



GREAT MYTHS OF ADOLESCENCE

**Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I. Axelrod,
Mitchell J. Prinstein, and Stephen Hupp**

Foreword by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

WILEY Blackwell

GREAT MYTHS OF ADOLESCENCE

Great Myths of Psychology

Series Editors

Scott O. Lilienfeld

Steven Jay Lynn

This superb series of books tackles a host of fascinating myths and misconceptions regarding specific domains of psychology, including child development, aging, marriage, brain science, and mental illness, among many others. Each book not only dispels multiple erroneous but widespread psychological beliefs, but provides readers with accurate and up-to-date scientific information to counter them. Written in engaging, upbeat, and user-friendly language, the books in the myths series are replete with scores of intriguing examples drawn from everyday psychology. As a result, readers will emerge from each book entertained and enlightened. These unique volumes will be invaluable additions to the bookshelves of educated laypersons interested in human nature, as well as of students, instructors, researchers, journalists, and mental health professionals of all stripes.

www.wiley.com/go/psychmyths

Published

50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology

Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Beyerstein

Great Myths of Aging

Joan T. Erber and Lenore T. Szuchman

Great Myths of the Brain

Christian Jarrett

Great Myths of Child Development

Stephen Hupp and Jeremy Jewell

Great Myths of Intimate Relationships

Matthew D. Johnson

Great Myths of Education and Learning

Jeffrey D. Holmes

Great Myths of Adolescence

Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I. Axelrod, Mitchell J. Prinstein, and Stephen Hupp

Forthcoming

Great Myths of Personality

M. Brent Donnellan and Richard E. Lucas

Great Myths of Autism

James D. Herbert

50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology, Second Edition

Scott O. Lilienfeld, Steven Jay Lynn, John Ruscio, and Barry L. Beyerstein

GREAT MYTHS OF ADOLESCENCE

**Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I.
Axelrod, Mitchell J. Prinstein,
and Stephen Hupp**

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2019
© 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by law. Advice on how to obtain permission to reuse material from this title is available at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

The right of Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I. Axelrod, Mitchell J. Prinstein, and Stephen Hupp to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted in accordance with law.

Registered Offices

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Office

111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, USA

For details of our global editorial offices, customer services, and more information about Wiley products visit us at www.wiley.com.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats and by print-on-demand. Some content that appears in standard print versions of this book may not be available in other formats.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty

While the publisher and authors have used their best efforts in preparing this work, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this work and specifically disclaim all warranties, including without limitation any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives, written sales materials or promotional statements for this work. The fact that an organization, website, or product is referred to in this work as a citation and/or potential source of further information does not mean that the publisher and authors endorse the information or services the organization, website, or product may provide or recommendations it may make. This work is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a specialist where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jewell, Jeremy D., 1970– author. | Axelrod, Michael I., author. | Prinstein, Mitchell J., 1970– author. | Hupp, Stephen., author.

Title: Great myths of adolescence / Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I. Axelrod, Mitchell J. Prinstein, and Stephen Hupp.

Description: First Edition. | Hoboken : Wiley, [2019] | Series: Great myths of psychology | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018024850 (print) | LCCN 2018026691 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119248781 (Adobe PDF) | ISBN 9781119248798 (ePub) | ISBN 9781119248767 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781119248774 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Adolescence. | Adolescent psychology.

Classification: LCC HQ796 (ebook) | LCC HQ796 .J539 2019 (print) | DDC 305.235–dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018024850>

Cover Design by Wiley

Cover Image: © A-Digit/Getty Images-School Kids Silhouettes;

© A-Digit/Getty Images-Cell Addiction

Set in 10/12.5pt Sabon by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

This book is dedicated to teens everywhere who are
working to understand who
they are and how they fit in the world.
and

To Kelly, Brea, and Chaney
(J.J.)

To Henry, George, and Angela
(M.A.)

To Tina, Samara, and Max
(M.P.)

To Henry, Vyla, Evan, and Farrah
(S.H.)

