



GENERATIONS IN POSTWAR BRITAIN

Activity Guide

This guide provides background information and prompts for further discussion around the *Bodies, Hearts, and Minds* toolkit activities ‘Generation and Identity’, ‘Teenage Rebellion’, ‘Parents and Children’, and ‘From Boyhood to Manhood’. It may be useful when running the activities with groups.

You can also find associated ‘Learning Objectives and Curriculum Links’ that can be used to support teaching on topics related to personal, social, health, and wellbeing education in England (1.1), Wales (1.2), Scotland (1.3), and Northern Ireland (1.4) on the [Body, Self, and Family website](#).

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WHY DO INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN POSTWAR BRITAIN MATTER?

Nowadays, we often take it for granted that there is a ‘generation gap’ – a real difference in the beliefs and behaviours of different generations that can make communication between them difficult. These generational differences are often most visible in tensions between children and their parents or caregivers.

We can find examples of intergenerational conflict throughout history. However, in Britain these generational differences were particularly sharp in the postwar period (c. 1945-1979). Social and economic changes after 1945 led to a heightened sense of differences between generations.

The generation who reached adolescence in the 1930s and 1940s lived through a period of extreme national and global turmoil. They lived through the economic depression of the 1930s and then the Second World War – while their own parents had experienced the First World War.

The bigger picture was very different for adolescents in the 1950s and 1960s. These teenagers grew up in a world shaped by the welfare state. The British welfare state was introduced via a series of reforms in the 1940s and 1950s that aimed to ensure the economic and social wellbeing of citizens. Reforms included the 1944 Education Act, which promoted free secondary school education for all, and the 1946 National Health Service Act, which led to the establishment of the NHS (and therefore free health care to all at point of entry) in 1948.

Crucially, successive governments in this period pursued economic policies based on full employment. Employment rates and wages were high. In the late 1940s, the school leaving age was raised from 14 to 15 (legislation passed in 1944, and enforced from 1947). In 1972, it was raised to 16. These changes extended the non-working period of life for all.

These educational changes converged with the increased spending power of families. Many young people had more leisure time and more money. This led to a new sense of adolescence as a separate, easy-going period of life, and to the emergence of a distinctive 'teenage culture'. Young people had different interests and opportunities to their parents.

These changes affected people of all genders and social classes, but in different ways. Working-class men earning higher wages could marry and support families earlier. Changes to the education system meant that some working-class people, and many more middle-class people, benefitted from the expansion of universities. In general, though, men were still expected to be breadwinners, and women were expected to be wives and mothers.



ACTIVITY: GENERATION AND IDENTITY

Task

The activity asks participants to undertake an exercise matching keywords related to personality traits, attitudes, and cultural events to specific generations. It is followed by discussion questions.

The matching exercise seems simple, but in association with the discussion questions, it encourages participants to think about:

- ✚ The extent and nature of differences between generations;
- ✚ The benefits and shortcomings of using labels for different generations;
- ✚ Which labels work, or don't work, and why;
- ✚ Similarities and differences between these generational cohorts.

Group leaders: Participants may not find it easy to match each word to only one generation. This can be used as an opportunity to discuss the shortcomings of these labels, and of stereotypes in general – shorthand labels can be useful in some contexts, but they can also mask similarities between groups.

Participants might also ask questions about specific terms and how they relate to particular historical periods/generations. The information below should help in fielding these questions.

- ✚ 'Generation X' is often referred to as the '**MTV Generation**' because 24-hour music television (MTV) launched on 1st August 1981, when most of this generation were growing up.
- ✚ Millennials are known as '**Digital Natives**' because this was the first generation to grow up with the internet and mobile phones.
- ✚ 'Generation Z' are described as **Zoomers** as an ironic play on 'baby boomers' (it has nothing to do with the video conferencing platform Zoom!).
- ✚ **AIDS** – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. This is the name used to describe a number of potentially life-threatening infections and illnesses that happen when the immune system has been severely damaged by HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). While AIDS cannot be transmitted from person to person, HIV can. AIDS was first clinically reported in 1981. It is associated with Generation X.
- ✚ **ADHD** – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This is a medical condition characterized by restlessness, difficulty in concentrating, and impulsiveness. The term is often jokily applied to Generation Z.
- ✚ **Latchkey kids** – describes children who use keys to let themselves into their houses because their parents are not in. The term became common in the 1970s and 1980s at the same time as more women with children began to work full-time outside the home. It is associated with Generation X.
- ✚ **New Labour** – this refers to the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (1994-2010). It is associated with Millennials.

