

Donna

The Lives and Times of a young person in Northern Ireland

The typical life of a young person in Northern Ireland, or indeed most places in the world, is often not typical at all. Stereotypes of a teenager are almost never true, I say 'almost' because there are of course, always a few who fulfil the expectations of others, dragging us all down with them.

Despite this, I find it very easy to see the humour in such stereotypes. For example, the apathetic, '*whatever*' attitude we supposedly all possess. Admittedly this can be the case occasionally but everyone cares about something, even teenagers. If I didn't I probably wouldn't be writing this. Being a passionate and caring person is not restricted to the adult world. Personally I believe the best thing about stereotypes on teenagers is how absurd and completely inaccurate they can be. This is not helped by the media. Thousands of popular songs are depicting our 'teenage angst'. We must be understood and rebellious and angry if so many songs say so.

I'm afraid I'm starting to sound very against stereotypes. True, I do not think they should exist as they are usually wrong. However they weren't just conjured out of mid-air and aspects of them can sometimes be precise. It's fairly common knowledge that adolescence is a difficult and stressful time, especially in its later stages.

With our world fast becoming a mass media monster, intent on consuming us all, with its portrayal of body image, sex, drugs and basically what we should and should not be doing it's a marvel young people even have minds of their own. Despite popular theory, we are not all junk food addicts and television zombies but people who are aware of what's happening in the world politically, environmentally and socially. But, like all age groups we are influenced by the media (as if we have a choice) and from as long as I can remember, learning from the Book of Media that

sex dominates everything. This isn't exactly an alien concept. Throughout time it has had a place of importance in society, but perhaps maybe not as public of a place. The generation I was born into knows nothing of the world before the genius idea- 'sex sells'. What must have society been like before this? How could a fizzy drink or shampoo been sold if not with sex? Is it any wonder teenagers are so obsessed with the subject if that is what we have been brainwashed into for years?

Young people's attitudes to it have certainly changed. Once regarded as a cherished and sacred, virginity is now a secret shame for many teenagers, something to be rid of, a chore to cross off before you have passed an acceptable age. It's not to say that the consequences of sex don't have their say. We know about STIs and STDs and teenage pregnancies. But this negative portrayal doesn't exactly sell lingerie or alcohol so we have the rather conflicting and much more positive aspect of it. That it's normal, everyone's doing it and if you're not then you have a serious problem. With so many views and stances on the topic, what to believe? Which is right? It would confuse anyone. Maybe that's why we're so angry.

The popular myth that all teenagers are having sex from about thirteen links in with, what I see to be a peculiar myth, the idea of peer pressure. That peer pressure is basically the only reason we ever do anything- drugs, drink, turn to crime and so on. I've never really understood this. Nor have any of my 'peers'. Apparently we are at that very influential age but, and I could be the exception here, my actions are generally not motivated by the actions of others. I have actually never even met anyone who has tried to pressure me into anything.

Conversations with others lead me to believe that I'm not alone in this respect. So peer pressure in adolescence is probably not the widespread epidemic one is told so many times as a teenager. Other words of wisdom we are taught is to be responsible for our actions yet when we do wrong, often it can be blamed on pressure from others. I do not think we are quite as easily influenced as the older generations like to believe.

However having said that, we have reached the age in which we begin to question the unquestionable ideologies spoon-fed to us from as early as we can listen.

In this regard, new ideas would probably be more willingly accepted if they represent the alternative. At this stage we are entering the rebellious phase- challenging authority, acting on our own accord, not caring about consequences etc. It is this phase that parents dread most. Something else I don't entirely understand. Like all phases it is merely temporary and despite the daring claims made to keep face, there is only so much damage teenagers can do. Behind the black clothes, sullen expression and foul mouth, there isn't a whole lot of actual rebellion going on. We must keep up appearances, of course, otherwise young people could get the bad reputation of being pleasant, docile and respectable citizens and what sort of society would we live in then?

I shall now move on to the educational portion of a young person's life. Obviously it plays a huge role in our lives contributing to practically everything else. Schoolwork makes us confused and stressful which leads us to become angry and upset which may result in rebellious behaviour i.e. drinking, criminal activities, drugs and so on. In this way one could make the outrageous claim that the education system is to blame for the major problems in society. However I am not one of those people. I do believe that education does contribute to at least two thirds of the difficulties and stress of our struggle through the torturous time of being a teenager. I think the obvious and, perhaps most crucial element of school life found most tiresome and anxiety-inducing would be tests or exams. We'll start with class tests.

From a teacher's perspective these are essential, that pupils should treat them as an opportunity to learn and be grateful that they finally have an excuse to crack open that dusty file and read barely legible notes. This differs slightly from the student's perspective: they are pointless, a complete waste of time and absolutely useless for any function. These conflicting views may worsen problems in the teacher/student relationship which we will delve into in more detail later on. Don't get too impatient. Back to the tests or rather the exams now. Having performed adequately in the numerous class tests, teachers are confident you know what you're doing. The student on the other hand has the extra burden of knowledge that cheating just won't work for these. Not having the great fortune of personally knowing the entire student body in my school, I can only offer my wisdom of what happens during exam periods. End-of-the-year exams are not my first priority. For want of a better

term, 'cramming' is how you could describe my revision process. However it appears to work as I'm generally a good pupil and I obtain grades with which I am happy. So I continue with my school career, content and oblivious to what the G.C.S.Es will have in store for me.

