

Understanding



Toronto YFC



TODAY'S YOUTH

Fall 2002

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Youth Culture Facts:

- Youth spend an average of 7 hrs. per day using media
- 23.8% of MuchMusic viewers are 12-17 years old
- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes
- Nearly 5% of 12- and 13-year-olds have drawn up a plan to commit suicide

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A Trip Through Seventeen

One of the most insightful journeys a person can make into the realm of adolescent culture is an examination of teen magazines. One of the most popular magazines for young females today is Seventeen. If you were to spend several hours in serious study of a magazine like Seventeen, what would you learn about the culture of young girls in particular? What are the real messages being communicated to our kids?

Some general observations would include just how short most articles and features really are! The majority of articles consist of only one page followed by another page or two of ads. These "bites" of print information seem so disconnected and random that they can drive an adult reader crazy. However, we need to realize that this is the exact format that young people love. After all, this is the generation where waiting 10 seconds for a page to download on the Internet is too long.

In the May 2002 issue of Seventeen, there were 102 full-page ads out of a total of 203 pages. The majority of them sell cosmetics (Clean & Clear, Maybelline, Redken, etc.) and clothing (Ralph Lauren, Nike, Sears, etc.). Ad space is also given to videos, shoes, hair dryers, etc. If you add to these all of the "articles" that include or feature product names, prices, websites, and store locations – ads in disguise – you need to add another 46 pages! It quickly becomes obvious that every page includes some product, service, or idea to sell to our kids.

As you examine the magazine more closely, other things become even more striking.

First, it is hard to escape the obvious marketing component – even on pages that don't appear at first to be ads. It is often hard to tell where the advertising ends and the articles begin. The November 2002 issue of Seventeen has a regular section entitled "17 under \$17". It features 17 different types of body soap and each one includes a price, phone number, and/or website address.

Sometimes ads have to be marked "advertisement" to distinguish it from the articles around it. The line between "selling" and "telling" has been radically blurred.

Nearly every page trumpets an agenda for a teenager's life, most of which are guaranteed to make them better looking and their lives more pleasurable. Crest Whitestrips promise to make your prom a real success if you make whitening your teeth part of your personal prom preparation. Secret

Sheer Dry underarm deodorant assures that you won't be embarrassed as "the only thing that shines through is you" because it is "strong enough for a man - made for you." Starburst Candy – showing two teens kissing – will make your "life juicy." The new Corolla 2003 "just wants to have fun." Don't we all?

The overall premise is that you will never arrive and you will never have enough in order to be all that you should be. We should remember that advertising is in the business of selling disappointment. Unless they can make you



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Anxiety and Depression Too Soon

There is no doubt that our world changed significantly with the destruction of the World Trade Centers in New York. If the fear and carnage of that event wasn't enough, we can now add the Washington area sniper as yet another source of dread, reeking havoc on the psyches of kids on both sides of the border.

When you include these concerns on the list of normal stressors in a young person's life – academic pressures, athletic demands, work responsibilities, relationship issues, and peer pressure – we should not be surprised that more and more youth are dealing with anxiety and depression related health issues.

Trends in the Health of Canadian Youth, released in September 1999, prior to many of the current disturbing events, reported that one quarter of school children in grades 6 to 10 felt depressed at least once a week and had trouble getting to sleep.

In grade six, 22 percent of boys and 23 percent of girls, reported they had been depressed at least once a week over the last six months. By grade ten, 21 per cent of boys and 35 per cent of girls reported problems with depression. Girls are more inclined to withdraw and develop sleeping problems and the boys are more likely to become irritable and quick to anger.

When asked about the changes she has seen in the kids over the past 17 years, a local Child and Youth Counsellor shared the following observation: "High school students would

be dealing with issues around body image, drugs and alcohol, depression, suicide, etc. It seems to be the trend now that children are dealing with these things at a much earlier age."



In addition to the growing issues of bullying and anger, she also cites a number of psychological health issues that appear to be on the rise: "I see younger children dealing with anxiety and depression. Children in our schools are struggling with these things often without support."

