was expected to organise and mould the culture and leisure of youth, and in the process improve youth and their families. This social mission of secondary schooling was often resisted, especially in the academic high schools as new subjects were invented to meet the newly apparent needs of adolescents. There was a long struggle to introduce and popularise subjects such as physical education, social studies, civics, home economics, health, craft and electives based on student interests. For curriculum conservatives such subjects were seen as taking time and dignity from modern and classical languages, mathematics, the sciences, history, economics and geography. Australian universities usually resisted the reforming secondary curriculum as well. The new subjects were considered unsuitable for the purposes of university preparation and matriculation. Reformed curricula for adolescents formed the battlefront. Could secondary schools be reformed along New Education or progressive lines? The 1930s text, [*Education for Complete Living*](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/education-complete-living-1938/), is in part a reflection of this Australian struggle.

Over time, school youth might be split into younger and older adolescents. Many Australian schools and systems adopted *middle schooling* to meet identified needs of younger adolescents. A systemic problem in achieving some of the aims of middle schooling was the sharp divide between primary and secondary education. By the end of the twentieth century, many argued that middle schools should encompass older primary as well as junior secondary youth. Such argument responded to the apparent shrinkage of the period of childhood. Established boundaries between adolescence and childhood were under challenge.

The secondary schools, in the early and mid-twentieth century appeared to be the most promising hosts for the supervision of productive adolescences. Despite it taking a long time for academic curricula to be subordinated to the social purposes of prolonged adolescent schooling, secondary schools were expected to keep youth off the streets, and ensure the socially-efficient management of youth.

**Adolescents, schools and labour market**

The collecting of adolescents into schools was seen as a boon to the rational introduction of youth to labour markets. The decline of apprenticeships over the second half of the twentieth century added importance to the role of schools in the transition to employment. The early intention was to aim youth beyond low-paid dead-end jobs. Vocational subjects could be introduced to students who were likely to leave early, seeking work. From the 1920s the vocational guidance movement was introduced into schools. The IQs of young people were determined, and other information gathered on their backgrounds, aptitudes and interests. Teachers initially, but over the course of the twentieth century, counsellors and guidance officers would advise parents and adolescents on the kinds of jobs, careers, and further training, that would suit the young person. Such guidance did not always escape the social class and gendered assumptions that had long conditioned labour market entry.

**Adolescents, schools and health**

Early in the twentieth century, the collecting of youth in schools was identified as an opportunity to survey the physical and mental health of adolescent populations and wage health campaigns. Surveys into the mental capacities of school populations occurred early on, being used to justify increasingly differentiated schooling, including the introduction of special, or opportunity classes for above and below *normal* youth. Education departments employed psychologists to deal with non-normal groups, and by the middle of the century, were dealing with individual cases, including *disturbed* adolescents.

Whole age groups were drawn into [mass vaccination campaigns](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdi3702j), say against poliomyelitis and rubella. An early school-based vaccination program (1932—1936) provided the diphtheria–tetanus toxoid vaccine to the adolescent population. Chest X-rays administered to mass child and adolescent populations helped manage tuberculosis.

**Adolescents, schools, voluntary sports and other youth organisations**

Young people, even when enrolled in school, often had access to leisure time. The challenge was how to occupy leisure time with healthful activity rather than allowing youth the opportunity to get into trouble. Non-government boarding schools dealt with the issue relatively easily. Organised games occupied Saturdays and after lesson time, as did supervised homework in the evenings. House and boarding masters and mistresses, and religious worship, were responsible for youth at other times.

Day students were a different matter. Schools and other authorities had a long standing suspicion that too many parents were unsatisfactory supervisors of their adolescent children. Three main clusters of voluntary organisations supplemented the school by providing adult-supervised activity:

1. churches, with their Sunday schools and other youth clubs, sports and youth fellowships;
2. sporting clubs, with their training sessions and weekend games; and,
3. youth clubs and classes, including scouts, guides, YMCA, YWCA, ballet, arts, and similar.

In each of these clusters, youth were usually split into age cohorts. Sporting clubs were assiduous. Teams were organised as the ‘under-13s’, ‘under-14s’ and so on. It had been a great criticism of older sporting competitions that young people suffered when in the same competitions as older youth and adults. The middle of the twentieth century was the high point for youth engagement in each of the three clusters of youth oriented voluntary organisations. Thereafter their popularity declined.

**Adolescents, urban and suburban reform**

Progressive thinkers in town planning, many of them influenced by the eugenics movement, had long criticised the baleful effects of inner-city slums on working class youth in particular. Poor living conditions, lack of privacy and environments favouring the spread of disease exacerbated moral contagion. It was argued that the presence in the inner cities of too many public houses, pool halls, brothels and gambling dens produced perfect conditions for the corruption and exploitation of youth.

