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Review article

## Growing Infantilism in Modern Adolescents and Young People: Symptoms and Causes

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**Abstract.** In the 21st century, in the era of growing infantilism, one of the important tasks of modern psychology and pedagogy is to solve the problem of educating and developing the responsibility of adolescents and young people. There are various hypotheses about the emergence of infantilism and irresponsibility and their manifestations in childhood and adulthood. The strength of society is the strength of individuals who make it up; therefore, in modern science it is important to identify the causes of social infantilism and introduce technologies for its prevention and correction. On the basis of a theoretical analysis, the authors consider the dominant symptoms of infantilism (irresponsibility, mental discomfort, loneliness, sexual behavior disorders, narcissism and gender chauvinism) as well as their manifestations in different age periods. According to the authors, the main reasons for the development of infantilism in adolescents and young people are as follows: (1) the lack of collective education and the low influence of teachers, psychologists and the educational environment as a whole on the personality development; (2) the pronounced style of pedagogy of freedom, provoking the development of egoism; (3) the delegation of responsibility for education exclusively to the family in the absence of psychological and pedagogical support for family relations; (4) the deformed model of family relations against the background of falling birth rates, shifting gender roles and family values. To prevent and correct infantilism among adolescents and young people, specialists in the field of modern education need to carry out systematic diagnostic work with families and pay close attention to the introduction of practical technologies for the prevention of irresponsible behavior among younger schoolchildren and adolescents. In addition, it is necessary to introduce psychological and pedagogical education of the younger generation on the issues of personal self-development, self-education and self-fulfilment.

**Key words:** infantilism, symptoms of infantilism, formation of responsibility, adolescents, young people, hikikomori, kidult

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## Introduction

The young generation of any country is the main reserve for the development of the state. It is no coincidence that the strength of society is made up of the strength of its individuals. Therefore, modern education, which is experiencing the collapse of the traditional system before the 'tsunami' of the upcoming digitalization, is faced with the acute question of how to preserve the viable resources of future human capital. Traditionally, the markers of a mature personality are responsibility, independence, freedom (including economic), social activity, moral reliability, adequacy (formed personal self-identification with society), professional and personal self-development and self-fulfilment. Accordingly, the characteristics of an immature personality are: irresponsibility, lack of independence, economic dependence, social passivity, marginality, immorality, creative stagnation, professional and personal degradation.

The problems of psychological maturity and infantilism have long been of concern to society. Legends and fairy tales from different peoples of the world describe important character traits of a mature person. The complex ecological, political and socio-economic environment that has surrounded man for thousands of years, the struggle for survival in a confrontation with nature, the large family and the embodiment of universal human values in popular culture contributed to the development of maturity and independence of young generations.

The infantilism of young people began to develop rapidly in the 20th century, especially in its second half. This was undoubtedly influenced by the technological progress and transformations of the institution of the family, family values and socio-psychological roles of men and women in family relations. According to a number of authors (Mikhailova et al., 2015; Kudinov et al., 2017), at present, the main reasons for the development of infantilism in adolescence and youth are as follows:

- 1) the lack of collective education and the low influence of teachers, psychologists and the educational environment as a whole on the personality development;
- 2) the pronounced style of pedagogy of freedom, provoking the development of egoism;
- 3) the delegation of responsibility for education exclusively to the family in the absence of psychological and pedagogical support for family relations; and
- 4) the deformed model of family relations against the background of falling birth rates, shifting gender roles and family values.

## Literature overview and analysis of theories

A.P. Chekhov was probably the first to brilliantly describe female infantilism: in his story *The Grasshopper* (1891/2004) the writer highlighted the main personality features of infantilism in the female image and showed the fatal consequences of the union between a hyper-responsible husband with an infantile wife. The author illustrated for the first time that infantilism is terrible not only for its parasitism but also for the desire to psychologically harm close people who demonstrate personal maturity and responsibility. The global problem raised by A.P. Chekhov is that infantile persons will not only live economically at the expense of their donors but also hate them for their successes and ambitions; they will use the donors, humiliating them, enjoying systematic psychological violence

(Chekhov, 1891/2004). One of the topical issues in the study of personality development is the question of how and when infantilism is formed.