On October 3, 2002, Health Canada released "A Report on Mental Illness in Canada" which showed that young people, especially young women, are being hospitalized at soaring rates for illnesses such as depression and anxiety.

When looking at the youngest category examined, ages 15 through 19, the report showed a high spike in hospitalizations for several mental illnesses. Adolescent girls in this group had very high rates of care for eating disorders, attempted suicide, anxiety disorders and depression. The study also reported that 26 per cent of the deaths among young men aged 15 to 24 are a result of suicide.

What can parents and adults do if they suspect a young person they know has a problem with anxiety and depression? **First**, take note of the behaviours that concern you and how long they have been going on including how often and how severe they seem to be. **Second**, be encouraged to talk to a mental health professional or your family doctor for more direction. **Third**, search out accurate information from libraries or the Internet that can educate you further about the problem. **Fourth**, talk to other families in your community who have been affected by these illnesses. **Fifth**, share your concern with the young person and assist him/her in getting the best possible help.

Childhood Divorce Latest New Rock Theme

Pop music themes have been fairly consistent over the past 15 years – sex, money, fame, rebellion, violence. Recently, perhaps in a case of art imitating real life, a new generation of pop songwriters is tackling the issue of childhood divorce and the impact it has had on millions of children. Someone once said "if you listen to your poets, you will know where your culture is headed." The insight of the musical poets doesn't bode well for our society.

With the skyrocketing numbers of divorces that have taken place since the early seventies, it was only a matter of time before some of those children caught in its aftermath would use their musical avenue as a means of dealing with the pain that infects them.

Pop star *Pink* describes her childhood as nothing short of growing up in a war zone on

her new CD "Missundaztood". Shedding light on what life was like in her house during the teen years, Pink sings, "This is my Vietnam/I'm at war/Life keeps on dropping bombs/And I keep score." Indeed, for a lot of kids, coping with the carnage of broken homes has become their new Vietnam – a war they didn't choose. The song opens and closes with eerie sounds of distant artillery fire. In a recent *MuchMusic* interview, Pink could only describe how she felt when he dad left as "abandonment". As she readily admits, this only led to a life of rebellion and anger on her behalf. In "Family Portrait" Pink croons, "You fight about money, 'bout me and my brother/And this I come home to, this is my shelter/It ain't easy growin'up in World War III, never known what love could be". Pink said

that after recording the song and listening to it being played back was a painful experience. "I realized how my life was affected, and to listen to that song was like being naked in front of an auditorium of people" (pinkspage.com).

Blink 182's Tom DeLonge laments, "The anger hurts my ears, been running strong for seven years/Rather than fix the problem they never solve it; it makes no sense at all/I see them every day; we get along so why can't they?" on "Stay Together For the Kids". In their hit song "Fade", rock group *Staind* sings about the loss of a father, "I just needed someone to talk to/You were just too busy with yourself/You were never there for me to express how I felt."

Other current rock songwriters who have experienced divorce at an early age include

front man Coby Dick from Papa Roach, Creed's Scott Stapp, Korn's Jonathon Davis,



Linkin Park's Chester Bennington, Slipnot's Corey Taylor, twin brothers Benji and Joel (they

only go by their first names because they are in the process of legally dropping their father's last name) of Good Charlotte, and the infamous Eminem among many others.

No matter how pleasant parents try to make it, divorce and separation always rips the kids apart. Lynn, a 17-year-old student, says, "Watching my parents go through a divorce was awful. It was the only time I have ever seen my father cry." Today's new rock has only put a face and sound to what thousands of kids go through on a regular basis. It is no surprise when young people talk about being so connected with a musical world that understands them.

Judith Wallerstein's latest book, "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce" provides anecdotal evidence to some of the many painful themes in today's music. Wallerstein

says, "Contrary to what we have long thought, the major impact of divorce does not occur during childhood or adolescence. Rather, it rises in adulthood..." She goes on to explain how the lack of a healthy marriage model has impacted a whole generation of young adults who have trouble forming and maintaining healthy romantic relationships.