✚ **Slackers** – refers to someone who avoids work. It also suggests cynicism and lack of interest in social and political causes. It is associated with Generation X.

✚ **Thatcher's Britain** – refers to Britain in the period of Margaret Thatcher's premiership (1979-1990). The most obvious connotations are with high unemployment, the decline of industry, attacks on trade unions, and the rise of free-market ideologies. It is associated with Generation X.

Above all, remember that some of these terms are cross-generational, might be applied to multiple generations, or will be interpreted differently by different people (often depending on their own generation!). The purpose of the exercise is partly to highlight the extent to which assumptions associated with generations are simplistic or unreliable – differences of opinion on meaning reinforce this point.

'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ Social and economic changes led to a sense of generational difference that still persists today
- ✚ The labels used to describe generational cohorts reflect this sense of difference, but often rely on stereotypes
- ✚ These labels don't always take into account differences between members of the same generation, and similarities between members of different generations



ACTIVITY: TEENAGE REBELLION

Task

This activity introduces the concept of a distinctive teenage culture that led to perceptions of a generation gap in the 1950s and 1960s. The discussion questions focus on exploring distinctive aspects of youth culture and potential generation gaps today.

The task encourages participants to think about distinctive aspects of their experiences as a generation. In thinking about their own experiences, they should gain deeper understanding of why generations are often seen as in conflict. The activity can also encourage reflection on how older generations were also subjected to stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes when they were young. Understanding why such conflict occurs is a first step towards developing coping strategies to negotiate conflict.

Group leaders: Ask questions about similarities or differences in experience between members of the same generation, as well as across generations. You might also encourage participants to think about practical steps for coping with generational conflict. Bear in mind that some participants may have difficult relationships with their parents or caregivers, and could find this a sensitive topic for that reason.

Because the questions focus on participants' own experiences, they do not need detailed information about teenager culture in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the following information might be useful:

- ✚ The ‘baby boom’ occurred across Europe and the USA. In the UK, it happened in two waves: peak years for births were 1947 (881,030) and 1964 (875,970), significantly up from the low-point of 1933 (691,590) (further information is available [here](#)).
- ✚ In the newspaper quotation, ‘the washboard’ (an old laundry tool repurposed as a musical instrument strummed with a thimble) – is a reference to ‘skiffle’ music, an early precursor to rock’n’roll. Famously, John Lennon was in a skiffle band called The Quarrymen before forming the Beatles.
- ✚ The newspaper quotation also mentions ‘rations’. This refers to wartime and postwar limits on food such as meat, sugar and dairy. In Britain, rationing officially ended in 1954. Using ‘rations’ in this context points up differences between the wartime sacrifices of older generations and the leisure of teenagers.

‘TAKE HOME’ HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ In the 1950s and 1960s, a distinctive teenage culture emerged
- ✚ This culture was a result of adolescents having more leisure time and more money
- ✚ The differences between teenagers and their parents were often described in terms of conflict



ACTIVITY: PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Task 1

This task asks participants to read quotations from oral history interviews with fathers and sons, and then to consider what these quotations reveal about attitudes to work and to emotion.

The task encourages participants to read quotations with attention to detail. Not all interviewees mention specific emotions or use the word 'work'. Making links between specific words and phrases and the attitudes or emotions they convey helps participants to be sensitive to nuances in historical and contemporary speech.

Group leaders: Oral history is a method of conducting historical research in which historians interview participants who lived through particular events or time periods. It has the specific aim of adding to the historical record by preserving voices and experiences that might otherwise never be recorded.

In discussions, prompt participants to think about particular emotions including pride, fear, anger, guilt, regret, shame, love, disappointment, and hope. Encourage participants to define particular emotions and to explain why they associate these emotions with specific phrases in the quotations.

You can also probe why different generations may feel differently about work – how does that play out today?

Finally, you might consider how these ideas about work play out across genders. What constituted 'work' for men and women in the past? This point can be considered further in the next task.