It is generally accepted that personality development is influenced by three global factors, namely: heredity, environment and upbringing. Numerous experiments that nature has conducted on humans prove that children can perfectly adapt to the environment of animals, but the longer they stay in it, the faster they lose the ability for personal development. Therefore, it is the environment that is the leading factor influencing the features and qualities of future generations. The translator of the environment is culture. Everything that is not nature, everything human-created in a broad sense, is culture.

In her work *Configurations of Culture in North America* (1932), the American researcher Ruth Benedict identifies culture and personality. She argues that culture is the personality of society (Benedict, 1974). Margaret Mead, comparing the adolescence of American and Samoan girls, concluded that puberty in traditional cultures is conflict-free (Mead, 2004). R. Benedict noted with concern that it was difficult for a teenager living in the 30s of the 20th century to approach the world of adults (Benedict, 2006).

At the end of the 20th century, a new term appeared in popular psychology, i.e., '*Peter Pan syndrome*.' This syndrome does not denote a mental disorder: it is rather a metaphor used to describe socially immature adults. The term came into use after the publication of Dr. Dan Kiley's book *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up* in 1983. This book became an international bestseller and sparked a wave of publications in popular psychology. Dr. Kiley came up with the Peter Pan syndrome after noticing that, like the famous character in the J.M. Barrie play, many of the troubled teenage boys whom he treated had problems growing up and accepting adult responsibilities. These problems continued into their adulthood.

Dan Kiley draws attention to the fact that the study of the fairy tale about Peter Pan reveals not only an instructive allegory but also a rather sad picture to the psychologist. Neither parents nor other loving close people realize that many children are steadily following Peter Pan's path. Thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of young people are afraid of adulthood and this fear doesn't let them leave their childhood. Some of them eventually overcome their fears, but many remain in the ranks of so-called 'lost children' (Kiley, 1983). If A.P. Chekhov draws a portrait of female infantilism and irresponsibility in his story *The Grasshopper*, then James Barry, and after him Dr. Dan Kiley, skillfully reveals the typical features of infantilism in its male representation. At the end of the 20th century, the problem of the development of infantilism in society became quite obvious.

In the late 90s of the last century, the problem of infantilism among young people continued to develop due to the growing trend of public hedonism (Pupavac, 2000; Schulenberg, Zarrett, 2006; Tanner et al., 2007; Hayward, 2013).

In the 19th century, a new type of description of the state of infantilism appeared in the Japanese version, i.e., the *hikikomori* phenomenon. The term became widespread after the publication in 1998 of the Japanese psychiatrist Saito Tamaki's book *Hikikomori: Endless Teenage Years* (Saito, 2013). *Hikikomori* are young people who deliberately isolate themselves from others striving for complete

social isolation (they may choose not to leave their home for years). At the same time, *hikikomori*'s decisions are not associated with mental pathologies. They neither study nor work, being dependent on their parents. A *hikikomori* in the most general sense is 'a person without values'. Such young people are often completely immersed in virtual reality. The term itself, along with the abbreviated Americanized name '*hikki*', refers to people who are found not only in Japan. However, it is already obvious that in popular and scientific literature they are called exactly this way, in the Japanese manner (Hayakawa et al., 2018).

In Japanese, *hikikomori* is a designation for those who voluntarily stay in solitude: they are drawn inside (into themselves, to a shelter, to a specific place in a house or apartment), but not outside, not towards other people, even the closest ones. Society scares the *hikikomori*, they become reclusive and voluntarily refuse to fulfill the society expectations, such as helping their elders, studying or working for a living. At the same time, they are not mentally retarded and do not have mental illnesses that prevent communication. It is believed that most *hikki* experience discomfort and stress from their own weakness and low resilience, they are oppressed by the inability to return to the Confucian lifestyle, traditional for the Japanese family. Being unable to bring the image of the 'self' and the 'ideal self' closer together, they are ready to "admit being defeated without even entering a fight" (Bowker, 2016).

