



NOT SO PLAIN AND SIMPLE ~ THE LIFE OF AN AMISH TEEN

Which would you choose? To wear jeans, own a telephone, go to high school – and live away from your family for the rest of your life? Or to wear long dresses, quit school after eighth grade, live without electricity – and stay close to your family and friends. Tough decision, huh? But, this is the choice that every Amish teenager must make.

by Jackie Walker

Many people recognize the Amish as a simple group of people who drive horses and buggies and dress plainly. But, the life of an Amish teenager isn't quite so plain and simple. At only 16, teens must begin to decide whether to remain Amish, a choice that will affect the rest of their lives. Here are the questions they must consider.

WHERE DID I COME FROM?

During 1693 in Europe, founder Jacob Amman and others decided to break away from other Christian groups and form their own religious sect. They called themselves "Amish" after Amman. In the 18th century, the Amish moved to America where all Amish live today – about 231,000 Amish in 28 states. Within their communities you may find Old Order Amish who maintain old traditions and new orders who may drive cars or use machines.

WHAT DO I BELIEVE?

As Christians, the Amish believe in God and Jesus. They also believe:

- The Bible is God's word.
- Worship should be held in a house every other Sunday for three hours. Christmas and Easter may be celebrated, along with other holy days.
- Sinful members should be shunned (no one may talk to them) and perhaps even kicked out of the community until they confess.

The Amish stay separate from the rest of the world so they can focus on God. To show they are different, they wear plain clothes (dresses, suits and hats); speak a different language (Pennsylvania Dutch), and do not participate in government. They reject all technology including electricity, cars, radios, telephones, computers and TVs.



WHAT WILL I DO ALL DAY?

Amish teens go to school in one-room schoolhouses with no electricity. There are usually three or four students in each grade and everyone has the same teacher. Subjects include English, Math, Health and History. Kids play sports during recess but do not have extracurricular activities. The biggest difference between Amish schools and “English” schools is that the Amish are only allowed to go to school through eighth grade. After that, boys find jobs in factories or work on the family farm or the family business. Unmarried girls may work in nearby homes or in Amish shops. Once women marry, they must stay home and maintain the house.

CAN I TALK TO NON-AMISH PEOPLE?

The Amish mostly only talk to other Amish – but not always. For example, tourists often come to Amish communities to purchase goods or to get a glimpse at a different lifestyle. Though it may be uncomfortable to be stared at, Clinical Psychologist James A. Cates, PhD (who works with Amish in the Elkhart-LaGrange settlement in Indiana), says the Amish are happy to interact with the “English” (non-Amish). The Amish are unlikely to develop deep relationships with the “English.” They usually do not allow anyone to take pictures or video of them.

Amish teens typically date other Amish teens – but not always. Cates said some Amish teens date “English” teens “to drive their parents crazy.” But when it comes to marriage, the Amish may only marry other Amish (or risk being shunned).

MAKING THE DECISION

When Amish teens turn 16, they enter Rumspringa, a time when they are released from Amish rules and restrictions. They may skip church, use technology, wear jeans and experiment with “English” activities. This freedom helps them to figure out if they want to be Amish or “English” for the rest of their lives.

“This is their time,” Cates said. “If they’re going to return to the Amish church, this is the only time in their lives in which they are free not to be under the expectations of the Amish church.”


For some, this immediate opportunity to break the rules can be too much to handle. In the 2002 film *The Devil’s Playground*, Amish teens from the Elkhart-LaGrange community were shown abusing drugs and burning buggies. Cates said this isn’t how most teens act during Rumspringa. But, the film caused enough of a stir that Cates was approached to develop classes to help Amish teens who have been arrested. His program is called the Amish Youth Vision Project. In three years, 240 Amish teens from Elkhart and LaGrange counties have completed the program. Cates said it has helped them to understand the dangers of peer pressure and alcohol use.

When Rumspringa is over, around age 20, Amish teens make a choice to either return to the Amish community or enter the world on their own. According to Cates, 95% return to the Amish lifestyle. At that time, they are baptized, join the church and give up all “English” items and activities.

WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM THE AMISH

The Amish stick close together, support their family and friends and maintain a strong religious identity. “It’s easy to look at the horse and buggy, the plain clothes, the way of living, and that’s what strikes us first,” Cates said. “If you look beyond that, there’s a powerful sense of Christian community at its best.”

Want to see what an Amish community really looks like? Take a trip to local Amish areas like Jamesport, in Northwestern Missouri (www.jamesport.net), or Arthur, Illinois (www.illinoisamishcountry.com). Can’t road trip? Read *Amish Society* by John A. Hostetler, and visit www.religiontranscends.com for more religion news from Jackie Walker.



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