CONTENTS

Foreword	x
Preface	xvii
Introduction	1
1 Development of the Body, Brain, and Mind	7
#1 Adolescence ends at 18 years old	8
#2 Girls are universally experiencing puberty sooner in recent years	16
#3 The teen brain is fully developed by age 18	24
#4 Anorexia treatment usually requires teens to be separated from their parents	33
#5 Technology has made teens better at multitasking	38
Mini myths for development of the body, brain, and mind	46
#6 Pubertal “early bloomers” fare better than “late bloomers”	46
#7 Teens can study better while listening to music	48
#8 The “Freshman 15”: College students gain 15 pounds their freshman year	50
#9 Horses are helpful in the treatment of eating disorders, autism spectrum, and more	51
#10 The onset of puberty is very upsetting to most teens	52
#11 Male teens are much less likely than females to be preoccupied with their physical appearance	54
#12 Most teens hardly ever engage in leisure reading these days	55

#13	Greek life has a negative effect on college students academically	56
#14	Paying for prep courses is the best way to make large gains on the SAT	57
2	Development of the Self	59
#15	Significant mood disruptions in adolescence are inevitable	60
#16	Teens should have a job in high school to build character	64
#17	Risky behavior in adolescence is inevitable	68
#18	Taking care of an infant simulator doll increases abstinence from sexual activity	72
#19	College placement tests are useless at predicting academic success in college	77
	Mini myths for development of the self	82
#20	College students' lives are full of random hook-ups	82
#21	Teaching teens about contraception makes them more likely to engage in sexual activity	84
#22	Abstinence-only sex education programs are effective at keeping teens abstinent	85
#23	The HPV vaccine increases teen sex	86
#24	The millennial generation is lazy	87
#25	High school football players are more likely to become seriously injured than cheerleaders	88
#26	Offenders hide sexual interest when using the internet to initiate sex offenses against teens	90
#27	Conversion therapy effectively turns homosexual teens into straight teens	91
#28	Teens underestimate the consequences of risky behavior and adults do not	94
3	The Social Environment	96
#29	More quality time with teens can make up for less quantity of time	96
#30	Successful transition from adolescence to adulthood is achieved through detachment from parents	98
#31	Popular teens are usually mean	107

#32	Peer pressure only causes teens to make bad decisions	112
#33	Boys only use sticks and stones to hurt while girls use words instead	117
Mini myths for the social environment		121
#34	Most teens have a strained relationship with their parents	121
#35	Asking teens if they have thought about suicide “plants a seed” and makes them more likely to actually attempt suicide	123
#36	Teens only listen to their peers	125
#37	When girls are sexually assaulted it is usually by a stranger	125
#38	Most college students graduate in 4 years	126
#39	College is the happiest time of one’s life	127
4	Problems in Modern Society	130
#40	Teens these days are worse behaved than those of previous generations	130
#41	School violence is on the rise	139
#42	Boot camps get teens “on the right path”	149
#43	Most teens party with drugs or alcohol on weekends	154
#44	DARE programs prevent teen drug use	158
#45	Listening to heavy metal or rap music makes teens more likely to defy authority	165
Mini myths for problems in modern society		173
#46	Teens have the highest suicide rate	173
#47	Goggles mimicking drunkenness help prevent impaired driving	174
#48	Teens can be “scared straight”	176
#49	Sexting is only a teen problem	177
#50	Traditional High School Driver education courses have a strong record of making teens safe drivers	178
Index		180

FOREWORD

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

As monkeys go, we are a remarkably clever species in some ways. Alone among monkeys—alone among all creatures, in fact—we tamed fire many thousands of years ago and began to use it for our purposes. From the taming of fire to the creation of smartphones and their myriad apps, we have used our exceptional cognitive abilities to bend the world to our purposes, and to make our lives more comfortable and abundant.

Yet, at the same time, alone among all creatures, we have a special proclivity for believing nonsense. From the beginning of our recorded history, and no doubt for many millennia before, we have held a fabulous array of beliefs that are simply not true. From the belief that the sun is transported across the sky each day by a chariot pulled by heavenly horses, to the belief that misfortunes are a consequence of the malevolent “evil eye” of one’s enemies, to the belief that the individual’s personality is determined by the balance of four “humors” in the body—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—and many, many more, we show an astonishing level of creativity for explaining how the world works and why things happen and why we behave the way we do, all of which is entirely fabricated. What other monkey would be so foolish?

The rise of science about 500 years ago was a brilliant and world-changing innovation which, for the first time ever—yes, including the ancient Greeks, who may have been wise in some ways but were also enthusiastic purveyors of nonsense—put a systematic check on the human tendency to believe in things that are not true. Science requires evidence, and has rules for judging the validity of proffered evidence that everyone who engages in the scientific enterprise commits to following. The establishment of systems of scientific evaluation led to an explosion of fact-based knowledge that changed everything about how we live, and that revolution continues today.

