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YOUTH ISN'T KID STUFF THESE DAYS;  
YOUNGSTERS' WORLD IS FRAUGHT WITH PERIL. THEY MAKE THEIR OWN RULES IN A MILIEU OF  
SINGLE-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS, EARLY SEX, GANGS, DRUGS AND OVERBURDENED SCHOOLS.

**SERIES:** GROWING UP IN AMERICA: The Reality of Childhood Today. First in a series. Next: American children  
and violent death.

**BYLINE:** By RON HARRIS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

Childhood has changed.

It is not the superficial change among generations that parents and grandparents like to recall -- the quick car ride instead of the long walk to school; milk in store cartons rather than bottled and on the doorstep.

It is not just hand-held calculators in place of slide rules, nor the blip of Nintendo instead of the ping of pinball, not just 2 Live Crew instead of Elvis.

It is real change, fundamental change, sometimes even life-and-death change.

For children now, living with single parents, stepparents or guardians is the rule rather than the exception. Today, it is common for youngsters to be home alone while parents work, common to attend schools where boredom and fear replace promise and pride.

Childhood today can mean making your own rules and depending on those your own age -- in a world of early sex and drive-by shootings, of gangs and television ads begging you to "Just Say No" when your parents may already have said "yes."

And, those who pay close attention to the lives of American youngsters warn, childhood has changed for everybody's kids -- city kids, rural kids, poor kids, affluent kids, and kids of every race.

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More than 100 psychiatrists, teachers, social workers and historians across the country who were interviewed for this series of stories generally agree that childhood has been transformed because the family has changed, and with it the other institutions -- community, school and the standards of society -- that nurture the nation's children.

"It used to be that there was a fairly stable family unit. Home was a secure place . . . where there was encouragement for learning and so on. Now, with what's happening with the family, that just isn't there," said Frances Ianni, professor of education at Columbia University Teachers College and author of a 10-year study of adolescents.

In the previous generation, Ianni said, "the general idea in society -- what you heard about, what you saw -- was that there was a regimen and there was a structure. Now . . . families aren't in a society that supports that structure."

Bob and Linda Abrams do not need a bunch of experts to tell them about that. As they struggle to rear three teen-agers, they often think back to how it was when they were growing up in the 1950s and '60s -- Bob in northern Los Angeles, Linda in Culver City.

Dad worked and Mom was always home, as were just about all the mothers in their neighborhoods. The family lived in the same house and the kids went to the same schools through most of their childhood years. Meals were a family affair at about the same time every day. Everything, in fact, revolved around a fairly regular routine.

"Most of the time," Linda Abrams recalled, "you came home after school, played a bit, had dinner, did homework, watched television, maybe talked on the phone with friends and you were into bed around 10 p.m." Kids always went to bed before parents.

That is not what their youngsters, Emily, 16; Michelle, 16, and Jarod, 15, will remember.

Their mom has always worked, as have their friends' moms, so their parents are rarely home when they leave for school, and the house is empty when they return. The children have moved from house to house and school to school for most of their lives. There is really no daily routine; the family seldom eats together.

Last year, when they lived in North Hollywood, before the family moved again, Michelle and Emily would often drop off their books after school, then stay at friends' houses until perhaps 8 p.m. Emily would go to Gail's to smoke and talk, Michelle would visit Amalia, or sometimes go with her to hang out with gang members they knew.

Concerned because their kids' school performance is often erratic, Bob and Linda often ask them about homework, but almost never check it.

"Sometimes we do it," Emily said, "sometimes we don't."

For the Abrams kids, bedtime is flexible -- usually around midnight, but the parents almost always go to bed before the children.

At first glance, the Abrams family may look just like the American family of old, and statistically they represent the median American family today: Together, they earn roughly the median income for those in their age group -- \$42,700: Bob, 38, as purchasing agent for a bank, and Linda, 42, as an administrative assistant at UCLA.

