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Student Pieces: The Generation Gap is Not the Problem

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The Generation Gap is Not the Problem

ly broke away from their parents that the idea of an ever-present generation gap was popularly accepted. It has become a social expectation in America for younger generations to break away culturally from their parents. Though breaking away is a trying process for many, it ultimately helps members of the younger generation to forge identities of their own.

What is eventually recognized as a "generation gap" starts out as an intangible philosophical disparity between a younger and an older generation, eventually manifesting itself through changes in the young generation's lifestyle (changes in clothing and hair styles, musical tastes, etc.). These differences, the symptoms of more fundamental changes, are the tangible enemies that the older generation has waited for, enemies against which they can openly react. A father might tell his son, "Get to the barber, boy, you look like a damn fool," but his real concern is what's going on underneath that mess of hair. The popularity of rock n' roll culture in the 50s is another good example of a strongly opposed symptom of America's youth changing. After its parent generation finally found economic stability during World War II and the years after, the youth of

America adopted a more carefree, hedonistic lifestyle, embodied by the music and culture of rock n' roll. Shocked mothers begged pointlessly for the souls of their children back, terrified of the sudden cultural shift: "Rock n' roll is the music of the *devil*, and I will *not* have it in my house!" Today, most of us can laugh at our grandparents' generation's paranoid response to Elvis Presley and that diabolic thing he did with his hips. But although America is becoming more comfortable with the cultural disparity between its generations, not every concern regarding the generation gap can be taken as a historically-recurring joke on humanity's fear of change. There are many concerns regarding the generation gap that need to be taken seriously; among them, the concern of a cross-generational communication breakdown.

When the cultural gap between a younger and an older generation is too wide, the alienation felt by both sides discourages communication, encouraging each to blame and demonize the other. The voice of a frustrated *Breakfast Clubber* comes to mind: "You see us as you want to see us: in the simplest terms, in the most convenient definitions." Ironically, the members of the younger generation who feel slighted in this way are oftentimes guilty of the same closed-minded mistake, thinking of their elders in the "simplest terms possible" and refusing to make the socially beneficial effort of seeing things another way. When enough people on either side of the generation gap buy into this failure of imagination, the younger and older generations of a society stop communicating with each other, leaving important differences not only unresolved, but undiscussed. Old individuals are criticized by young ones as "cranky" or "backwards," while young individuals are criticized as "fresh" or "hard-headed." Neither of the complaining parties realizes that, in reality, both are equally cranky, backwards, fresh, and hard-headed towards the other.

Though the social consequences of such a communication breakdown would be serious, the likelihood of one ever being fully realized is negligible. No aspect of the generation gap is of immediate concern; in fact, a preoccupation with the gap only makes things worse... The generation gap, after all, is largely a product of the all-too-anxious Western mind. Nothing can resolve the cultural differences between a younger and an older generation. Fortunately enough, this isn't something to worry about. While a healthy level of communication exists between those generations, disagreements will remain cultural, not personal. ■

The term "generation gap" came to prominence in the late 1960s, when the cultural differences between the younger and older generation were particularly severe. The Baby Boomers wanted to break away from their parents' generation, maturing on their own terms; however, the Boomers' parent generation was unable to understand their children's radical cultural departure, and showed general discontent towards their children's freewheeling lifestyle. The "Greatest Generation," the generation that had led American society through the Great Depression and the Second World War, considered the generational rift an historical anomaly. It wasn't until later generations similar-