Nevertheless, the rise of science did not extinguish the human proclivity for believing nonsense. Science only muted this tendency, and provided rules and standards to expose it and correct it. Humans, including scientists themselves, have a persistent, immutable attraction to appealing stories that seem to explain things in a comforting and familiar way, regardless of whether the stories are fact-based. Hence, there is a perpetual need for important works like this one, to draw our attention to the things we believe that are not correct.

This book focuses on adolescence, and follows other “Great Myths” books including the original work on myths of popular psychology (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2010) as well as a book that focused on “Great Myths of Child Development” (Hupp & Jewell, 2015). It covers a wide range of myths, 50 in all, and many of them will seem familiar to any reader. Some of the “Mini-Myths” are disposed of in a paragraph or two, whereas others receive more extended treatment. The latter include a useful “What you need to know” capsule summary at the end.

Almost everyone will discover here at least one myth they will have to give up in the face of the evidence. For me, it was “Greek life has a negative effect on college students academically.” I was also surprised by the myth that “High school football players are more likely to become seriously injured than cheerleaders,” given all the public attention to concussion risks among football players. I hope other readers will find, as I did, that even though it is never pleasant to have to admit you were wrong, there is satisfaction to be had in discarding false beliefs in favor of the facts.

But back to the original question of my Foreword, why do people have a tendency to believe nonsense? There are, no doubt, inherent cognitive tendencies we all share that lead us to misunderstand what we observe or experience, for example the tendency to interpret correlation as causation. However, with regard to adolescents in particular, many years of my own research and reading, as well as reading the present book, lead me to propose five factors that contribute to our beliefs in myths about adolescents.

1. Despising the young is arguably the last respectable prejudice, and believing the myths allows people to feel superior to them.
2. Some myths seem to be verified by the extensive media coverage they receive.
3. Many of the myths are portrayed in popular culture, particularly films and television.

4. Myths may be embraced because they are part of a broader political worldview.
5. Some myths seem logical, like they *should* be true.

Let's consider each of these explanations briefly.

The last respectable prejudice

The authors recognize that contempt for the young has been around for a long time, going back at least to Aristotle, and can be found in many different times and places (also see Arnett, 1999). The present book contains some potent examples of such myths, including that “Teens these days are worse behaved compared to previous generations” and that “The millennial generation is lazy.”

But why? Why does each generation tend to find the generation on the rise to be deficient in some ways? Books can and probably have been written to explain why, but one simple explanation is that adolescents are always a low-status group because they have little power, and low-status groups always receive contempt from high-status groups (Cheng, Tracy, & Anderson, 2014). Adolescents have little power because they are young; they are economically dependent on their parents, and they have not yet had a chance to accrue the knowledge and skills that may translate later into power.

This explanation, however, is no excuse. In recent decades, Western societies have come to view numerous traditions of contempt toward low-status groups as unacceptable: slurs against women, ethnic minorities, or sexual minorities were once not just accepted but celebrated with zeal and mirth by those in high-status groups. Times have changed, for the better, but the prejudice against the young remains. The authors here state that “most of all we want to debunk the idea that teens these days are worse than previous generations,” because they recognize how unfair that prejudice is and how destructive it is. It's time that bashing the young went the way of other formerly accepted prejudices. This book will help.

Media coverage distorts perceptions of frequency

Some myths flourish because they represent shocking events that draw media attention, and the media attention has the effect of leading us to believe the events are more common than they really are. Two examples

of this would be “Teens have the highest suicide rate” and “School violence is on the rise.”

Psychologists have identified what they call the “availability heuristic,” meaning that when we try to judge the probability of an event, we think of “available” examples, things we have witnessed or heard about (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Media coverage makes events like teen suicide and school violence more available. This is not the media’s fault, exactly. Suicide is less, not more, common in the teen years than in older age groups, but often more shocking because of the youth of the victim. If someone commits suicide at age 16 or 17, we not unreasonably think of it as a tragic waste of a potential life, because there is so much life yet to come, so much more opportunity to correct whatever is causing distress, compared to a suicide in the later years of life. In the case of school violence, we can hardly expect the media not to cover an event in which someone enters a school and commits mass murder, even if it is true that adolescents are at far more risk when they enter an automobile than when they enter a school.

However, this is not to let the media entirely off the hook. Spectacular coverage of teen suicides or school violence has the potential, at least, of generating more such events. Suicide contagion has been documented (Sisask & Värnik, 2012), and a motivation of at least some school shooters is to obtain a perverse kind of fame.