The kids are an appealing threesome. Emily is a quiet, cherubic girl with long, dark-brown tresses who, like nearly all girls her age, constantly worries about her weight. Michelle is the intense and striking-looking family rebel. Jarod, whose interests are baseball, rap music and making money, looks like a clean-cut, well-mannered teen-ager right out of the early '60s. In North Hollywood, Bob and Linda owned a home typical for their income. They bought it, with help from Linda's father, at around the new median age for first-time home buyers, the mid-30s. They have achieved the median education level -- a junior college degree for Bob, and a high school diploma for Linda.

But the Abrams family is also representative of American families today for another reason: Bob's and Linda's

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marriage is the second for both.

For five years theirs has been a "blended" family, made up of members of two previous families that broke up in divorce.

And they are typical of millions of families across the nation because, over the years, they have had to worry about the effects of divorce and single parenthood on their children. They have had to grapple with such problems as day care, school absenteeism and mediocre educational performance, and have been concerned about such perils as child abuse, early sexual activity, gangs and exposure to drugs.

Like previous generations, the vast majority of today's youngsters do not get pregnant, do not drop out of school, are not physically or sexually abused and do not join gangs. But neither are they on their way to an assured future.

Today, growing up is more uncertain, more dangerous, more fraught with perils.

In 1955, 60% of America's families consisted of a biological father who went to work and a biological mother who stayed at home caring for the children. Now, less than 11% of the nation's families are like that, according to a study by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In their brief lives, the Abrams children have belonged to traditional families, single-parent families and, now, a second family.

Emily is Bob's daughter. Her parents separated when she was an infant. Before coming to live with Bob at age 7, she lived with her mother or her grandmother in and around Santa Barbara. Her mother remarried, moved to the island of Cyprus, divorced, moved back to Santa Barbara, then lived for a while with a boyfriend before Emily moved to Los Angeles with Bob.

Michelle was 2 and Jarod just a baby when Linda's first marriage dissolved. They lived with Linda in various apartments in Los Angeles, at times at their grandparents' home and once in Eureka with Linda's brother. They have seen their father only occasionally -- the last time four years ago in Alaska. Though they are part of the Abrams family now, their last name is Primiscerio.

If Jarod, Michelle and Emily have lived in single-parent homes for most of their lives, they are not alone. Sitting on a concrete wall at her school, Emily ticked off the names of her classmates.

"Gail lives with her mom," she said. "Alicia lives with her father; her mother died when she was 3. Natalie lives with her mother. Rene lives with her aunt. Vanessa lives with her mom and Gideon lives with her mom."

In fact, more than half of America's 52 million children under 18 have spent part of their childhood in single-parent households, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Such changes in the nature of the family concern specialists who work with children.

"Everything we know says that two parents are better than one," says Dr. George Weiner, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "Two parents in the same family is an enormous difference."

"When you have a single parent trying to raise kids and work, there's little time or energy for sitting down and talking," said Ianni, the Columbia professor of education. "Boys don't have a father image. What's even worse is that the female children don't see what a male is like in a relationship until they are out doing it themselves."

But today's two-parent families also encounter problems when both parents work. And about half of two-parent families today are "blended" (or stepparent) families, in which kids sometimes get confusing signals as parents struggle with questions of competing authority or as children are torn between the new family and the missing member of the old

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one.

In all these family structures, the absence of parents appears to be the most serious problem. "When parents aren't around as much," Weiner said, "they are going to be more indulgent, less likely to set limits, less likely to be consistent in maintaining the limits, more likely to look the other way rather than have a confrontation."

Linda Abrams said that certainly is true in her family.

"You feel guilty," she said. "You may put in one set of rules, or you put your kids on punishment, but then you relax the punishment because you feel sorry for them because of all the other things you haven't been able to do. Or, you just can't keep a certain routine going because of work or something else that comes up."

Psychologists and sociologists say that when individual families fail to establish hard-and-fast rules at home, they are also unlikely to join around standards for the whole community. And, they warn, when collective community standards erode and neighborhoods become less cohesive, parents have less ability to affect the values that their children will encounter in the popular culture.

