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The Hormonal Containment Chamber in Your Home

Jason Reid's "Get Out of My Room!" is a study of the rooms in which American kids carry out the hideous process of becoming grown-ups.

By *Daniel Akst*

Updated Jan. 20, 2017 6:03 p.m. ET

In olden times, teenagers didn't have bedrooms. Lacking doors to slam or walls to plaster with Megadeth posters, they channeled their energies into strenuous sulking by the fire, for which they had to be asked 10 times to bring in the wood.

Family togetherness was the rule in those happy days. Without spaces of their own, teens were spared the drudgery of keeping their floors littered with clothing—until developers, sensing an opportunity, began creating homes equipped with separate hormonal-containment chambers to quarantine offspring. Young adults eventually struggled free of these angst-ridden cocoons, like butterflies from a chrysalis.

This, at least, is the version that I always told my twin boys, who seemed satisfied sharing a stall in the barn until they were old enough to call child protective services. I can only imagine their shock when they learn of the radically different account presented in "Get Out of My Room!" Jason Reid's concise and well-researched history of the rooms in which kids carry out the hideous process of becoming grown-ups.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Reid, a historian by trade, portrays teen bedrooms as a household institution forever oscillating between refuge and holding cell. He argues that the rise of the teenage bedroom was the result of powerful forces, including shrinking families, growing affluence, increasing schooling and the advice of experts, a group of charlatans who at first enlisted God and then science (without evidence in either case) in place of common sense. The greatest beneficiary of these forces, aside from the builders who profited by selling bigger houses, were the teenagers themselves, who wanted their own rooms. And who can blame them?

In America, "the separate bedroom ideal first emerged during the early 1800s," Mr. Reid reports, noting that messiness was an issue from the get-go. In keeping with the gender roles of

the day, boys led more of their lives out in the world, but girls were likelier to be at home, where

GET OUT OF MY ROOM!

By Jason Reid

Chicago, 299 pages, \$45

some experts felt that a sanctuary of their own would help acquaint them with the domestic arts and keep them out of trouble—not imagining that the gift of privacy would someday help set them free. The prosperity of Northeastern cities and



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towns made the added expense of room expansion manageable for growing numbers of families in the region.

The trend soon went national. Parents came to believe that kids could study better in quiet rooms of their own, and the spread of oil- and gas-fired heating systems made it easier for family members to disperse themselves away from a central hearth or coal stove. This was one step among many in the slow-motion splintering of the American household. Houses accordingly grew larger throughout the 20th century even as families were shrinking. Mr. Reid doesn't discuss the advances in construction techniques that lowered building costs, but technology and social change march hand in hand across his pages to shape family living arrangements—and undermine parental surveillance and control over teens.

After World War II, Mr. Reid observes, teenagers acquired enough disposable income to become an attractive market. The rise of rock 'n' roll led to a generational divide in musical preferences, and the advent of portable phonographs and transistor radios loudly proclaimed the virtues of separate rooms for the kids.

Of course, technology's advances, including Princess phones and portable TVs, removed the sting of "go to your room!" and made it harder for parents to keep up with what was going on in

there. “The bedrooms that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s,” the author notes, “were seen by some observers as parent-free zones where teens could run riot.” A single poster of Farrah Fawcett in a swimsuit reportedly sold more than five million copies between 1976 and 1980 as part of a booming industry supplying such material for teen walls.

Parents and offspring embarked on a never-ending struggle over contraband, including not just provocative images but alcohol, drugs and even people. Mr. Reid cites the example of one Casey Calloway, a 1980s Georgia teen whose parents forbade her from spending time with her best friend. Casey smuggled her BFF into the house, and the two girls had something like a weeklong pajama party in Casey’s room without arousing suspicion. Of her parents Ms. Calloway recalls: “I was always in my bedroom anyway, so they didn’t think anything of it.”

It turns out that the teen bedroom is a useful prism for gaining perspective on a great deal of American social history, and Mr. Reid makes deft use of data to portray a changing nation and its people. In this day of near-universal cellphone use, it may come as a surprise to learn that as late as 1946 just 51% of U.S. households had access to a telephone. And who knew about the distinction between boarders (who ate with the family) and lodgers (who ate out)? For unmarried working people, being a lodger was a step on the path toward a separate apartment, a development that, coupled with the decline of live-in servants, freed up more rooms for kids.

The invasion of teen bedrooms by the internet has completed the room’s transformation from a place where kids were safely tucked away into a place where the world can all too easily intrude—and where teens can leverage their pranks to greater effect. Mr. Reid shows that, just as tinkering teenage boys helped drive the radio revolution, they pioneered the hacking of computer networks. “We weren’t really sure what he was doing,” said the mother of one hacker, “typing away at that computer all the time. I guess now we know.”

—*Mr. Akst writes the Journal’s weekly news quiz.*

Appeared in the January 21, 2017, print edition as ‘Chamber of Horrors.’

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