The *hikikomori* phenomenon has cultural and historical roots in Japan. Historically, loneliness for the Japanese is a manifestation of asceticism and self-knowledge. Therefore, interest in the ancient cult of *hikki* hermits has been renewed in Japan since the 70s of the last century. There are books, 'anime' cartoons and programs about *hikikomori*. Special groups are involved in helping hermit people. However, the socially determined reasons for the appearance of *hikikomori* lie in the traditional way of Japanese society, in a system of strict rules and standards that every Japanese citizen must comply with. A prestigious education is a secure future for a Japanese, so parents often require their children to have good grades on tests in secondary and high school (in junior school, they have no grades). School classes (they last up to 4 p.m.) are supplemented by daytime classes in sports sections, lasting up to 6 p.m. (if a child does not show significant achievements in sports, It will be a disgrace to his/her family) and classes at an additional education school (Nagornova, 2018).

For younger generations, living with parents is recognized as a risk factor for the *hikikomori* pattern development, which hinders normal psychosocial development, in particular the development of independence and can also lead to the emergence of psychological addictions. Refusal to communicate even with the closest people in most cases indicates the lack of feelings of attachment, low self-esteem and self-doubt, insufficiently developed communication skills, which acts as an obstacle in interactions both with peers and older people. Of course, the *hikikomori* phenomenon can be considered as one of the manifestations of the Peter Pan syndrome.

According to Russian authors A.E. Voiskounsky and G.U. Soldatova, it is digital technologies that contribute to the transformation of Japanese *hikikomori* escapism into a truly international, global phenomenon. As already noted, many

non-Japanese are willing to display the *hikki* worldview and behavior. For example, a recent empirical paper has examined the differences between American and Australian *hikikomori* who play computer games and show psychological dependence on computer games (Voiskounsky, Soldatova 2019). Many experts suggest that *hikikomori* are prone to developing the Internet addiction disorder (IAD).

The availability of digital technologies has significantly transformed the life of the international *hikikomori* community – traditional socialization, which they mostly neglected, has been replaced by a more acceptable digital socialization for them, which allows them to become even more social in the new ‘digital sociality’ than in the pre-digital era. Hikikomori hermits now have the opportunity to watch movies (including their favourite anime cartoons), play computer games (including online multiplayer games that require coordinated actions of large groups of players), find each other in social networks (presumably closed) and communicate, exchanging impressions and experiences. Nevertheless, they rigidly build borders and minimize contacts. The lifestyle they adopted has become widely known to the younger generation thanks to the Internet, so there is a certain fashion among young people for this style and for the use of the term ‘*hikikomori*’ as a self-name.

A similar phenomenon of modern society is represented by *kidults*: this word was first used by the British scientist Andrew Calcutt in his book *Arrested Development: Pop Culture and the Erosion of Adulthood* (Calcutt, 2016). The term began to designate middle-aged people who quite successfully fulfil their professional potential but retain the symbolic attributes of childhood.

We find another psychological portrait of the manifestation of infantilism among today’s youth in the description of the ‘*kidult*’ phenomenon. According to experts, a *kidult* as a phenomenon does not have a specific progenitor; the word is formed from two English words, i.e., ‘*kid*’ and ‘*adult*’ (Karpov, 2020). Despite the fact that many experts explaining this phenomenon refer to appearance, the essence of the *kidult* origin is attributed rather to the problems of psychiatry and pathologies of human social interactions.

*Kidults* are not recluses: they can be quite successful in everyday life, easily start a family and find a well-paid job. The question lies in the motivation of their actions: people with the arrested development do not see priorities in career growth or expansion of their own social networks, all these are only means of ensuring the need to maintain the ‘childhood’ stage. Many researchers pay special attention to appearance, as *kidults* retain behavioral patterns characteristic of adolescents, which is also expressed in clothing. Bright colors, prints and contrast distinguish *kidults* from the general mass of people (Gibson, Hamilton, 2013; Aline, 2014; Temnova, Tezina, 2018; Karpov, 2020).

