

Understanding



TODAY'S YOUTH

Fall 2001

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Youth Culture Facts:

- One in 20 girls will develop anorexia nervosa
- One in 100 girls will develop bulimia
- About 20% of people with eating disorders will die from them
- For one boy with an eating disorder there are 10 girls with the disorder

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Not the World I Remember

I recently attended the 30th year reunion for my high school graduation class. Needless to say, it was a frightening experience. Kids I hadn't seen in three decades were now parents, and yes, even grandparents! Although we had all experienced many changes since last we met, we all agreed that our kids were growing up in a world very much different than the one of our childhood. The black and white days of the Beaver have been replaced with post-modern moral relativism.

As parents, teachers, youth workers and other adults look at this new world, we need to be reminded how different things really are. I sometimes hear a parent say that things have not really changed all that much. To some degree, that is true. We still have kids doing some of the same foolish things we did but the stakes are much higher now. Sex can be lethal. Marijuana is much more intoxicating. Drinking starts earlier. More Canadian kids are depressed than ever before.

A recent survey showed that almost 9 in 10 people say it is harder today to raise kids to be "good people" than it was 20 years ago, and 2 in 3 say parents are doing a worse job. Fifty-one percent of those polled agree with this despairing assessment: "There are so many bad influences out there that even for

parents who do a good job, there is a good chance their children will get into serious trouble."

You would think that if entertainment and materialism made you happy, our offspring would be the happiest people in the world. Unfortunately, this isn't always the case. Our children are growing up in a culture that cares more about profits than it does about people. Through the media we have people into our homes who would otherwise never get past our front door. Even our youngest children are able to live all

of their adult life vicariously thanks to the TV... nothing is left to the imagination except imagination itself.

Suffice it to say, today's pop culture doesn't do our kids many favours. It is our hope that through this newsletter we will be

able to help you better understand today's youth culture and the often-toxic society in which they are growing up. The world is changing at a tremendous speed for our kids. Most recently, the New York city tragedy has forever changed their lives. We at Youth Unlimited want to support and encourage you as best we can in your work and relationships with young people. We hope that Understanding Today's Youth will help put some of the youth culture puzzle pieces together for you.

"The black and white days of the Beaver have been replaced with postmodern moral relativism"

Wrestling with the WWF

Every week millions of young boys ages 2-11 tune into their favourite show to see bronze, breasts, and bizarre behaviour. WWF Raw (World Wrestling Federation) takes our kids into the new world moral chaos and decadence. Indiana University did a recent analysis of 50 episodes of wrestling in 1998 and here's what they found (and remember that things have declined significantly since then). There were 1,658 incidents of a character grabbing or pointing to their own crotch (not counting the slow-motion instant replays); 157 instances of wrestlers or audience members making an obscene gesture; 434 times people either said a sexually charged slogan or displayed one on a sign; 128 episodes of simulated sexual activity; 47 references to Satanic activity; and 609 instances of wrestlers or others being struck by objects like garbage cans or nightsticks.

In September 1999, the Parents Television Council conducted an analysis of the WWF's Thursday night broadcast of Smackdown. They concluded that the most shocking feature was the obscenity with 25 incidents of foul language per hour. Professional wrestling entertainment also includes stories of incest, sexual addiction, frontal nudity, female degradation, and extreme violence.

Of all the issues we could look at, let's just talk for a moment about the violence factor. According to Dave Grossman, an expert in killing and the harmful affects of media on kids, there are three things we know that can make media violence "particularly harmful". Let us assess "professional wrestling" by these three standards:



First, is it a realistic depiction of violence and human suffering? WWF is so realistic that many adults sincerely believe it is real. If some adults believe that, then how many children are harmed by a similar belief?

Second, is the violent behaviour punished? In the WWF environment, the GOAL is to inflict damage and harm to your opponent and such behaviour is rewarded. (As opposed to football and hockey where the play stops and the

perpetrator is punished.)

Third, is the violence for laughs and pleasure? Is it "happy violence?" Once again, the whole goal of the WWF is to associate pleasure (cheers, snacks, laughs, sexuality) from vivid, unpunished, visual depictions of violent behaviour and human suffering.

Does all of this have any affect on our kids? A Wake Forest University study showed that watching wrestling by males was associated with having started a fight with a date, being a date fight victim, gun carrying, other weapon carrying, fighting, spit tobacco use, non-prescription Ritalin use and driving after drinking. Alcohol or drug use during the last fight by the date or by the student was associated with watching wrestling more frequently, according to the study. Several cases of children being killed by others imitating the wrestling moves have been reported over the last three years.