When Bob and Linda were in school, they remember that schools and parents had a lot to say about how kids dressed. Boys could not wear their shirttails out. "You could get sent home for that," Bob said.

Today, clothing manufacturers, ad agencies and pop stars often seem to determine what children wear. Youngsters live in a world of brand names and \$100 sneakers, and, parents and children agree, kids worry over their clothes, compete over them, neglect school for them and often ostracize those who do not dress as they do.

Movies offer another example of the changing cultural impact on childhood.

When Bob and Linda grew up -- with such films as "Mary Poppins," "Thunderball" and "My Fair Lady" -- profanity and nudity were rare. In 1969, the first full year of the movie-rating system, 81 movies were rated G, for general audiences; 139 were rated M, for mature audiences, and 83 were rated R, for restricted.

Last year, there were only eight G-rated movies. Another 168 were rated PG -- the replacement for M -- and 341 were rated R.

Those restrictions do not concern Bob and Linda's children much. Jarod said he can recall only once being refused admission to an R-rated movie. Michelle said the age limit is never a problem. "I guess they think I look 18. I don't see why they don't just let us in anyway. By the time you're 12 you already know all that stuff."

Childhood has changed in other ways too. Linda recalls with a smile how she rambled, carefree, through her neighborhood as a young girl, playing unsupervised in the local park, meandering up and down the street visiting friends or just exploring open fields.

"We used to go out and play, sometimes we'd be gone for the whole day," Linda said. "Nobody worried about it."

But when Jarod and Michelle were the same age, "I never let them go to the park or places without me or another adult present. Now, you have to worry that somebody might come by and kidnap your kid." She recalls calling the police once when she and her small daughter saw a man in the park approach several youngsters.

Some generational changes are hard to spot. At 14, Bob collected comic books, read them for fun and let his imagination roam with their heroes. Now, Jarod reads and collects comic books too. But for Jarod it is primarily an investment. Whether he likes or dislikes their heroes, he buys first editions by the bunches and resells them, sometimes for double the price.

"If I had kept my collection it would be worth a fortune today," Bob grumbles. "But you didn't think about that stuff

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then."

Some changes are obvious.

Just about the time Bob was finishing high school in the late '60s, marijuana began to trickle onto campus. "It was really just a real fringe crowd" that used it, Bob recalled. "You might go to a party and have a beer, but drugs weren't really socially acceptable."

His daughter, Emily, can hardly recall a day when she was not aware of drugs. When she was 7, she was sent home after she took some marijuana that she had found to school. She has seen pills, cocaine, "just about everything," she said.

Jarod and Michelle first saw drugs when they were 13. For Jarod, it was "guys on the street smoking crack" as he headed home from school. A classmate produced the first marijuana Michelle ever saw. Cocaine soon followed. She figures that, by the time they are seniors, at least 70% of the students at her school have tried marijuana, and just about everybody drinks now and then.

Linda cannot remember any girls getting pregnant in her high school class in the '60s. She guesses that probably half of the girls at her school were still virgins when they graduated.

Michelle and her friend Amalia figure that most of their friends have had sex by now. In fact, Amalia says: "I can't believe I'm still a virgin."

Sitting in a nail shop, having a manicure before heading home, Emily thinks about her friends. One got pregnant at 13. Just about all of them have had sex, she says -- one girl with her own aunt's boyfriend.

Sexual abuse, too, is on the rise. In fact, Emily says a 14-year-old friend was molested by an uncle.

Though increased reporting may be partly responsible for the rise, reported sexual abuse offenses have jumped 30% nationally in the last five years.

Some of Emily's friends have gone through other kinds of abuse, such as Tony, 12, who called her from a pay phone one night. His father had fought with his mother. When Tony tried to intercede, the father turned to attack him. Tony spent the next few days at a relative's house. Another friend, Jason, 15, slept on a park bench one night after his brother warned him not to come home to his abusive father.

