House & Home

The secret history of the teenager's bedroom

Parents have always fretted about what goes on behind closed doors — but societal shifts and tech dominance mean concerns are now more fraught

© Michelle Thompson

Emma Jacobs 5 HOURS AGO

As the new academic year gets under way, 15-year-old Fox has a compelling reward for getting through the school day: her bedroom. "It's a good place to relax . . . I want to get home and lie in bed." She has created a room to her tastes — on the walls are posters of films (*The French Dispatch*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club* and *Donnie Darko*) as well as musicians (A$AP Rocky, Wu-Tang Clan, Frank Ocean and four of Tyler, the Creator).

The pandemic made the teen, living in north-west London, feel her bedroom was a "home within a home . . . [It's] where I spent three years of my life. It's definitely a more comfortable space [because of lockdowns]."

The sanctuary of the bedroom has long been important for teens. I vividly recall the horror felt at the age of 15 when my dad, diligently doing his paternal duty, crossed the threshold of my bedroom to quiz a gay male friend about his intentions (Platonic! Obviously!). It stands out in my memory all these decades later because it felt so invasive.

Like millions of others over the years, my parents periodically fretted about what was going on behind closed doors. Yet, more recently, there have been social changes that have made the teenage bedroom more significant and fraught. Once a place to leave behind, today, due to high university fees and housing costs, young adults might return in an arc that has been described as less a transition to independence, more a yo-yo or boomerang. In the US, those in multigenerational households quadrupled between 1971 and 2021 to 18 per cent of the population. In England and Wales, the number of adult children living with their parents rose 14 per cent between 2011 and 2021.

At the end of last year, OnSide, a UK youth charity, found that 77 per cent of young people spent most of their leisure time at home, with 51 per cent in their rooms. At the same time, anxiety and depression among teens have increased. In the UK, the NHS reports that in 2022, one in four 17 to 19-year-olds reported a mental health issue, compared with 17 per cent the year before.

With today's smartphones and devices, for teenagers stranger danger is no longer only a risk in the streets but lurks at home, just as bullying can take place beyond the school gates. Such fears are crystallised in distressing headlines about TikTok challenges taking place behind closed doors.

But are teenagers' bedrooms changing as society shifts, and is technology making them riskier than in the past?

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The teenager is a relatively new concept, taking off after the second world war as children stayed in education longer and parenting became more intensive. Business seized on the new tribe. In 1958, The New Yorker ran a piece on Eugene Gilbert, whose company studied teenage buying habits as they became a consumer category and "people in general were becoming aware of them as a caste apart, or even, in the view of some anthropological thinkers, a culture apart".

Joe Locke as Charlie Spring in Netflix's 'Heartstopper' © Rob Youngson/Netflix

Jason Reid, author of *Get Out of My Room! A History of Teen Bedrooms in America*, says the teen bedroom has long been a source of anxiety, "once parents realised that giving teens too much privacy led to new problems that hadn't been considered in earlier eras". When the teen bedroom became an important site for socialising, he says, "people started worrying that teenagers would use their rooms to have sex with each other, especially once both parents started working outside the home and parental surveillance decreased for significant stretches of time over the course of an average day".

Today's teens may be less likely to engage in risky behaviour than their predecessors because, as research led by US psychologist Jean Twenge points out, they are pursuing "a slower life strategy", hitting markers of adulthood later, including drinking, dating and having sex. The research pointed to "greater parental investment, lengthened education, delayed reproduction, lower pathogen prevalence and longer lives".

Your views

Do you have a teenager? How does their bedroom differ to yours when you were that age? Share your memories and thoughts in the comments below

Solitude has a bad reputation. But it does not necessarily equate to loneliness. Research in the scientific journal Frontiers has found that "choosing to spend time alone is beneficial in terms of enhancing creativity, self-reflection and identity development". But also by "choosing when and how to engage in solitude, youth may also exercise their autonomy".

It may not be a sign of despair but teenagehood, says Devorah Heitner, author of *Growing Up in Public: Coming of Age in a Digital World*. "Sometimes kids withdraw because it's bad and sometimes it's because they are teenagers. Just because they don't want to hang out with you for 24 hours [don't assume the worst]. There is an intense expectation of family togetherness today."

When Carey Newson was researching a 2016 exhibition of teenagers' bedrooms at the Museum of the Home (then called the Geffrye Museum) in London, this idea of "a reflective space" or a "safety valve" was a recurring theme, even before the pandemic. Siân Lincoln, author of *Youth Culture and Private Space*, has described the room as an important site "for the exploration of the self, a place to take stock of their emerging adult lives".

For many, decoration is key to this exploration, starting with markers of childhood such as cuddly toys or pebbles from the beach. As teens mature, their tastes reflect external influences, including fashion and culture. This transition was expressed exquisitely in Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13¾*: "Bought two tins of black vinyl silk-finish paint . . . Noddy keeps showing through the black paint.*"*

It is the trajectory Maxwell Fine, a television set decorator, summons when recreating teenage bedrooms, most recently on *Heartstopper*, the Netflix drama based on Alice Oseman's graphic novels of queer love. That included "height marks notched on bedroom doors and threadbare childhood teddies, collid[ing] with trinkets from family holidays and doodles of future-bound affirmations".

This mix of the "past, present and future" is what drew photographer Adrienne Salinger to chronicle teen bedrooms in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. "Teenagers then and now still put everything they own inside that one space. The past is always [combining] with the present and the future is in there too."

Sixteen-year-old Selin from London eschews the toys favoured by some of her friends, preferring film posters, including *Scarface,* and Vogue magazine covers. "Sometimes if I get a present in a Pandora package, I'll put them up in my room as decoration," she says.

