

# YOU DON'T GET IT: PARENTS AND CHILDREN

**“Fie, how my bones ache! What a jaunce have I had!”** —Nurse  
**“I would thou hadst my bones, and I thy news!”** —Juliet, Act 2, sc. 5

The “generation gap” refers to the differences in experience that people of different ages have had which shape their point of view and attitudes.

Students today are part of the “Millennial” generation. Your experiences with technology, world events, and American society will continue to shape your cultural understanding in different ways than the generation before you. This will lead to inevitable misunderstandings, even if they are not intended.

## In Shakespeare’s Time:

Children at the beginning of the Renaissance generally were treated as little adults, expected to act, dress, and work just as if they were grown up. Children had no rights and were absolutely subject to the decisions of their parents, including who and when to marry. In wealthier families such as the Capulets and Montagues, boys were sent to school and girls trained in domestic accomplishments such as needlework, music, and drawing. Later in Renaissance times, children of the wealthy began to be treated more in accordance with their abilities, and playtime was considered as important as studies, but absolute rule of the parents remained.

### **In Modern Times: Try this!**

Interview an older family member about how they were supposed to act when they were children and teenagers. Ideally this person should be at least 30 years older than you. Sample questions could be:

What did your parents expect from you in terms of marriage or a career? Did you have to fight them to get your own way or did you agree?

How was a child supposed to act at a grown-up party?

Were children expected to work or go to school? What did you study?

What were the clothes like?

How were teenagers supposed to go about dating? Was there a certain period of time that had to be observed before “going steady”? What was “going steady”?

See ORAL HISTORY PROJECT on page 36.



# ELIZABETHAN CULTURE: LOVE AND MARRIAGE FOUR CENTURIES AGO

*Romeo and Juliet* gives a fascinating snapshot of English life in the late 16th century, especially about love and marriage.

Obedience, hierarchy (“knowing your place in life”), and order were prized and expected of all good citizens. Any violation of duty or rebelliousness and disrespect of the laws would have consequences, even though enforcement of those laws was often arbitrary and ineffective. However, the way women were seen by the society was clearly defined. Elizabethan culture was patriarchal, and loyalty to your relatives was more important than anything else. Men controlled their wives and daughters. Chastity was a woman’s most important virtue. A father could disown, starve, or lock up a woman who had violated the family “honor.”

Queen Elizabeth defied all expectations of the age. She never married because she realized early that marriage meant loss of power. Even though the general opinion of the time was that women’s minds were weak and that a female head of state was an “offense against nature,” she ruled with great political skill and cunning.

Juliet is expected, as she approaches her 14th birthday, to be married and already planning her family. Shakespeare never specifies Romeo’s age, although it is often assumed to be a few years older than Juliet. In Elizabethan England the age of consent was 12 for a girl and 14 for a boy. However, statistics show that the average age of marriage in Elizabethan England at the time *Romeo and Juliet* was written was in the mid-20s, about the same as it is today. It is thought then that Juliet’s young age was meant to be extreme to audiences of that time as well, and perhaps a comment on Shakespeare’s perception of Italian culture.

The decision to marry is in the hands of Juliet’s parents. A father chose a daughter’s husband and it was considered dishonorable and disrespectful to communicate her desires in the process. Juliet must beg her father’s forgiveness after speaking out against marrying Paris. When a woman married, all of her personal property became the property of her husband and she had no say in how it was spent. Women were regarded as chattel (property) to be married to improve the family fortune or political alliances. Elizabethans thought women needed a male caretaker (remember, females could not have careers). However, Shakespeare lived during the time of the Renaissance, which was a turbulent and exciting period of history in which many old and accepted ideas were being questioned, examined, and interpreted. In this time the idea of romantic, personal love flourished. *Romeo and Juliet* is all about the struggle between personal love and “correct” matchmaking.