Myths of adolescence flourish in popular culture

A related reason for the prevalence of beliefs in myths of adolescence is that many of them are staples of the plot lines of popular culture, particularly films and TV shows. The authors do an excellent job in this book of providing many such examples.

This is unsurprising if you think about it a bit. It may not be true that “Popular teens are usually mean,” but there’s not much dramatic potential in popular teens being nice to the nerds and rejected kids. It’s not true that “Most teens have strained relationships with their parents,” but a movie about teens and parents getting along harmoniously would probably be short and not very compelling.

To some extent, these kinds of distortions and extremes are inherent in dramatic story lines, and not just for adolescents. It’s not common, either, for a short-tempered man to kill his father unwittingly and then unwittingly marry his mother, but that’s how you get the story of Oedipus Rex that has fascinated and appalled audiences for millennia. It’s just

that, given the above-discussed tendency to heap abuse on the young, it is important to remind people (as this book does) that films and TV plots about adolescents don't represent all adolescents or even most of them. It's just a movie, after all.

Myths can be part of a political worldview

It is also important to recognize that some false beliefs about adolescents are not isolated myths but part of a fabric of political beliefs into which the myth conveniently fits. For example, the myth that "Abstinence-only sex education programs are effective at keeping teens abstinent" fits neatly into a conservative worldview that premarital sex is wrong. Similarly, on the liberal side, the myth that "College placement tests are ineffective at predicting academic success in college" fits into a larger worldview that people can become whatever they wish to be and are not limited by the extent of inherited abilities or past experiences.

Myths that support a political worldview are likely to be especially hard to dispel. Mere facts may be of little use. The myth may be emotionally comforting, and acknowledging that it is wrong may mean casting doubt on the entire worldview, or creating cognitive dissonance, which people generally find unpleasant and try to avoid. On the other hand, it may be especially important to speak up loudly against this kind of myth, as these myths are often the basis of public policies that are useless or harmful, such as devoting government funding to "abstinence-only" sex education programs that do not reduce unintended pregnancies rather than to comprehensive sexuality education programs that do (Haberland & Rognow, 2015).

Myths sometimes seem logical and therefore plausible

Finally, some myths seem to make sense, so people embrace them without knowing about or caring about what research may say. In this vein, it is understandable that, for example, most people believe that "Traditional high school 'Driver Education' courses have a strong record of making teens safe drivers." How could it be otherwise? Isn't it obvious that being taught how to drive in a certified program would make you better prepared to begin driving? Sure it is, until you learn that research leads to the opposite conclusion, and this counterintuitive result is explained by adolescents who have taken driver education having a misplaced

confidence in their driving abilities following the course, which raises their risk of accidents. Several other myths seem to fall into this category, including “Teens should have a job in high school to build character,” “College students gain 15 pounds their freshman year,” and “Teens can be ‘scared straight.’”

One reason research is so important is precisely that many of the things we take for granted as true turn out not to be. Here as with the previous point, the consequences of false beliefs have important public policy implications. Once you know that traditional driver education programs predict greater risk of involvement in accidents, you can change their content to try to find more effective methods. Once you know there’s no evidence that “Teens can be scared straight,” you can shift public money from those kinds of programs to programs that research supports as more effective. And so on.

Conclusion: More empathy, fewer stereotypes

All in all, this provocative, informative, and entertaining book is a testimony to the value and importance of high-quality research. Because we have many cognitive tendencies that lead us to embrace nonsense, we are in perpetual need of the bracing tonic of science to steer us back toward the way things really are. The essays in the present book deepen our understanding of how adolescents really are in the twenty-first century. The book also subtly encourages us to be less harsh in our judgments of the young. Being young can be exciting, but it is not easy to find your way in the world. Dodging the opprobrium, ridicule, and nasty stereotypes of older folks does not help. It never has. By shattering many of these stereotypes, this book offers a sympathetic, encouraging, and—most important of all—reality-based portrayal of today’s adolescents.

References

- Arnett, J. J. (1999). Adolescent storm and stress, reconsidered. *American Psychologist*, 54(5), 317–326.
- Cheng, J. T., Tracy, J. L., & Anderson, C. A. (2014). *The psychology of social status*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Haberland, N., & Rogow, D. (2015). Sexuality education: Emerging trends in evidence and practice. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56(1), S15–S21.

- Hupp, S., & Jewell, J. (2015). *Great myths of child development*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Lilienfeld, S. O., Lynn, S. J., Ruscio, J., & Beyerstein, B. L. (2010). *50 great myths of popular psychology: Shattering widespread misconceptions about human behavior*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Sisask, M., & Värnik, A. (2012). Media roles in suicide prevention: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 9(1), 123–138.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185(4157), 1124–1131.