It is worth noting that the listed criteria are not only distinctive features of people with the arrested development, modern reality tends to deviate from both behavioral standards and appearance. When analyzing the *kidult* phenomenon, a more correct name is often used, namely ‘*the delayed maturation syndrome*’. The problematic questions remain: when will such a person grow up? and will it happen at all? Let us now try to analyze the features of infantilism in modern adolescents and young adults in their development.

## **Current studies of infantilism in Russian and Western science**

Today, in view of the relevance of the problem of infantilism among young people, there are diverse Russian and international studies underway. This problem is considered in the humanities, including pedagogy, psychology, psychiatry, and sociology.

Modern Russian researchers state the growth of infantilism among adolescents and young people (Demidenko, 2018; Pakhomova, 2021).

Russian areas of research on infantilism in most cases are associated with the personal maturity. A.A. Seregina developed a methodology for diagnosing the severity of infantilism, *the questionnaire: Level of Infantilism* (Seregina, 2006). Based on the compiled model and structure of infantilism, the author has developed a correctional program, the essence of which corresponds to the main elements of the structural-dynamic model of infantilism.

The determining factors of infantilism, according to N.D. Apraksina, are deviations from social and cultural standards and personal disorganization of students as well as unfavourable conditions that disrupt the process of learning and professional development (Apraksina, 2008).

A.V. Utenkov considers the problem of educational and professional infantilism. He associates this phenomenon with a negative attitude towards accepted formal norms and values, colleagues who achieve success in their activities, and active-aggressive behavioural models (Utenkov, 2012). Ye.V. Sabelnikova identified the characteristic signs of adult infantilism in modern conditions. As one of the most important determinants of infantilism, these authors singled out the increasing intensity of information flows and socio-economic changes as well as, in general, the features of the cultural and historical environment (Sabelnikova, Khmeleva, 2016).

A.V. Miklyaeva singled out the main categories of personal infantilism, including: regulatory infantilism (difficulties in regulating behaviour); moral infantilism (distorted value orientations, a small share of personal responsibility, the desire to assert itself at the expense of others); reflexive infantilism (unhealthy self-esteem). According to the results of the study, the importance of the construct ‘personal maturity – personal infantilism’ in maintaining a positive social identity was noted (Miklyaeva, 2019). However, although this study highlights aspects of infantilism, it neither presents specific personal characteristics of infantilism, nor analyzes how the modern digital society affects the development of infantilism, nor presents developed programs for diagnosing, preventing and correcting infantilism among young people. The author of the study states that “the limitations of the socio-psychological approach to the study of personal infantilism are associated, first of all, with the lack of research tools that would make it possible to implement the principles of the socio-constructionist approach in empirical research” (Miklyaeva, 2019. P. 15).

In the latest Russian studies, the correlations of social intelligence, the phenomenon of infantilism and personal self-esteem are analyzed. Based on the results of the analysis of domestic studies, it can be concluded that the topic of infantilism is relevant, there are various theoretical models of the structure of infantilism, but a holistic system for diagnosing, preventing and correcting infantilism in

adolescents and young people has not been developed (Shtriker et al., 2021). It is important to note that today in Russian scientific and practical psychology there is an extremely small amount of methodological materials for diagnosing infantilism and there are practically no psychological and pedagogical programs aimed at preventing and correcting manifestations of infantilism in the educational space.

According to data published by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), young people in Eastern and Southern Europe are more likely than other Europeans aged 18–34 to live with their parents. Most of them are in Croatia, Slovakia and Italy. But northern Europeans (young Danes, Finns and Swedes) tend to live independently (Smith et al., 2017).