Many of the older church collegiate schools were in these insalubrious areas. From the late nineteenth century many such schools bought land and built new schools away from inner city slum districts. An example of a school that remained is the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School in Darlinghurst, Sydney.

The popular solution was to shift families out of the slums into freestanding houses on blocks sufficiently large to incorporate gardens. In the 1910s and 1920s especially there was a *garden suburbs* movement. Adelaide’s Colonel Light Gardens is a prime example. A whole suburb would be planted with trees and lawns; playgrounds, parks and other facilities would be provided for the wise use of leisure. Youth in particular were expected to benefit as their social lives were separated from the inner city.

Schools would be essential elements of the new suburbs, separating their students from the old scenes of degradation. Adolescents would not be distracted from their education. An improved family life was meant to occur in the suburbs. The old slum schools with their run-down buildings and lack of play areas would be left behind. The new schools would be planted out with trees, shrubs and lawns, and in some cases vegetable gardens. In every Australian state new regulations required that a certain acreage must be included in any new school. Suficient room to run around and play, and the possibility of contact with ‘nature’ were seen as vital to developing child and adolescent health.

**Adolescence: theory versus experience**

There was a strong tendency among the arguers for improved adolescence to imagine that adolescence was a universal condition with universal characteristics. Too often the social and cultural circumstances of different groups were ignored. Moreover the classic theories of adolescence regarded youth primarily as passive subjects of reform. Young people were less easily manipulated than was initially imagined. From the 1950s and 1960s especially the imagined pliable adolescent receded rapidly. What follows is a brief discussion of the hoped for construction of modern adolescence and some of the circumstances that contradicted its achievement.

**The problem of gender**

Early statements about adolescence more clearly applied to boys than girls. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century girls were confined at home for longer periods than boys and were less likely to be schooled as long. Girls were more likely to be tied to helping their mothers with running households, looking after younger siblings, and, middle class girls, less likely than their brothers to be entering the labour market. Many of the supposedly universal ‘storm and stress’ characteristics of adolescence seemed mostly applicable to boys. Some have argued that before the mid-twentieth century girls barely had an adolescence. It is more likely that many of the characteristics of adolescence were experienced by girls, but this usually occurred later. Girls had been subject to regimes of ‘protection’ for a long period. In the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century where girls had a secondary education, they were often schooled in single sex institutions that emulated the safe relations of middle and ruling class families. The freedom to be an adolescent with leisure and in danger was hard won for girls, both middle and working class.

**The problem of puberty**

Many of the classic statements about adolescence overstated the role that puberty may have played in its production, tending to ignore the social and cultural circumstances that shaped modern youth. There is no easy connection between puberty and cultural expressions of adolescence. Complicating issues include the differing ages for the onset of puberty between girls and boys, and within the two major sexes. There is also the problem of the retreat of the average age of puberty, as occurs in societies with improving diet and disease control.

**The problem of social class and ethnicity**

Because middle and ruling class boys experienced prolonged schooling before their sisters and working class youth in general, and because they were separated from labour markets, often until their very late teens, and in some cases later, this group pioneered modern adolescence. As other groups began to remain at school longer, and as they were increasingly separated from paid work, adolescence as a social and cultural state of transition between childhood and adulthood became more pronounced. Working class girls were probably the last class/gender social group to experience what is thought of as modern adolescence. Similarly, different ethno-cultural groups in the population organised and experienced adolescence differently. Age of marriage, the likelihood of prolonged school attendance, timing of labour force entry, freedom from close family involvement and surveillance–all of these affect the kind of youth and adolescence experienced.

**The problem of reflexivity**

Separation of youth from paid labour and their confinement in prolonged schooling were not only about reforming youth and society. The new regimes that managed the transition from childhood to adulthood through increased adolescent surveillance and supervision, produced a new kind of youth experience. Youth in the twentieth century were routinely confined to their peers for a large part of each day. They were increasingly managed by trained adults, not only at school but during their leisure time. They were routinely expected to delay the gratifications associated with sexual expression, and certainly reproduction. Teenage mothers and fathers became a social problem. Youth were made more dependent on their parents for money than would have been the case had there been early entry into the workforce. Some historians have argued that rather than transition to adulthood, modern adolescence was actually a prolongation of the conditions of childhood, specifically the condition of *dependence*. Severer critics have labelled the process as the *infantilisation* of youth. Reflexivity occurs in the idea that the preliminary identification of adolescent needs actually led to the creation and consolidation of modern adolescence, and the exacerbation of the ‘storm and stress’ characteristics meant to be alleviated by the interventions.