"There is a huge gap between Emily's generation and her father's generation," said Toni McBane, a marriage and family counselor who counsels Emily and other middle-income children in the San Fernando Valley. "Everything is earlier now. The drug experimentation is a lot earlier. Most of these kids, by the time they're in early junior high school years, it begins. Before, it was high school.

"Sex is earlier. The average age is 14 or 15; it used to be around 17 or 18. If there has been sexual abuse, it starts even earlier. . . . If you watch MTV for five minutes, it's pushed all over the place, the sexuality. It's in the movies, in magazines, on television, in music."

Neither Bob nor Linda can recall a schoolmate's death when they grew up -- no suicides, no shootings. There were fights, but with fists. "People ended up with bloody noses, but not dead," Bob said. "You didn't have kids packing guns."

Michelle and Emily can recite a list of friends or schoolmates who have been killed. There was the girl at Michelle's school who died in a motorcycle accident. "People said she had been doing cocaine before they got on the motorcycle," Michelle said, "so, you've got to figure the guy driving was doing it too."

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Another student was mistakenly shot while standing across the street from school at the doughnut stand where Michelle and Amalia always meet. Michelle did not know him, but she knows the teen-ager police arrested for the shooting.

And there was Rene, 15, who was fatally shot by accident while he and friends posed for pictures with a gun. Michelle and Emily visited him in the hospital, Michelle holding his hand as he lay connected to a respirator.

Michelle, Jarod and Emily are used to gangs, such as the North Hollywood Boys, who stoned Bob's car and painted "N. H. Boys" on it while it was parked outside the family home one night. Jarod tries to avoid gang members after school, but Emily and Michelle occasionally hang out with them.

In a world full of such perils, Bob and Linda have gotten professional counseling for both girls. For a while, they also attended weekly sessions of "Tough Love," a parent-support group, but that routine also proved difficult for working parents to keep up.

So, like many parents today, they are mostly on their own when they try to deal with the kids' attitudes toward school, even though countless other parents are struggling with similar problems.

Absenteeism and failure to do homework -- that was the rap on Bob and Linda's children last year.

The worst offender was Michelle. Out of 100 days during the final half of the year at North Hollywood High School, she missed 18 days in math, 17 in English, 17 in life sciences, 15 in health, 13 in softball and 12 in computer class.

When she did attend, she said, "My favorite period was lunch." Her grades reflected it. She made Ds or Fs except in health and softball and came within points of having to repeat the 10th grade.

Emily was absent 20 out of 100 days in English, her last class of the day. Even when she was there, she said, she was often sleepy from staying up so late.

"Let's see," said Lynn Bluth, her English instructor at Walter Reed Junior High School, as she scanned Emily's grades. "She was absent for two tests. She didn't do her book report; that was a double grade. She was absent for an essay. She missed three spelling tests, failed on the '(Diary of) Anne Frank' tests and got a B- and an A on 'Romeo and Juliet.' "

Emily graduated to the 10th grade, but failed English.

Jarod is a B-minus student but he would do better if he came to school more often.

"Out of a 20-week period, there were only six weeks that he didn't have an absence," said Marcia McHarge, his social studies instructor at Walter Reed last term. "But a lot of parents don't feel it's too important."

Bob and Linda said they know it is important, but as they juggle household responsibilities, bills, jobs and their personal lives, they find it difficult to keep up with all the details.

"The stress level is overwhelming," Linda said. "To a certain extent, you have to try to do something, but there's only so much I can do. I talk to Michelle and it doesn't do any good. I can't sit up there the whole night and make sure she does her homework, though I have thought about it.

"I would get myself to thinking, it's not my problem; it's her problem. If she fails a grade, that's punishment enough."

"It's hard to keep track," Bob said. "I shouldn't have to police Emily's homework. Even if I wanted to, I don't know

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what homework she has. I'd have to phone the teacher. . . . I do take an interest, but it is a practical issue."