The highest percentage of young people living with their parents in 2015 was in Croatia (70.1%). At the same time, the number of sons living with their parents (78%) is much higher than that of daughters (61%). Slovakia is slightly behind Croatia, where 69.6% of young people live with their parents, while Slovak girls stay with their parents more often than girls from Croatia.<sup>1</sup>

Nancy McWilliams proposes to consider the infantile personality as retaining to a greater extent infantile forms of thinking. The attitude of irresponsibility does not decrease with age and the main defense mechanism, i.e., regression determines the strategy for overcoming life's difficulties (McWilliams, 2011; Gazzillo et al., 2015).

Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, author of the theory of emerging adulthood, singled out a special age period from 18 to 25 years, when young people, being in a transitional demographic state (no longer teenagers but not yet adults), have only partial independence, since they usually live with parents. Before choosing a partner or profession, they can try different options several times while maintaining their inner comfort zone and a sense of security (Arnett, 2010).

An alarming symptom of infantilism is the lack of will to grow up. Analyzing the work of Dr. Dan Keely and many other researchers, it should be assumed that there are six main symptoms of infantilism that parents, educators and psychologists working with children should pay attention to: 1) irresponsible behaviour; 2) mental discomfort; 3) loneliness and hidden fears; 4) mixing of sex roles; 5) narcissism; and 6) gender chauvinism. According to Dr. Dan Kiley, all these symptoms develop gradually in the age period from 10 to 22–24 years (Kiley, 1983).

Irresponsible behaviour becomes habitual around the age of 10–11 years. This is the period when a teenager consciously begins to use irresponsible behaviour strategies. It should be noted that the facets of such behaviour are very diverse and depend on the temperament and character as well as the circumstances in which this strategy of behaviour manifests itself. There are at least four options of the irresponsible behaviour of adolescents that need to be corrected as early as possible.

The first type of behaviour is *'angelic'*. Teenagers skillfully use the emotions of innocence and self-pity. Demonstration of this kind of suffering and offended innocence, complaints about ill health and the severity of life are emotion-

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<sup>1</sup> WritingBros. (2020, September 4). *Infantilism as Social Phenomenon and a Sign of Growing Immaturity*. Retrieved February 18, 2022, from <https://writingbros.com/essay-examples/infantilism-as-social-phenomenon-and-a-sign-of-growing-immaturity/>

al tools in the implementation of this behaviour strategy. The teenagers use parental love, care and guardianship to justify their behaviour.

The second type of behaviour, *'bully'* is an aggressive strategy of irresponsible behaviour implemented according to the principle 'attack is the best defense'. Knowing that few will be able to resist their rudeness and aggressiveness, the teenagers openly resist fulfilling their duties. They often resort to emotional blackmail and try to be the first to exert psychological violence. In fact, this behaviour hides self-doubt and low self-esteem.

*'Deafblind'* is the third strategy of irresponsible behaviour based on ignoring requests and demands and postponing chores. Typical phrases of this behaviour strategy can be, for example: "I forgot what you told me", "I didn't see your message", "I have no idea of how it happened", "I'll do it later". When this strategy is being implemented, parents are worried that the child has mental problems, but this is far from the case. It is just a convenient position to avoid responsibility.

And the fourth strategy of irresponsible behaviour can be called *'sweetie'*. Such teenagers are quite sociable and willingly offer their help to strangers, but in their own family they do nothing and do not help anyone. It is hard to be offended with them: it is not that they refuse to help, but they need to be reminded many times. Helping others is seen by them as compensation for inaction in one's own family. This strategy of behaviour is the most difficult to correct, since responsibility and care are periodically manifested, but they are not aimed at close people who really need help and care.

Thus, as early as at the age of 10, teenagers skillfully disguise their strategies of irresponsible behaviour and acquire the skills to use them consciously. Later on, other symptoms begin to develop, which we wrote about earlier. One symptom will complement another, thereby causing infantilism to develop more and more actively.

Let us single out the main topical questions that modern science must answer: (1) What most influences the development of infantilism?; (2) Can strategies of irresponsible behaviour be inherited?; (3) Why do hyper-responsible parents develop infantile children and vice versa, why do infantile and irresponsible parents develop responsible children?; and (4) What methods of correcting infantile behaviour are the most appropriate and how does the environment influence the development of infantilism?

