

**Kids Today Are Growing Up Way Too Fast**Wednesday, October 28, 1998

By Kay S. Hymowitz

Marketers call them "tweens": kids between eight and 12, midway between childhood and adolescence. But tweens are becoming more like teens, leaning more and more toward teen styles, teen attitudes and teen behavior at its most troubling.

"The 12- to 14-year-olds of yesterday are the 10- to 12-'s of today," says Bruce Friend, a vice president of the kids' cable channel Nickelodeon. The Nickelodeon-Yankelovicht Youth Monitor found that by the time they are 12, children describe themselves as "flirtatious, sexy, trendy, athletic, cool." Among the products targeted at this age group is the Sweet Georgia Brown line from AM Cosmetics. It includes body paints and scented body oils with names like Vanilla Vibe and Follow Me Boy. Soon, thanks to the Cincinnati design firm Libby Peszyk Kattiman, your little darling will be able to slip into some tween-sized bikini panties.

The tweening of childhood is more than just a matter of fashion. Tweens are demonstrating many of the deviant behaviors we usually associate with adolescence. "Ninth and 10th grade used to be the starting point for a lot of what we call risk behaviors," says Henry Trevor, who heads a middle school in Brooklyn, N.Y. "Fifteen years ago they moved into the eighth grade. Now it's seventh grade."

The data supporting this trend are sketchy, since most studies of risk behavior begin with 15-year-olds. But the clearest evidence is found in crime statistics. Although children under 15 still represent a minority of juvenile arrests, their numbers have grown disproportionately in the past 20 years. According to a report by the office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "offenders under age 15 represent the leading edge of the juvenile crime problem, and their numbers are growing." The crimes committed by younger teens and preteens are growing in severity, too: "Person offenses, which once constituted 16 percent of the total court cases for this age group now constitute 25 percent."

Tweens are also becoming more sexually active. Between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of girls saying they had sexual intercourse before 15 rose to 19% from 11%. (Boys remained stable at 21%.) "We're beginning to see a few pregnant sixth-graders, "says Christy Hogan, a recently retired middle-school counselor in Louisville, Ky.

Drugs and alcohol are also seeping into tween culture. The past decade has seen more than a doubling of the proportion of eighth-graders who have smoked marijuana (10% today) and of those who no longer see it as dangerous. "The stigma isn't there the way it was 10 years ago." says Dan Kindlon, Mr. Thompson's co-author.

Other troubling trends: Although the numbers remain small, suicide among tweens more than doubled between 1979 and 1995. Therapists say they are seeing a growth in eating disorders — anorexia and obsessive dieting—even among girls in late elementary school, doubtless an outgrowth of a premature fashion-consciousness.

What change in our social ecology has led to the emergence of tweens? In my conversations with educators and child psychologists who work primarily with middle-class kids nationwide, two major and fairly predictable themes emerged: absentee parents and a sexualized and glitzy media-driven marketplace. What has been less commonly recognized is the way these two influences combine to augment the authority of the peer group.

With their parents working long hours away from home, many youngsters are leaving for school from an empty house after eating breakfast alone, then picking up fast food or frozen meals for dinner. Almost without exception, the principals and teachers I spoke with describe a pervasive loneliness among tweens. "The most common complaint I hear," says Ms. Hogan, "is, 'My mom doesn't care what I do. She's never home. She doesn't even know what I do.' "

The loss of family life invariably expands the power of the peer group. By late elementary school, according to "Peer Power: Culture and Identity," a recent study by Patricia Adler with Peter Adler, boys understand that their popularity depends on "toughness, troublemaking, domination, coolness, and interpersonal bragging and sparring skills." Girls derive status from "success at grooming, clothes, and other appearance-related variables; . . . [their] romantic success as measured through popularity and going with boys; affluence and its correlates of material possessions and leisure pursuits."

Both parental absence and the powerful peer group are intricately connected to the rise of a burgeoning tween market. Tweens began to catch the eye of marketers around the mid-1980s, when research found that more and more children this age were shopping for their own clothes, shoes, accessories, drugstore items—even for the family groceries. Today's tween ads reflect this sensibility: Kids are on their own, goes the premise; flatter them as hip and aware almost-teens rather than out-of-it little kids—as independent, sophisticated consumers with their own language, music and fashion.

Anyone who remembers high school will recall many of these dynamics. But it is important to recognize that the combination of isolation from adults, peer cruelty and fantasies of sophistication, though always a danger to the alienated teenager, is especially taxing to the fragile ego of the preadolescent. With less life experience and less self-awareness, preadolescents have fewer internal resources to fall back on. "These kids have two years less time to become a firm person," says Helen Colvin, a middle-school science teacher from Harrisburg, Pa. "That's two years less time to discover what they are, what they believe, to experiment with identity. Instead, they want to be like their friends."

Tweens, far from being simply a marketing niche group, 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.