

Was the 1950's really 'dull' for teenagers?



What can you infer from this photograph about the lives of children and the family?

What happened at the beginning of the 20th Century that might have had a significant impact on the lives of children and teenagers?

The beginning of the 20th Century was incredibly tumultuous for young people thanks to WW1 and WW2. As well as the wars, poverty was still very high with Britain coming out of the Victorian era, with large families in cramped conditions. Of course children and teenagers of the upper classes fared much better.

Family life was, up to 1914, and between the wars, a time of being together. Families would eat together, listen to the radio together and play games together. You might call this a traditional family.





What can we infer about family life in the 1950s from this photograph?

Stick your text about life in the 1950s in your book and using 5 colours, identify anything it says relating to the following categories:

Food:

Parents & Teenagers:

Fashion:

Entertainment:

Education & Health:

Much of the country was still recovering from bomb damage caused by the war. Many other areas of the country resembled building sites as Britain built blocks of new flats and new towns as well as motorways, schools and hospitals. Britain was still recovering from the war economically. Despite its victory against Hitler, Britain felt far from secure and during these early days of the Cold War the government was still spending a lot of the country's wealth on arms. There were still tight controls left over from wartime. Food rationing did not end until 1954 and some items continued to be rationed after that. National service (eighteen months military service for all young men aged 17-21) remained compulsory until 1960. Licensing hours for pubs were still controlled. The shops were not piled high with goods. Shopping was certainly not the leisure pursuit it is today.

In one sense there were no teenagers either. Obviously there were people of that age but they did not behave the way we think of teenagers behaving today. In the early 1950s most young people seemed like younger versions of their parents! They wore similar clothes to their parents, they went to the same schools as their parents had done. They followed many of the same routines, perhaps going to church on Sundays, visiting relatives, listening to the same music at dances. If they had left school they might well go on to work in the same place as their parents.

There was only one TV channel and so, if they had a TV at all, the whole family tended to sit together and watch the same programmes. There was not much choice of listening on the radio either, and again the family tended to listen to the same programmes together. It sounds a bit dull to you as a teenager then it maybe felt dull for many of them too, although we should never assume that people in the past see things the way we do from the early twenty-first century.

The 1950s is often seen as dull and a transition decade from war to modern Britain. Rationing continued, the economy was ruined. People who could afford it, could get things on the black market, meaning the poor suffered even more. Adults struggled as they expected life to get better after WW2. Those who were teenagers however recall the 1950s altogether differently! Many claim they had so much more freedom, even more than teenagers today!

As we've seen from the previous task, the 1950s started slowly, young people didn't really have separate lives from adults; they wore the same clothes as their parents, had the same pastimes, ate together, watched TV together (the one channel they had) and listened to the radio together, they even went to the same school as their parents and mostly followed their parents into the same work.



Is it time for some independent teenage culture?...

What does Margaret think?

"I started school in 1951 and compared with what kids have today, we had very little. We didn't have a TV, although I knew some families that did. It was a real badge of honour to have a TV mast on your roof. We had enormous freedom: you could just say 'I'm off for a cycle ride' and off you'd go. It was an age of great innocence. I suppose, looking back on it, our demands were small, but then we didn't know any different. The great age of the teenager hadn't really come in: we thought of ourselves as young and as not knowing as much as grownups – and they encouraged this view! As far as I know, there weren't teenage magazines, although we did have our pin ups and fantasies – mine was Laurence Olivier and my friend Mary Taylor's was Peter May, the cricketer: grown up idols. We modelled ourselves on grown up film stars. I don't remember any young teenage pin-ups until Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard at the end of the 1950s"



So, what changed from the start of the decade to the end?

Throughout the 1950s, the economy improved, there weren't enough people for all the jobs on offer. Anyone who was fit for a job could get one; resulting in higher wages to stop people moving to a better job the following week. Families went from having no money to having plenty.

Teenagers could easily get a job after school



Teenagers could keep their wages as their parents earned enough themselves



Teenagers were now economically independent...

Unions had helped workers work reasonable hours, 5 days a week, leaving weekends to have fun

Teenagers started creating their own identities, as different from their parents as possible! Companies began marketing towards teenagers, who had lots of money! Teenagers began dressing differently, listening to different music, watching films their parents would not approve of and spend more time with other teenagers than before!

There was a massive American influence, based on both speaking English and the Americans who were stationed here during the war, introducing American fashion and youth culture. The television in the 1950s helped as well of course...



“police were called to cinemas in London and Liverpool last night to deal with disturbances among youthful audiences at showings of the film Rock Around the Clock... Youths threw lighted cigarettes from the circle onto people sitting in the stalls. Others sprayed parts of the cinema with water from hose pipes. Girls in the audience struggled to get outside”.

A report from The Times newspaper, 11 September 1956. The film Rock Around the Clock was banned by some UK councils following other similar disturbances.



You have a choice... The task is to show you understand the differences in the lives of the teenagers from 1950 to 1959...

You can do some diary entries across the decade highlighting the differences

Social Media account (insta, facebook, twitter, snapchat etc) showing what you were getting up to as the decade went on...



So, were the 1950s really dull?