## Conclusion

The main task of modern researchers is to develop practical tools and introduce into the psychological and pedagogical process effective practical methods for diagnosing and correcting the manifestations of infantilism in adolescents and young people. The scale and complexity of this task is due to the steadily growing youth infantilism against the background of computerization and digitalization of modern society. The formation and development of a person engaged in creative activities for the benefit of society, but not passively playing in the mythological virtual world, is a global goal, towards the achievement of which scientific research in modern education should be directed.

In order to form individual stable psychological boundaries, responsibility and activity, it is necessary to have an effective system of communications be-



tween the individual, family and society. For the effective functioning of the education system as the main channel for the transmission of cultural meanings, an active, dialogic interaction of home education, the state education system and the real socio-cultural context must be ensured.

To prevent the development of infantilism in adolescents and young people, the following modern measures should be highlighted:

1) creating a pedagogical and social environment that will stimulate social activity and develop the social intelligence in adolescents and young people;

2) reviving in the educational process the methods of collective and labor education to form the independence and influence the development of an individual in a group of peers;

3) providing pedagogical and psychological assistance to the family (especially incomplete families) in diagnosing and preventing infantilism in the practice of family education;

4) creating conditions for real self-fulfilment of young people here and now in order to prevent their escape into mythological worlds (the world of virtual games, digital reconstructions of communication, drugs, illusions, artificially created subcultures);

5) forming aspiration for independence (including financial), first of all, developing self-confidence, capabilities and abilities;

6) supporting the culture of family relations at the level of the state and society, supporting large families, the decisive role and responsibility of the father as a regulator of legal family relations and the rules of upbringing in the family;

7) developing and implementing digital protection methods; counteracting Internet addiction in the educational process in order to popularize a creative (rather than playing) personality; and

8) introducing self-learning and self-developing subjects (primarily psychology) based on the principle of natural correspondence in order to develop the younger generations in unity with nature and forming responsibility for their lives and the lives of other people on Earth in the practice of teaching adolescents and young people.

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## Прогрессирующий инфантилизм у современных подростков и молодежи: симптомы и причины

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**Аннотация.** В XXI веке в эпоху нарастающей инфантильности одной из важных задач современной психологии и педагогики является решение проблемы воспитания и развития ответственности подростков и молодежи. Существуют различные гипотезы по поводу возникновения инфантильности и безответственности и их проявлений в детстве и во взрослости. Сила общества – это сила личностей, его составляющих, поэтому в современной науке важно выявлять причины социального инфантилизма и внедрять технологии по его профилактике и коррекции. На основе теоретического анализа рассматриваются доминирующие симптомы развития инфантильности (безответственность, душевный дискомфорт, одиночество, нарушение сексуального поведения, нарциссизм и гендерный шовинизм) и их проявления в разные возрастные периоды. По мнению авторов, основными причинами развития инфантилизма в подростковой и молодежной среде являются: 1) отсутствие коллективного воспитания и низкое влияние педагогов, психологов и образовательной среды в целом на развитие личности; 2) ярко выраженный стиль педагогики свободы, провоцирующий развитие эгоизма; 3) делегирование ответственности за воспитание исключительно на семью при отсутствии психолого-педагогической поддержки семейных отношений; 4) деформация модели семейных отношений на фоне падения рождаемости, смещения гендерных ролей и семейных ценностей. Для профилактики и коррекции инфантилизма в среде подростков и молодежи специалистам в области современного образования необходимо проводить систематическую диагностическую работу с семьей и уделять пристальное внимание внедрению практических технологий профилактики безответственного поведения в среде младших школьников и подростков. Кроме того, необходимо внедрять психолого-педагогическое просвещение подрастающего поколения по вопросам саморазвития, самовоспитания и самореализации личности.

**Ключевые слова:** инфантилизм, симптомы инфантилизма, формирование ответственности, подростки, молодежь, хикикомори, кидалт

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