

# How Our Culture Disempowers Teens

Teenagers are extraordinarily capable.

Louis Braille invented his language for the blind when he was 15. Mary Shelley, daughter of libertarian feminist [Mary Wollstonecraft](#), wrote *Frankenstein* when she was 18. As a young teen, Anne Frank documented her life of hiding from the Nazis during World War II. Malala Yousafzai won the Nobel Prize at 17.

## The Impact of Low Expectations

These are remarkable people for sure, but teenagers are able to accomplish remarkable things when given freedom and opportunity. Instead, our culture systematically underestimates teenagers, coddling them like toddlers, confining them to ever more schooling, and disconnecting them from the adult world they will soon enter.

Our low expectations of teenagers create a vicious circle. We think teenagers are lazy, unmotivated, and incapable of directing their own lives, so we restrict their freedom and micromanage them. This process leads teenagers to believe that they are, in fact, lazy, unmotivated, and in need of micromanagement. According to Peter Berg, author of [The Tao of Teenagers](#) and a teacher who has worked with teenagers for over 25 years, this circle emerges because many of us were treated this way as teenagers. We may have a hard time trusting teens because we ourselves were not trusted. Berg tells me:

*“We know that many people in our society unfortunately don’t understand teenagers, don’t relate to them well, and actually, in my experience, have a fear of teenagers. In part, I believe this is because they struggled themselves as*

*teenagers and were not treated well by adults. Coming from this mindset, it's easy to underestimate teenagers and easy to view everything teenagers do through a lens that confirms that we should underestimate them."*

## **Teens Crave Connection and Purposeful Action**

When teenagers are trusted and treated well, they are incredibly enthusiastic and competent. I spent this week in Austin, Texas, with 14- to 17-year-olds attending one of [FEE's summer leadership seminars](#) for teens. Far from being lazy and unmotivated, these young people were engaged and curious—even when confronting meaty material like [Economics in One Lesson](#). In fact, I saw more adults dozing off during lectures than teens! Sure, teens like their smartphones and social media—but so do many of us adults. As Berg says:

*"What irks me the most is the myth of the lazy, always-on-social-media, disengaged teen. Teenagers are engaged and are far from lazy. Most teens today have schedules that many adults couldn't navigate. Teenagers do care—maybe not always about things that adults think they should care about—but they do care about little things, big things, and everyday things. Teens want what adults want: to be respected, taken seriously, cared about, and treated fairly."*

On the edge of adulthood, teenagers need and crave authentic connection to real, daily life, but they are increasingly cut off from this experience. Even as [states like Oregon](#) push to lower the voting age to 16, arguing that teens are fully capable of democratic decision-making, they raise the compulsory schooling age to 18. Be free to vote, but you must

remain locked ([literally](#)) in coercive schooling.

Teens now spend more time in school and less time in work than at any other time in our history—even in the summertime. According to the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 42 percent of teens were enrolled in school in July 2016 compared to only 10 percent in July 1985. Overall, teen labor force participation has plummeted from a high of 57.9 percent in 1979 to just 34.1 percent in 2011. Part of this decline is related to more emphasis on academics, extracurricular activities, and other structured programming for adolescents. But public policy may also be to blame.

## The Minimum Wage's Impact on Teens

Raising the minimum wage, as many states have aggressively done, has a disproportionate impact on young workers who do not yet have the skills and experience to justify an employer paying them a higher wage. As a result, these neophytes don't get hired and thus don't gain the necessary experience to ultimately warrant higher pay. It is [widely understood](#) that minimum wage laws lead to higher unemployment, particularly for young and low-skilled workers who are then prevented from gaining important entry-level career skills.

According to a [July report](#) by the Congressional Budget Office regarding a proposed \$15 federal minimum wage,

*“The \$15 option would alter employment more for some groups than for others. Almost 50 percent of the newly jobless workers in a given week—600,000 of 1.3 million—would be teenagers.”*

Writing for [PBS](#), economist [Diana Furchtgott-Roth](#) reported the same thing in 2016:

*“Young people would be harmed the most by increasing the minimum wage. Almost half of minimum wage workers are under 25, and 19 percent are teens.”*

Only 1.8 percent of US workers were paid at or below the federal minimum wage in 2015, so it's a small segment of the overall population at this pay level but a large percentage of young people.

Rather than criticizing teenagers as lazy and in need of more control and structure, we should recognize the ways our culture infantilizes its teens. We confine them in coercive schools and school-like activities for most of their adolescence, limit their autonomy, and prevent them from working in jobs and gaining valuable career skills. Is it really any wonder that they may retreat into their cell phones when they get the chance? It might be the only moment of their day when they are actually in control and connected to the wider world.

From rising compulsory schooling ages to rising minimum wages, we treat teens like toddlers and separate them from the genuine adult world they will soon join. As Berg says:

*“For many teens, their days consist of an expectation to live a story or script that others have created for them.”*

Maybe we should give teenagers the freedom and opportunity to create their own scripts and witness the remarkable things they will do.

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