PREFACE

As with any book, *Great Myths of Adolescence* is the product of the hard work of a number of individuals, to whom would we like to give credit and thanks. First, we would like to extend our gratitude to Scott Lilienfeld and Steven Jay Lynn who wrote the founding book in this series, *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology*. We especially appreciate their mentorship and guidance. We've used this founding book as a guide in many ways while writing *Great Myths of Child Development* and now *Great Myths of Adolescence*. We would also like to thank Darren Reed and Danielle Descoteaux from Wiley Publishing. Their encouragement and assistance during the early conceptual stages of this book were invaluable. We are also appreciative of Liz Wingett, Monica Rogers, and Elisha Benjamin for helping us carry this book over the finish line. There have also been a number of students who have helped with some of the research required for this book. In particular, we would like to give special thanks to several research assistants—Hannah Dahms, Madison Schoen, Bethany Myszka, Molly Logic, and Katie Paulich—for their important contributions to the development and investigation of some of the myths.

INTRODUCTION

Someone famous once described the youth of society in the following way:

Young men have strong passions, and tend to gratify them indiscriminately. Of the bodily desires, it is the sexual by which they are most swayed and in which they show absence of self-control. They are changeable and fickle in their desires, which are violent while they last, but quickly over...They are hot-tempered, and quick-tempered, and apt to give way to their anger; bad temper often gets the better of them, for owing to their love of honour they cannot bear being slighted and are indignant if they imagine themselves unfairly treated.

In other words, “teens these days” are sex-starved, hot-headed, and become angry when they think they’re being disrespected. And who is the mysterious writer? It was Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher who lived more than 2,400 years ago (Aristotle, *Rhetoric Book II Chapter 12* as translated in Barnes, 2014). And it seems that the cynical view of “teens these days” has continued throughout the centuries, as exemplified in the first season of the Emmy-nominated show *True Detective* (Fukunaga, 2014), starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. In the show, Harrelson’s father-in-law echoes Aristotle:

*So you’re telling me the world isn’t getting worse? I’ve seen kids today, all in black, wearing makeup, sh*t on their faces; everything is sex.*

Great Myths of Adolescence, First Edition. Jeremy D. Jewell, Michael I. Axelrod, Mitchell J. Prinstein, and Stephen Hupp.
© 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Published 2019 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

While negative stereotypes of teens and young adults have existed for millennia, some of these stereotypes hold true when scrutinized under the lens of science while other stereotypes do not. For example, the stereotype that risky behavior generally declines over time when one moves from the teen years into middle adulthood is quite true. However, the often-held notion that most teens routinely get drunk on the weekends is not true. In fact, research shows that half of high school seniors report that they have never been drunk.

Format of the book and target audiences

Myths related to sex, drugs, and self-control, as well as many others, will be tackled in this book, which could be considered a sequel to our first published book *Great Myths of Child Development* (Hupp & Jewell, 2015), and will share many of the features of that first book. For example, in the current book we define each myth, identify each myth's prevalence, and present the latest and most significant research debunking the myth. We also conduct our own research on the prevalence of belief in each myth, from the perspective of college students, and present those findings throughout the book. Additionally, we link each myth to various pop culture icons that have helped propagate the myths. For example, in the *Great Myths of Child Development* (Hupp & Jewell, 2015), we reference television shows such as *Moonshiners*, *Duck Dynasty*, *The Simpsons*, *Mad Men*, *Sex in the City*, and many more. In the current book we reference movies such as *Mean Girls*, *House Party*, *Superbad*, *Project X*, as well as the *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* movie series. Other television series that we also cite include *Stranger Things*, *South Park*, *Jackass*, *Degrassi*, *Glee*, *Two and a Half Men*, and *Gossip Girl*. We also give mention to a few well-known doctors such as Dr. Phil and Dr. Oz. At the end of each major myth, we conclude with a discussion about why the myth is harmful and best practices related to the topic in the “What you need to know” section. For example, the myth that most teens routinely get drunk on the weekends is harmful because the communication of that myth has the potential to actually increase teen alcohol use. Specifically, teens may be more likely to get drunk if the myth leads them to think that “everyone is doing it—so it’s OK if I do too” or “everyone expects me to, so I guess I will.”

Similar to our first book, we believe that *Great Myths of Adolescence* has two primary audiences. The first audience is teachers and college students who may use this book as an ancillary text to their primary