And the absences?

"Mostly it's illness," Bob said. "Part of it is laziness, I guess . . . but how much freaking time do you have to determine whether one lousy kid is sick or not? When I was a kid, if you were truant, you had truant officers. Now, who cares? There's only so much you can do with a kid who weighs more than you do when they don't want to do something."

The Abrams children are anything but unusual in their school attendance records. In the nation's public schools, seemingly isolated problems are amplified as they are mirrored in student after student.

"It's not uncommon for a student to be absent at least once a week," said Christine Mangnall, Michelle's computer instructor at North Hollywood High. "I've got one student I haven't seen for a month. And the parents don't seem to care."

But even when students are present, educators say, there is less attention to learning.

Jack Moscowitz, who was a teacher when Linda attended University High School in the 1960s, and who is now principal there, still remembers her and her class. When he talked about kids today, he said: "I think the average kid has slipped. The smart kids are there. The kids at the bottom are still there. But it's the ones in the middle who have really fallen. They've got the capacity to do the work, but there's less commitment to education. They're more casual about homework assignments, more casual about attendance -- and so are their parents."

Those changes have caused many instructors to retool the way they teach. Some say they have the class read a text out loud in class instead of assigning it overnight because nobody would read it otherwise.

"I know that, for myself, I've lowered my standards," said Bluth, Emily's English instructor. "I used to ask them to write an autobiography. I quit giving that assignment a few years ago because either they wouldn't do it, or they couldn't do it or they would do just C work."

Schools across the country have found that they must compensate for what children are not getting at home before they can even begin the learning process. That can mean supplying everything from the morning meal to drug counseling to medical care to day care -- and sometimes even to day care for the students' own children.

Jane Flanders, a counselor at Emily and Jarod's school, Walter Reed, said many parents "don't know how to deal with their own problems, so they become the children's problems. The parents aren't coping, so the children don't. We have a generation of parents who don't set limits, don't follow through, who aren't being firm enough. These kids run over their parents."

Educators say they find today's children more street smart and less book smart. Psychiatrists and teachers say they are more responsible -- but largely because, in a world where they must more often fend for themselves, they have to be.

Like many others, Bob and Linda's children are latchkey kids -- on their own when classes end.

"After school, you see a lot of kids milling around school," said Brad Ratcliff, football coach and health instructor at University High School. "We've got buses that take kids home. The last bus leaves at 6 p.m. A lot of kids don't go home until 6 p.m. They don't want to go home. There's nothing at home for them. They're the kids who struggle in the classroom, who are the discipline problems. If there was an 8 p.m. bus, they'd wait until 8 p.m."

According to a USC study funded by the National Institute for Drug Abuse, children who spend five to 10 hours a week after school in a home in which an adult is not present, regardless of race or income level, are nearly twice as likely to smoke, drink alcohol or use marijuana. The probability goes up with each additional hour they spend

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unsupervised.

The children who are left alone regularly are most likely to be white and to live in middle- to upper-middle-income areas, the study found.

Paradoxically, Emily, Michelle and Jarod recently have had to spend more time alone than before because the distance their parents commute to work has become significantly longer.

Bob and Linda found the perils their children faced so unnerving that, in the hope that they could make things better, they sold their North Hollywood house at the beginning of the school year and moved to Canyon Country, a distant suburb of Los Angeles.

The new house is roomier -- two stories with four bedrooms and a big back yard. It even has a pool.

The area reminds Linda of the neighborhood where she grew up. The community and the school are mostly white. The place has a small-town feel.

"We just want a better lifestyle in an area where we all feel safer," Linda said. "It's mostly for the kids, with school. We're trying to get them away from some negative influences."

"We're trying to give the kids a chance," Bob said.

The children, though, have had mixed emotions about the move. Jarod misses the racial diversity of his old school. Michelle said she has been skipping school less often but thinks her attitude has not changed much. Emily said the school and the neighborhood are different, but some things are still the same.