**The problem of adult supervision**

By the end of the twentieth century the case for the trained and wise adult routinely being given charge of young people was damaged. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013- ) along with other inquiries from the late twentieth century demonstrated that many of the organisations trusted to manage adolescence—schools, churches and youth—had been colonised by persons who exploited their power over youth. Though many organisations were damaged by the revelations, very often better police checks on staff, better staff training, improved management, and apologies to victims with possible compensation, rather than the dismantling of the relevant institutions, were seen as the way forward.

**The issue of youth culture**

The classic model of modern adolescence had the adolescent understanding and complying with his or her management. Studying hard at school, delaying sexual activity, preparing for a career, being relatively poor, and being dependent on parents for shelter, food and money for longer periods of time was expected to occur, and for many youth it did. Working class youth were more resistant to the model than middle class youth. In economic terms this caused a major crisis from the 1970s when the labour market for working class youth collapsed. Working class youth were compelled into prolonged school attendance and dependence on their families—and government. Under these circumstances intense pressure occurred in the senior secondary school as curricula needed to be reorganised along more inclusive lines. Large numbers of youth were resistant to enforced senior school attendance.

At least as important from the 1950s was the emergence of a youth culture that was clearly separating itself from the adult world. Australian youth responded to rock and roll music, and the images of rebellious youth portrayed by Hollywood in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). New attention to juvenile delinquency occurred, as did the discovery that middle class adolescents as well as those of the working class were susceptible to the disturbing elements of the new youth culture. In the 1960s and 1970s the new youth cultures developed in many different directions, the Vietnam War and military conscription producing an organised and politically radical edge. Within secondary schools the old formulas for youth supervision and containment were often, and successfully challenged. The Australian edition of the [*Little Red School Book*](http://dehanz.net.au/entries/young-gay-proud-1978/), a guide to adolescent resistance, appeared in 1973. Second wave feminism profoundly affected girls. Film, television series and novels traced different aspects of the changing cultural terrain. The popular novel *Puberty Blues* by Gabrielle Carey and Kathy Lette (1979) later emerged as a popular film (1981) and television series (2012- ).

Often the heart of the problems associated with the emergent youth culture was the issue of dependence. Young people had never been more dependent on their families for economic support and secondary and tertiary educational institutions in the making of employment futures–at the same time generally insisting on their social, sexual and cultural independence through the developing youth culture.

**Conclusion**

By the end of the twentieth century, the classic analysis of early modern adolescence that had occurred in Percival Cole’s edited book of essays, *The Education of the Adolescent in Australia* (1935) had been well superseded. From the 1960s the new social science discipline that was establishing a presence in Australian universities, sociology, regularly inspired surveys of youth. W. F. Connell’s co-authored *Growing Up in an Australian City: A Study of adolescents in Sydney* (1963) was an early example. More recently has been the long-term Australian Government’s [*Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth*](http://www.lsay.edu.au/) (1995- ). Social historians have exposed to question the assumption that adolescence is primarily defined by apparent universal physiological and psychological characteristics. Instead they have argued that adolescence as a life-stage has deeply social, cultural and historical origins. Such a perspective has not slowed the industry that continues to surround the management of adolescence defined as a problem.

The production of moral panics (*see* Glossary) around new threats to adolescent health and control regularly occur, and many education, health and psychology professionals are engaged with their management and correction. Youth suicide, adolescent eating disorders, obesity, legal and illegal drug taking, depression, school truancy, violent youth gangs, propensity towards religious-inspired extremism and youth homelessness are only some of the issues that continue the historical definition of adolescence as a potentially troubled life stage requiring skilled management.

Schools remain significant sites for the hosting and management of adolescence. Their responsibilities for counselling, delivering health and social services, and curricula that address the healthy development of adolescents tend to increase over time. Schools routinely have curricula that might address, for example, driver education, sexuality and sexual development, drug education, work and work experience. They counsel for further education and career development.

At the same time youth often insist on relative freedom in the areas of cultural expression and consumption that were rare in the early and mid-twentieth century. New information and communication technologies, including those that host Facebook and Twitter, support this expression. At the same time, the continued fact of high youth unemployment and the demand for ever more prolonged, not only secondary but tertiary education, arguably consolidates the dependency characteristics of adolescence extending well beyond the ‘teenage’ years, through the 20s and perhaps into the 30s. Social policy responsive to neoliberalism tends to undermine the welfare and other supports that grew over the twentieth century for youth. There have been recent difficulties in housing young people for example. The costs of both post-secondary education and access to health services increase. Such issues are now central to contemporary youth history.

**Glossary**

*Moral panics* occur across populations, as social order appears threatened. They have a long history, just as likely to occur in modern as well as pre-modern societies. Some Australian examples may include the scares associated with communism in the Cold War and the supposed widespread criminal activity of ethnic gangs. (See Cohen, S,, 1972. *Folk devils and moral panics*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.)

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