

## Generations Divided: How America Became Segregated by Age

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We live in a society acutely conscious of age. Ours is also an intensely age segregated society and a society that denigrates whole groups of people based on their age.

It was only beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century that Americans became preoccupied by age. Over the past century and a half, age became institutionalized, rigidly dividing age cohorts from one another.

Age can be a milestone and a guidepost – nothing wrong with that. But age can also play a much more negative role: It can become an artificial barrier separating generations. It can be exclusionary: cutting one age group off from another. It can also be coercive: Telling you what you can or can't do based on your age. We tell people that they're too old to have children or to continue working or to live alone.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, age was not especially significant in American society. It comes as a shock to discover that many Americans a century and a half ago had no idea of their date of birth and did not celebrate their birthdays. School classrooms contained children as young as two and as old as 25.

Educators took the lead in identifying age as a crucial way of organizing schools, creating classrooms for children of different ages.

Next came psychologists, who identified distinct stages of life and who also established age norms: expectations about how people at certain ages are supposed to behave.

From Rousseau to Freud to Piaget to Erikson and beyond, age has been important to various theories of physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Especially influential was America's first psychologist and the man who brought Freud to the United States, G. Stanley Hall. In 1904, he popularized a new age category in a book entitled *Adolescence*.

At first, age norms were applied primarily to the young. Infants and toddlers were either on schedule or off schedule. But soon age was applied to the elderly in a particularly pejorative way. Old age became increasingly associated with debility, dependency, frailty, mental deterioration, and a lack of adaptability.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, but greatly accelerating in the twentieth century was the institutionalization of age, as new institutions arose for specific age groups (such as orphanages, children's hospitals, and old age homes), as the peer group became the chief way people socialized, and as age became a crucial legal category, defining when one could work, drink, smoke, marry, enter the military, and even have sexual relations.

Advertisers were especially significant in establishing age norms. The most notable example is the emergence of the “toddler stage” was a creation of department stores that in the 1930s were seeking ways to expand sales of clothing and other children’s goods. Marketers subsequently identified other categories like teenyboppers and tweens.

Along with the growth of age consciousness came the growth of ageism: Disparaging groups of based on their age – from adolescents to the elderly.

In recent years there has been a breakdown of age norms, as growing numbers of Americans refuse to “act their age.” Middle-class children have grown more knowing and electronically-connected. Young adults have delayed many of the traditional trappings of adulthood. And many seniors continue to work and remain physically active well after the traditional age of retirement.

Today, it is common to think of age segregation as “natural” and a product of personal preference. Supposedly, people want to hang out with others of their own age. In fact, however, age segmentation is a product of the era of the Industrial Revolution. It is not a timeless reality.

Nor is age segregation benign. Age segmentation fosters distrust, stereotypic thinking, and misunderstanding. It accentuates competition over public priorities: Whether public resources should be devoted to Social Security, Medicare, and services to seniors, or to education and child care.

Age segregation is not inevitable. We must find ways to promote generational equity in the distribution of resources and seek to bridge the generational divide.