"They've got the same things here that they had at North Hollywood," she said. "They've got gangs and drugs and all the other stuff. You don't see it as much, but it's still here."

The Changing American Family

Sixty percent of recent first marriages are likely to end in separation or divorce.

Nearly 25% of children today live in single-parent families compared to 9% in 1960.

Only about half of the children in single-parent families will eventually live in a remarried two-parent family.

Only 40% to 50% of all children will grow up in the traditional two-parent family.

Fifty-six percent of children under 6 in married-couple families have mothers who work outside the home. That compares to 19% in 1960.

Forty-two percent of children from kindergarten through third grade are left alone to care for themselves occasionally, if not regularly.

Source: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Child Welfare League; U.S.

Teen-Agers at Risk

As they get older, teens engage in riskier behavior. Binge drinking, drug use, petty theft and sexual activity all increase with age. Here is a list of risky, actions with the percentage of teens who say they engage in them.

In percent, by grade level

GRADE	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
FREQUENT ALCOHOL USE	2	3	5	9	12	17	22

(Student uses alcohol six or more times 'in the last 30 days')



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BINGE DRINKING (Five or more drinks in a row, once or more 'in the last two weeks')	9	10	16	21	27	34	39
DAILY CIGARETTE USE (One or more cigarettes a day)	4	5	9	13	15	16	18
FREQUENT USE OF ILLICIT DRUGS (Has used marijuana, cocaine or crack, PCP, LSD, amphetamines, heroin or other narcotics 'six or more times in last year')	1	2	5	8	11	12	14
SEXUALLY ACTIVE (Has had sexual intercourse two or more times)	7	9	15	24	36	48	60
SEXUALLY ACTIVE WHO DO NOT ALWAYS USE CONTRACEPTIVES	29	36	42	45	47	51	53
ATTEMPTED SUICIDE (Has attempted suicide once or more)	8	9	12	14	15	15	15
POLICE TROUBLE (Got into trouble with police two or more times 'in last 12 months')	3	4	6	7	8	11	10
THEFT (Stole something from a store two or more times 'in the last year')	3	7	10	11	13	12	11
SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM (Skipped school two or more days 'in last month')	7	6	7	9	10	13	14
DRIVING AND DRINKING (Has driven after drinking, two or more times 'in the last year')	1	1	3	5	9	24	33
RIDING AS PASSENGER AND DRINKING (Has ridden with a driver who had been drinking, two or more	18	21	27	31	36	43	46

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times 'in the last year')

SEAT BELT NON-USE

40 45 47 50 49 56 57

(Does not use seat belts 'all'  
or 'most' of the time)

Source: The Troubled Journey: A portrait of 6th-12th Grade Youth by Peter L. Benson, Search Institute for Lutheran Brotherhood. Survey of about 47,000 students in 25 states conducted between September, 1989, and March, 1990.

**GRAPHIC:** Photo, Abrams family, clockwise from left: Bob Abrams, 38, Linda Primiscerio, 42, Michelle Primiscerio, 16, Emily Abrams, 16, Jarod Primiscerio, 15. CON KEYES / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Michelle Primiscerio, lower left, and her friend, Amalia Sandoval, hang out with friends on Vineland Avenue in North Hollywood last fall. KEN LUBAS / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Emily Abrams lines up for ninth-grade graduation last June. JAVIER MENDOZA / For The Times; Photo, Growing Up Is Getting Harder: Childhood has changed, Column One finds. Living with single parents, stepparents or even guardians is often the rule rather than the exception, and youngsters have to contend with gangs, drugs and overburdened schools. In the first of a series of articles on growing up in America, The Times visits the Bob Abrams family, shown packing to move to Canyon Country to escape the perils of North Hollywood. MARSHA TRAEGER-GORMAN / Los Angeles Times; Photo, Bob Abrams in 1969 yearbook. ; Photo, Linda Moot (Abrams) in 1966. ; Table, The Changing American Family; Table, Teen-Agers at Risk