LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Teens as adults

A New York Times editorial of Aug. 31 ("What's the Matter With Kansas?") helps perpetuate faulty and dangerous myths about teens that we need to cast aside. In the late 1990s, this country celebrated the 80-year marriage of Paul and Mary Onesi, who married in 1917 when she was 13 and he was 21. By all accounts, this was a highly loving and successful marriage. The Onesis saw five of their six children celebrate their 50th wedding anniversaries and produced nearly 30 grandchildren.

Now, in the case of Matthew and Crystal Koso of Falls City, the Times insists that it's unconscionable for Kansas to allow a 22-year-old "man" to marry a 14-year-old "child." (With Crystal pregnant and Nebraska prohibiting marriage at this age, the Kosos crossed into Kansas to marry with parental permission. Nebraska's attorney general, Jon Bruning, then charged Mr. Koso with statutory rape.)

But research I conducted with Dr. Diane Dumas and others, which will be summarized in an upcoming book called "The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen," shows unequivocally that many 14-year-olds are at least as competent as most adults across a wide range of abilities.

Throughout history the extraordinary abilities of young people were widely recognized. It's only in the last century — and mainly in the United States — that we've come to treat teens like children, which they certainly are not. In most developing nations today, teens are still integrated into adult society at an early age, and adolescent turmoil is entirely absent.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that the turmoil experienced by American teens is entirely the result of their infantilization by adults.

The Koso marriage appears to be successful. Let's wish them well and begin to focus on people's abilities, not on their age.

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