Mess is also a feature of autonomy. One friend describes her child's "floordrobe" containing freshly washed clothes their child "can't be arsed to put away". Another worries that his teen's accumulation of crusted cereal bowls would trigger mouse infestations. In one memorable post on Mumsnet, the website for relationship and parenting issues, a woman posted a picture of her daughter's "shit tip", asking AIBU (am I being unreasonable) for complaining after the dog wandered out with a used sanitary towel in its mouth. Should she order her offspring to tidy up?

A 16-year-old told me such requests "make you feel like a child. I find it easier and more fun to clean my room when I decide when to do it rather than someone else telling me I should. Suddenly it's viewed as a chore." "Bedrot", the TikTok trend to describe lying in bed all day, might be self-care but, to their parents, it can look like laziness or despair.

A scene from the 1993 film 'Dazed and Confused' © LMK Media

Of course, not all teenagers have the means to decorate — or the luxury of a room to themselves. The National Housing Federation found one in six children in England live in overcrowded conditions. In 16 per cent of such homes, two or more children or teenagers share a bed — and in 10 per cent, an adult shares with a teenager or child.

Children of divorce might have two bedrooms, one in each parent's home. Lincoln, an academic who researched the topic, interviewed just such a teenager, Lisa. Her room at her mother's home was more of a guest room, which never really belonged to her and made her feel like she was a visitor. It was at her dad's that she had a "space of her own". One teen I spoke to had two very different rooms in her parents' homes, which she said expressed slightly divergent identities: in one, her room was minimalist reflecting a more "cool" persona; the other was full of decorations, where she felt "messy and fun".

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Technology increasingly influences the teenage bedroom. Ikea, the Swedish furniture store, reports gaming dictates some design and decorating trends. Dark blues and greys are popular among teens, as is LED accent lighting and gaming furniture. Retailer John Lewis says searches for smart home technology are up 60 per cent from before the pandemic, and gaming accessories up 750 per cent.

Grant Robertson, interior design leader at Ikea UK & Ireland, says influencers and #roomtok hashtags are also having an impact. "Retro music, crystals and wellbeing are just some of the interests we are seeing, as well as a big desire to have plants in their room. Or a dressing table, full mirror and wall lights [for a] fully personalised space."

Tech's influence on the bedroom is a source of great worry for parents. Heitner observes it "becomes a place where you no longer sleep if you are being pinged through the night". Earlier this year, the US surgeon general issued guidance on social media use among young adolescents. "When identities and sense of self-worth are forming, brain development is especially susceptible to social pressures, peer opinions and peer comparison," it said. "Frequent social media use . . . could increase sensitivity to social rewards and punishments." It advised parents to "create tech-free zones and encourage children to foster in-person friendships".

'Bed rot', the TikTok trend to describe lying in bed all day, might be self-care but, to their parents, it can look like laziness or despair

Amy Orben, a psychologist at Cambridge university, says the relationship between tech and mental health is complicated and should be seen in a wider economic and social context. Devices are wide-ranging tools and their impact depends on the child. "They aren't like drugs ingested, their impacts are a lot more varied. Their impact depends on how they're used and also the user."

A teen using their phone to disconnect from a social life is very different to one trying to engage, she says. The worrying signs are similar to those in the offline world: changes in mood or becoming very secretive about their use. Adolescence is a time of major change, making teens more focused on their peers. "It makes tech more important to them — the features of phones allowing connection to other people is aligned to their evolutionary goals, which makes the phone more emotionally charged." Open communication, she says, is key.

Pete Etchells, professor of psychology and science communication at Bath Spa University, says "they need to feel that they can talk to their parents about it, and that it won't devolve into an argument. When that happens, or if they feel like the rules around being online are too draconian, then the risk is that they start hiding what they're doing on the internet. That's when risk increases."

Matthew Broderick in 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off' (1986) © Allstar/Paramount

Lenore Skenazy, founder of a free-range parenting movement, believes kids' attachment to their phones is not just due to peer pressure and addictive algorithms but a consequence of their parents' desire to keep them on a tight leash. She wants them to give kids "an opportunity to have a real-world outside life — we've really delivered them unto the gates of Instagram by never letting them go."

Part of parental anxiety is over teens' increasing unknowability as they make their way to independence, suggests Maggie Jackson, author of *Uncertain: The Wisdom and Wonder of Being Unsure*. It can be unsettling for parents, she says, suddenly to find their child to be mysterious. "A constant angst-ridden search for peace of mind is a quest for certainty that can never be fulfilled. Life and relationships are essentially mutable, dynamic and filled with unknowns — and that's OK." Parents must learn to deal with such uncertainty, she says.

While fears over toxic algorithms may be new, concerns over tech are not, according to Reid, who says technology has shaped the teen bedroom. Electricity and central heating enabled family members to "slink off to their own room and entertain themselves away from the rest of the family". Then personal tech — phones, TVs, computers and gaming consoles — made the room even more compelling. Each inspired unease, he says. The phone was a distraction interfering with homework; televisions and gaming consoles exposed teens to sex and violence; stereos introduced them to music which was deemed subversive or rebellious. So in some respects, "the fears we have now regarding social media's influence on teens are a continuation of trends that have been around for decades, if not centuries".

Fox is sanguine about the impact of tech on her bedroom. Her mum "doesn't like it if I go off to my room for hours on my phone but she's not worried I'm doing anything dangerous". That's possibly because she has good open discussions with her mum, and is relaxed about letting her family into her room for a chat, unlike some friends. There are no "keep out" signs or locks on the door. Though, she observes, that potential friction is reduced because she is "insanely tidy".

Emma Jacobs is the FT's Work & Careers writer

This article has been amended to correct the spelling of Pete Etchells' name

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