Fifth year brings the added irritation of the constant reminders about these exam as if it is better we die a slow and painful death than fail. Slow and painful deaths did not scare me and any warnings to start revising basically when you begin your first day of the year fell on deaf ears. Luckily though, I abandoned my old revising technique and actually did try, which worked well for me, and the results I received were cause for celebration rather than consolation and so I avoid the slow and painful death. The actual exam process, however, is extremely stressful and tear-filled (for some). In retrospect, I don't think the results were really worth it. Though I cannot be certain, I'm fairly sure the pressure put on young people to do well, by both parents and teachers, is much worse than this so-called 'peer pressure'. In the long term they say it is for our own good. One could take from that, that we will only do well if forced by other people. If left to our own devices, we probably wouldn't care half as much. I'm not sure if this is entirely accurate, but take from it what you will.

As promised earlier, I will now examine the teacher/student dynamic. Deceptively simple looking, it is more complex once past the surface. Like most young people, I would view teachers as I would view most authority figures- in a negative light. Still, I would respect most of my teachers but very few have had any real impact on me so you may be wondering, what's so complex about this? I think the relationship changes a great deal throughout your school career. Upon entering the school you are still a child and so most teachers will treat like one both in favourable and unfavourable ways. As you grow older, the relationship changes and in my opinion, for the better. As you near adulthood you are treated as such and this does bring responsibility, something I and many other teenagers shy away from. But it's also very gratifying to be treated more sincerely and almost like equals. Almost.

Unfortunately, it would take more than this to make school an enjoyable place to be. Yes, as young adults we know it is necessary but how does that help on cold winter mornings, trudging your way through bitter winds and teeth-chattering cold

when all you long for is the warm bed left behind? Dreams of the future are nothing in comparison to your bed on these mornings. But since regrets are futile and the future is inevitable, we bravely make the arduous journey through school life with only an occasional respite in Christmas and summer. Summer may last two months but this will never be long enough. I've learned the older I get, the more precious they get. Alas this does not make them slow down. But what does one actually do during these holiday periods that make them so wonderful?

Nothing. For a short and long answer, it would be nothing. For me anyway. Perhaps you've been fortunate enough to speak to someone who uses their holiday time in a productive manner and gets a nice tan. God knows it can be tough work lying in the sun for hours. Since teachers have somehow cottoned on to the fact these days are filled with lazy, lazy nothings they had the marvellous idea of work during the holidays. More so in the later years of your adolescence, they will set homework and coursework and all sorts of work to keep your mind sharp throughout your leisurely time. Call me cynical but I can't help but think that is probably the most idiotic and hopeless idea possibly ever thought up in the history of the world. Well, that may be too strong. In between the long periods of doing nothing and short periods of doing some work (not much) there is free time for us to socialize.

Humans are social beings. That's been stated before and will be stated in time to come because it is very true. Young people are beyond social beings with interaction with others as essential as oxygen. One true aspect of those stereotypes is the time we spend on mobile phones. Forgive us; it's an infatuation- talking to people on it whilst talking to others around you who are incidentally texting on theirs to people who are texting back whilst talking to someone talking on their phone probably to you. Now add computers. And mp3s or ipods. Maybe a TV. Possibly a book open in front being ignored lying next to a magazine showing anorexic models. This is multi-tasking to the extreme. If we are indeed getting more stupid as the world lives to proclaim (why don't they do the exams if they are so easy?), it is uncanny how teenagers can do so much at once. But there are exceptions. For example, me. The image I have just provided was brought to you by the observations of my sister. The image of myself would've been much more boring: me reading a book or

watching a TV. Never both. I cannot multi-task. I'm living proof that not all teenagers are fascinating creatures to observe. But most are.

I feel I have discussed two very important segments of a young person's life- socializing and education. Before I conclude, I think I must at least touch upon another important aspect- family. This obviously isn't just limited to teenagers but home life is quite different as a teen. Just like teachers, parents will treat you more like an adult as you near the end of adolescence. And despite the protests of wanting trust and the 'treat me like an adult! I'm 16' arguments, no longer being a child has its downside. Simpler times now are just a haze of mixed up memories and it seems almost a lifetime away when you realised that school isn't actually that great.

Parent/teenage child relationships are often documented on TV, mainly on sitcoms where teenagers hate their parents, parents just don't know what to do and a laugh track goes off about every ten seconds. I find it odd for parents to despair over their adolescent nightmares and for teenagers to despise them. I was brought up with the old fashioned idea of respecting parents. I always pity any of my friends who have problems with their parents and it would be hypocritical of me to say I understand it because I don't and that is why I will leave this subject to someone, with perhaps more expertise, to elaborate on.

I would never say my life, or indeed anything about me, is what a typical teenager is portrayed as in the media or just from our own stereotypes concocted by society. Anything I have written in this piece can never be accurate for what a normal young person's life is like because there is no mould for a conventional teenager. My experiences as a young person probably differ from those of any of my friends or peers. This is my perspective on teenage life, mostly negative as you can see, and my musings on what are apparently the best days of our lives.