Task 2

This task asks participants to read quotations from oral history interviews with women. It is followed by discussion questions centring on how and why these women see their own lives as similar to, or different from, their mothers' and grandmothers' lives.

As in the previous task, participants are encouraged to read quotations with attention to detail. The quotations show that depending on their experiences, women may highlight different aspects of similarities and differences between generations. The quotations encourage awareness of the diversity of people's experiences. In association with the previous task, it also helps to highlight differences in gendered experiences in the past, and by extension in the present.

Group leaders: The quotations touch on different aspects of women's experiences across generations: in the home, as mothers and housewives; in education and the workplace; and in relation to sexuality.

These women have different views of what has changed and why. They also respond differently to popular myths about postwar experiences. You might encourage participants to think about the following points:

- ✚ AT and MJ, both born in the early 1950s, have very different views about the extent to which the welfare state and free university education shaped opportunities for women of their generation. (University tuition fees were abolished in 1976, and reintroduced in 1998). Thinking about the reasons for these differences in opinion could open up a discussion on the interaction of social class and gender in shaping opportunities.
- ✚ MJ talks about her own mother's large family. LT, born in the late 1960s, explains her own freedom in life partly in terms of her access to contraception. The oral contraceptive pill was made available free of charge on the NHS in 1974. As an easy-to-use, female-controlled method of birth control, it altered heterosexual women's degree of choice about having children. Thinking about the availability of contraception could open up discussion on the interaction of women's roles in education, work, and the family.

You might also prompt participants to think about the differences in how the men and women interviewed across Tasks 1 and 2 approach issues of work and education.

- ✚ Are there any factors that the men talk about that the women do not, and vice versa?
- ✚ What are the reasons for this? Do these differences help us to better understand gender roles in the past?

You might also encourage participants to reflect on their own ambitions and opportunities for life and work.

- + What are participants' ambitions for their future lives and work?
- + Do they have opportunities that were not available to these men and women?
- + If so, what are these opportunities? What has changed over the past few decades to open up these opportunities?

'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- + People of different genders experienced generational changes differently
- + For boys and men, these generational differences often centred on employment, because work was so central to male roles
- + Because women's main role was seen as wife and mother, there are lots of continuities across generations, as well as changes
- + Differences between parents and children were therefore determined by social class as well as by gender



ACTIVITY: FROM BOYHOOD TO MANHOOD

Task

In this task, participants consider an extract from a 1950s sociological text that sets out how boys progress through youth into manhood via a series of steps. The extract introduces some prominent ideas from the 1950s about how boys and men are expected to act.

The discussion questions encourage participants to reflect on the idea of 'stages to adulthood', but also on gendered expectations of behaviour. In thinking about how and why boys and men were expected to conform to certain attitudes and behaviours, participants should gain deeper understanding of longstanding ideas about masculinity and their effects on people's lives.

Group leaders: The main staging posts in the extract are: school; work; long trousers; smoking; drinking beer; and serving in the forces. National Service came into force in 1949 and required boys and men aged 17-21 to enlist in the armed forces for at least 18 months. It ended in 1960. Girls and women did not have to perform National Service.

Help participants to probe ideas about what constituted acceptable masculinity as boys came of age, such as being macho, adventurous, strong, working/ breadwinning, male-only friendship groups, heterosexuality, the 'stiff upper lip' or emotional repression, marrying, and providing for one's family. In considering why these attributes were

important to past views of acceptable masculinity, encourage participants to think about how these expectations were created and maintained through institutions like National Service, but also through parental and peer pressure. This will help participants to reflect on whether ideas of ideal masculine behaviour are different today.

Thinking about the equivalent staging posts today should help participants to reflect on both similarities and differences in expectations of male behaviour in today's world. Reflecting on traditional notions of 'macho' behaviour also promotes participants' self-awareness in relation to their own assumptions about ideal behaviour, and how such ideals affect their own wellbeing and that of others. In doing so, it can help them to understand the value of emotional openness and demonstrating care for others.

'TAKE HOME' HISTORICAL CONTEXT MESSAGES

- ✚ People have experienced the transition from childhood to adulthood in diverse ways at different points in time
- ✚ Expectations around gender roles partly shape these different experiences
- ✚ Markers of adulthood are different now, but certain ideas about gender roles are very persistent