So, as we wrestle with the WWF, make sure your kids aren't being exposed to it. They feel tremendous pressure to know what's going in order to fit in with their friends but they don't need the endless images of sex and violence. It may not be showing in your home but what about the place next door? Be a vigilant adult – don't let the WWF sneak into your house!

Freak Dancing Latest Rage

Teenagers bumping and grinding on the dance floor, rubbing their bodies together to the rhythm of their favourite tunes. Front-to-front. Front-to-back. Girls bending over while boys thrust their hips into the girl's backsides or faces. Kids straddling each other on the floor. It can be couples, threesomes, or a whole line (freak trains) of pulsating bodies. Articles of clothing sometimes come off.

It's called freak dancing (booty dancing, dirty dancing, grinding, jacking, freaking, the nasty) and it's hot with our kids. Although the kids, some as young as 12 years old, claim they are not being raunchy and that it has nothing

to do with sex, it sure leaves adults scratching their heads and longing for the days of the Twist.

It shouldn't surprise us that our kids don't think anything of it. Our culture has by and large taught our children that sex is just a recreational activity anyway. (Competition is an undercurrent of the freak dancing culture, in which one partner tries to outlast, or "break-off", the other. Whoever tires first is considered the weak one.) Sex is culturally defined as intercourse so anything short of that isn't anything to be concerned about. Young people today, including many in the church, don't even consider oral sex to be

"sex". Therefore, let us not be surprised that kids are just being true to their worldview. They see it simply as a way to express themselves while having fun at the same time. (Two of the highest values in the current youth culture I might add.)

I know every generation of parents have had a dance issue to deal with. The waltz was a scandal in the 19th century and the Charleston marked female rebellion in the 1920's. The swing caused a stir in the 30's and rock'n roll bugged our parents. However, none of these dance crazes amounted to simulated sex on the dance floor, which is the only way to

describe freak dancing.

So why is freak dancing such a craze right now? Walt Mueller, from the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding in Pennsylvania, outlines six reasons for its popularity.

First, in today's culture climate, it's only natural that kids want to freak dance. They have grown up in a culture that encourages sexual freedom without boundaries. To them, it's normal behaviour.

Second, the mainstream media has taught them how to dance and encouraged the practice. Their favourite dance shows and movies have provided plenty of lessons. Kids are only mimicking the visual and lyrical messages of their favourite songs.

Third, kids say freak dancing is a

way to express themselves and have fun. It's just another way to push the envelope and make them different from adults.

Fourth, we live in a postmodern culture that values limitless freedom of expression. It's about the pursuit of personal pleasure that has become the ultimate value among a generation of kids being entertained to death.

Finally, doing the "nasty" is seen as a non-threatening way to socialize. These are kids who are longing for intimacy, relationships, acceptance and connections. It's filling a need for closeness that many kids are not getting at home as families continue to fall apart.

Who knows what the next rage might be? For now, let's deal with this one. Freak dancing violates God's standards

of sexuality and decency. We need to remind our kids about morality, decency, modesty, and treating others with respect. Regardless of what the kids might say, this type of dancing fuels the hormones and most of our young people don't really need more fuel.



Kids freak dancing

Cult of Thinness Killing our Girls

A new study just released by the Canadian Medical Association Journal (Sept./01) found that 27% of girls age 12-18 have disordered eating behaviours such as bingeing and purging. They consider this number to be alarming. What should trouble us even more is the fact that the behaviour is appearing in younger and younger girls; some as young as 12 have turned to self-induced vomiting as a means of losing weight. These problems used to be the sole domain of young women and college girls but children are now adopting these dangerous behaviours in their drive for thinness.

The research also shows that as many as 4 girls in 5 of normal height and weight want to shed pounds. Many diet even before they reach puberty. Among 12 year olds, researchers found 9% of girls engaged in binge eating, 6% in purging (self-induced vomiting), 1.1% used diet pills and 0.4% used laxatives or diuretics to lose weight.

The story is even worse for 15 year olds with 22% engaged in binge eating, 11% in purging, 4% used diet pills, 2.2% used laxatives, and 1% used diuretics. Many girls with severe eating disorders die of organ failure or suicide. Girls who feel they fail to measure up to the cultural standards of beauty sometimes find death a suitable option.

There are two really interesting things to note in the study. First, the role of the media in perpetuating this cult of thinness. Mediascope reports that the average woman sees 400 to 600 advertisements per day and by the time a girl is 17, she has seen over 250,000 commercial messages. Only 9% of commercials have a direct statement about beauty, but many more implicitly emphasize the importance of beauty –

“Parents, teachers, and family doctors need to be encouraged to open conversations with young girls on issues related to eating and body image”

just try finding an unattractive, overweight girl in a teen magazine. One study of Saturday morning toy commercials found that 50% of the ads aimed at girls spoke about physical attractiveness, while none of the commercials aimed at boys referred to appearance. Other studies found that 50% of the ads in teen girl magazines and 56% of television commercials aimed at female viewers used beauty as the product appeal. This constant exposure to media may influence girls to become self-conscious about their bodies and

obsess over their physical appearance as a measure of their own worth.