The current reflection of broken homes in the current pop music scene should serve as a reminder to all parents about the importance of their marriage and family for their children. Husbands and wives need to cultivate deep loving relationships and as much as possible "stay together for the kids". Divorce and separation only result in wounded kids who never seem to heal. We only get one chance to raise our children and doing it right the first time is the only option.

The Impact of Music Videos

The world of adolescence changed forever on August 1, 1981 at 12:01 am. when MTV hit the airwaves with "Video Killed the Radio Star". MTV now made it possible for kids to "watch" their music. Often times when teens are asked what a particular song is about, the answer is "I don't know, I haven't seen the video". For those of us growing up a generation ago, old songs make us recall a certain time, a certain friendship, or a certain event. (Interesting to note that the number one selling CD in the world right now is Elvis Presley's "Elvis 30 #1 Hits.") Today, songs conjure up visions of music videos.

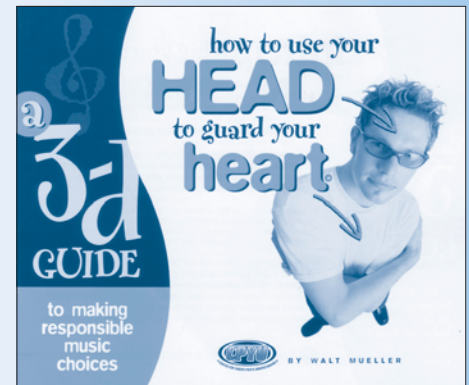
Music videos have impacted young people in a number of ways. First, it has limited the need for imagination and created a generation of passive viewers. Kids sit like zombies in front of a medium that leaves nothing to the imagination. Young people can see just about everything imaginable in terms of sex during an hours worth of MuchMusic. Christine Aguilera's new video "Dirrty" begins with a sexual content warning which probably only makes it more attractive for young viewers. It certainly leaves nothing to the imagination.

Second, powerful verbal messages are now reinforced with visual enhancements. One of the more positive videos airing currently is POD's "Satellite". POD (Payable On Death) is a rap-rock group which consists of all Christian guys. They play with some of the wildest groups you can imagine but as RollingStone magazine says, "they really do walk the talk". "Satellite" is really a tribute to and a cinematic look at God the Satellite - "Confusion blinded

me, mental and physically/And it's because of you that now I see/So now can I run? I follow the Son and ride on to Zion".

Third, some visuals only seem to confuse the message and have nothing to do with the lyrics. Given modern technology's capabilities, some artists seem to get carried away with their own creativity. Some videos are dream-like, surrealistic ventures which do little or nothing to connect with the lyrics. This is typical in postmodernism where the music and the message is whatever you "feel" you want it to be. Often times the numerous special effects only add to confusion of an already garbled message.

Finally, some video "stories" add meanings and visuals that are not obvious from the lyrics. Our Lady Peace's current video "Innocent" is a perfect example. Some parents were recently asked to listen to the lyrics as played from the CD. The solid, non-offensive lyrics "Oh, Johnny wishes he was famous/Spends his time alone in the basement/With Lennon and Cobain and a guitar and a stereo/And while he wishes he could be escape this/But it all seems so contagious/Not to be yourself and faceless/And a song that has no soul" seemed fairly passive and unemotional. However, the parents were then shown the video. This opening scene is made much more powerful when looking into the teenager's room and seeing him in action surrounded by all of his musical icons. This video, like so many others, really "comes alive" when seen as well as heard.



Parents need to be aware of just how powerful music videos can be.

We know that the vast majority of kids, both Christian and non-Christian, watch MuchMusic daily. Taking time to teach our kids how to discern the difference between appropriate and inappropriate musical choices is a valuable skill they will carry with them the rest of their lives. If musical choices are a matter of concern at your house, you might want try "How To Use Your Head to Guard Your Heart", a 3-d brochure and guide to making responsible music choices.

- > Call 416-383-1477 to order.
- > Cost is \$5.00 plus postage.

