

## let kids be kids

I spend most of my time with kids. With five children at home and over 700 at my dance studio, it's probably fair to say that I spend more time with kids than I do with adults! Multiplied across 20 years of teaching dance, I have spent a lot of time with children and seen many changes along the way.

When I first started teaching dance, 5-year-old girls played with dolls in the lobby, carried their tap shoes in Barbie dance bags, and wore Garanimals over their leotards. These days it's more common to see a 5-year-old girl playing with a cellphone instead of with a doll, the dance bag comes from Justice and the outfit is by Taylor Swift. To quote Bob Dylan, "The times they are a-changin'!"

And, the times aren't just a-changin', Bob, they are moving faster. In fact, the accelerated speed of childhood has become so wide spread it now has its own name – "age compression" – a pushing of adult products and experiences on younger and younger children. And, it's everywhere.

I used to feel somewhat insulated from full-blown age compression in the Midwest, but in today's digitally connected world, what's "out there" is also "right here." From TV to clothing to music and social media, what was once reserved for adults is being marketed to kids at an increasing rate. In fact, according to the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Company) "tweens" spend \$1.7 billion each year of their own cash, and marketers know it.

TV shows featuring teenage actors depicted in adult situations, are being marketed to 8- to 10-year-olds. Adult clothing styles, including spaghetti straps, skinny jeans, and knee high boots are now available in size 5T. YouTube is filled with videos of kids singing

and dancing to songs that would make grandma blush. And, Facebook, once the domain of college students, has become a social currency for elementary and middle school students.

If marketers are in the business of grooming the next generation of adult shoppers, they are doing a good job. My biggest question is, however, what will children growing up today find when they get there? Adulthood used

to be something to look forward to; a time filled with new privileges, opportunities and responsibility. But, if many of the privileges and opportunities of adulthood can be experienced as children and teenagers, and the only thing left waiting in adulthood is responsibility, it's no wonder fewer and fewer children are looking forward to it.

And it's not just the questionable things that are picking up the pace; even good things are speeding up. Sports, for example, are more becoming more involved and time intensive at younger ages. Even dance is not immune. I recently attended a dance competition where I saw some 5- to 7-year-olds showcasing tremendous technical skills, but not necessarily a lot of class.

And, then there are academics. According to one popular infomercial, "Your Baby Can Read!" and the Baby Einstein video series can bring out the genius in your child. I admit that I bought every Baby Einstein video when it came out, but still felt like a failure as a



mom when one of my kiddos couldn't write his name the first day of preschool. It wasn't required by any means, but when my child was the only who couldn't do it, I felt like I hadn't done enough as a mom. I wasn't slacking off; it simply never occurred to me to work on writing letters before he was 3.

On a good note, I am happy to report that my son caught up just fine and now proudly writes his name on all his homework. No, my kids didn't read as babies, but did they did great by the first grade. And, they will survive elementary school without getting every gadget, the trendiest clothes, the latest music, or even a cellphone. They might not always feel cool, but they are learning to play outside, entertain themselves, delay gratification and read books. And perhaps the biggest lesson of all for me is that my kids aren't going to "miss the boat" if they just focus on being kids.

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