Second, researchers were struck by how many girls actually wanted to talk about their problems and were frustrated that they had no one to turn to. What does it say about our society when we are too busy or not skilled enough to listen and empathize with our young people? Parents, teachers, and family doctors need to be encouraged to open conversations with young girls on issues related to eating and body image.

So what can we do to help our girls develop a positive body image? One, let's focus on what's really important – their values, character, and behaviour, not their looks. Two, don't talk about your own weight concerns to your teen. Be careful how you talk about your own image when standing in front of the mirror. Three, make sure the girls in your life know that weight gain during puberty is not only natural, but essential for healthy development. Girls need to know they are not any less attractive just because of these physical changes. Four, compliment your kids. Let them know how much you appreciate them for who they are and not what the media thinks they should be. Finally, make sure your girls stay active. Regular exercise, in whatever form, is a great part of staying healthy.

Raving the Night Away

Nicole's eyes filled with tears as she struggled to find the right words. She knew what she had experienced but couldn't find the language to describe it. It was a place of peace, everyone loved and respected each other, there were no words of violence and everyone seemed to be of one spirit. If you were to watch and listen to this young lady, you would really believe she was talking about a worship service or an out-of-body experience to the heavenly realm. But she wasn't; she was talking about her life in the rave scene.



Ravers

Raves – all night dance parties, often in warehouses and secret locations, often involving illicit drug use, meet many needs for the kids involved. The “code” of the rave is known as “PLUR” – a philosophy which dictates that each person freely give and freely receive Peace, Love, Unity and Respect. Kids always describe the rave as a place of acceptance and support. It is a place where they can escape from the pressures and stressors of their young world.

So, why are kids so attracted to life at the raves? First, it is a place of community. Kids disconnected from family, peers, church and society in general find in raves a place of approval and comfort. For many young people, raves have become family. The desire for love is nurtured with the use of the drug commonly called Ecstasy. Although it has many names, it's main function is to remove fear – the ultimate love

drug as it were. Everyone wants to be loved and for many raves have become the answer.

Second, there is an addictive nature to raves. Ravers live for the next experience, often enhanced with drugs. Postmodern culture tells our kids that “experience and feeling” are more important than intellect. Raves can be the counter to depression and the boring grind of daily routines. All of life is depressing compared to the excitement of the rave.

Third, raves, like music concerts, can be highly spiritual experiences. As kids move to the music for hours on end, ravers celebrate their unity and love, giving and receiving, in an almost worshipful way. Mystical altered states are created from the drugs, music, lights and dancing. For many it is an out of body experience that words can't describe. The DJ's can be seen as the “high priest” of the rave ceremony. It has a new age or pagan flavour to it as kids describe their heightened consciousness and oneness with nature. The “Technopagan's Rave Prayer”, widely circulated on the Internet, addresses the spiritual aspects of raves: “We thank the Technology Goddess for giving us the ability to rave. We desire that through the rave ritual we can use technology to bring the people of the world together in peace by means of dance. We finally wish that the Technology Goddess will receive our ecstasy while raving as an offering and a celebration of her omnipotence. Blessed Be and Rave on.”

Fourth, raving may be a natural response to the continuing wave of technology that focuses on time with products and not people. Every way of technological advance has always been met with the drive to have more time

with people. Raving may be some kids answer for the personal contact they're not getting elsewhere.

Fifth, it is place of escape - a place where adults won't venture and a place of fun. Today's generation has been taught that the meaning of life is based on how many material possession you own and how much fun you can have with them. The rave scene is just another place to go to enjoy life.

I think it is important for adults to understand the things that attract our kids to raves. For parents, we need to be aware of how much time we really spend with our kids. Surveys show that young people really want to spend time with their parents but it takes work on both sides to make it happen. For the church, it should bother us that kids go to raves to find all the things we claim to be about – peace, love, unity and respect. We should see these kids for who they are and treat them with dignity and not as those who would never be interested in spiritual things. For teachers, understand that this is just another avenue for kids to live out their postmodern worldview where feelings are everything and fun is the ultimate value. The rave may be light years from where we live but it is the only world some of these kids have ever known.



All articles were written by Paul Robertson. Paul is the youth culture specialist and Director of Church and Family Resources for Youth Unlimited/ Toronto YFC.