A Trip Through Seventeen

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disenchanted with what you have, they can never induce you to buy another product.

Second, the magazine portrays an unhealthy body image for girls. *Thin is still in.* It really doesn't seem to matter what the product is as long as the model is slim. Volatile shoe wear features three models with nice sandals and very long legs. The picture is shot from a lower angle to enhance their slenderness. The ad for Steve Madden shoes uses trick photography to make the



model's head much larger than everything else in the picture while emphasizing long thin legs and rounded cleavage.

About three years ago, one of the editors of Seventeen appeared on CNN to talk about their latest issue, which featured "plus size" models in a prom dress special. The editor went to great lengths to talk about taking more responsibility for the body images they portrayed and that Seventeen indeed was for all girls. In fact, Seventeen was going to feature plus size models regularly in upcoming issues. The truth is it never happened. Thin is still in.

Third, in all the articles in the May 2002 issue that featured mothers and daughters, it is very hard to tell who is who. Given May is Mother's Day month, the main article featured "Stars and Their Moms". Celebrities Beyonce Knowles, Elizabeth Jagger, Jessica Capshaw and Angelina Jolie look more like sisters than daughters when standing beside their mothers. We live in a culture where those who are getting older will do almost anything to look younger. Aging has become a sin and Seventeen com-

municates that message loud and clear to our girls.

Fourth, celebrity icons set the standard for beauty and popularity. If you want to sell something to kids, put their latest media hero on the cover. Justin Timberlake, former heartthrob to Britney Spears and a million others, graces the cover of the November '02 issue. Regular features teach young females how to dress and wear their makeup just like their favourite celebs. Other articles talk about the private lives of the stars and their responses to questions dealing with adolescent issues. Regardless of who they are, our adolescent girls make them the measuring stick for all things beautiful.

And how do these new standards for beauty impact our girls? One Toronto female, age 15, responding to our questions about the influence of teen magazines on girls, said, *"I think all girls are influenced by magazines. All girls want to be pretty, skinny and in style. I think some magazines will soon make teen girls have eating disorders."* Another 14-year-old added, *"Teen girls are influenced by teen magazines to buy beauty products and to try to achieve the 'perfect' image."* Eighteen year old Jessica explained, *"I think girls are disappointed in everything they see that they don't have. This could be the chest, stomach, long legs, long hair and arms... ANYTHING! This could definitely lead to depression, especially if the girl is already disappointed in herself, or feels like she doesn't love herself. Magazines have a large effect because girls feel as though they should be the 'norm,' which is, what is perceived through teen magazines."*

The power of this medium to dictate values and standards continues to grow. Young girls are manipulated by unattainable, airbrushed benchmarks of beauty. Failure to arrive at these culturally defined standards has driven many girls to eating disorders and extreme dieting.

As parents and adults, it can be difficult to understand how something as superficial as a magazine can be such a draw for our teens. What can we do to counter the manipulative effects of magazines? How are we to respond?

> First, if your daughter is reading magazines, seize the teachable moment. Take time to do your own analysis of what she is seeing and talk over the real issues that were covered in this article.

> Second, in a pop culture preoccupied with beauty, wise parents will continue to encourage and love their children for who they are. Smart moms, and especially dads, will spend time with their daughters. Girls generally want to know they are loved and admired for who they are in spite of what the culture has to tell them.

> Third, let's remember our kids want our time more than our money. The average Seventeen magazine will have over 300 products to sell to our kids, none of which can ever replace a solid, happy relationship with parents.

> Fourth, we need to keep our eyes on pop culture. We need to be aware that our children are bombarded with thousands of advertisements and media messages every year. Take time to talk with your children about their media and how they might be influenced by it.

> Finally, we need to model a life of contentment. Our kids should be able to see us as people who are content with what we look like and what we have. We need to model what we want our children to become.

Next time you walk by the magazine rack at the corner store, remember those teen magazines are more than just paper and ink. They powerfully communicate pop culture values for an emerging generation that is all eyes and ears.



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