

# Understanding



Toronto YFC



## TODAY'S YOUTH

Spring 2002

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### Youth Culture Facts:

- 78% believe in life after death
- 63% believe that miraculous healing sometimes occurs
- 57% believe in astrology
- 43% believe we can have contact with the spirit world

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## Searching For Spiritual Direction

The picture on Sarah's\* back is much more than a tattoo. It is the very story of how she views the world and the God who may or may not control it. A single hand etched in blue reaches upward. In between the first and middle fingers is a small red heart with tiny lines of light bursting out around it.

**Sarah is not really sure if there is a God, but if by chance there is, her body art represents His hand reaching out to her**

Sarah is somewhat embarrassed to share the story behind her only tattoo. In an apologetic voice, she warns her story is "going to sound really weird."

Sarah is not really sure if there is a God, but if by chance there is, her body art represents His hand reaching out to her. She wants very much to believe that someone, somewhere, is looking out for her.

The tattoo also symbolizes Sarah's hand reaching out to an unknown God. She wants to know that He too has her heart in His hand. Sarah says she is looking for love and safety, and not finding it here on earth, she longs to be connected to a God who seems just beyond her grasp.

Sarah's hunger for spirituality is played out time and again, as youth look for spiritual direction in a world where church and family often let them down. The world offers a spiritual smorgasbord for young people who often pick a little of this and little of that as they create their own belief system.

For example, most popular teen magazines

include articles and regular features dealing with the spiritual side of adolescent life.

One publication recently explained how to read tarot cards and provided a perforated page that could be detached and put into practice immediately. Marie Claire (October 2001) ran a "horoscope special" called "Your Guide to Sex, Love, and Your Destiny," examining numerology and what it reveals about life and luck in the next 10 years.

Adrenalin Magazine, published in the United Kingdom, covers the surf, skate and snow cultures and in June 2001 featured their take on "faith," tackling everything from the surf culture's deep faith in the ocean and the environment to the Afro-Brazilian faith of Umbanda.

"Diesel" brand clothing runs a series of ads featuring reincarnation with a focus on "saving yourself." As one ad boasts, "I've had many past lives—nurse, driving instructor, deer. Thanks to reincarnation, I can keep my graceful good looks forever, unless I'm reborn as a slug."



Jessica\*, 19, hopes she will be reincarnated. In the middle of her back is a tattoo of a small star. It symbolizes her belief that she was reincarnated from a star and her hope that when she dies she will return to the galaxy. She has always felt a deep mystical

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## If It Feels Good It Must Be True

The Barna Research Group recently reported, in a nationally random survey of 604 American teenagers aged 13 to 18 that only 6% of teenagers believe moral truth is absolute while 83% believe moral truth depends on the circumstance.

When the teens were asked about the basis for their moral decision-making, they cited the following criteria: whatever feels right or comfortable (38%), whatever produces the most beneficial personal results (16%), family or friend expectations (10%), parent taught values (10%), and biblical principles (7%). (The complete report can be found on the web at

<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/Home.asp> )



Canadian teens also seem to be following the same trend. Reginald Bibby reports in his new book "Canada's Teens", almost 50 percent of teenagers have an "internal focus" when it comes to deciding on matters of right and wrong. Their basis for decisions include personal judgment and, to a lesser extent, personal morality and how they feel at the time. One Toronto student puts it in straight forward terms, "I base what I do on what I feel is right and wrong. I work on the spur-of-the-moment thinking, and whatever my body wants to do I do. Impulse is what I go by."

The problem for teens today is that truth now becomes relative to the peer group within which an individual participates at any given moment. Often the group decides what is right and what is wrong based on feelings. When taken to its logical conclusion, sin then becomes a conceptual impossibility because no one can say for sure that their way is right, just right for him or her.

Our kids are no longer growing up in a world of standards by which morality can be measured. Life is based on "likes" and "preferences". One of the reasons so many youth don't feel a sense of shame or guilt is because they have no sense of violat-

ing anything anymore. Their rules, based on their "feel good" criteria, leave little room for embarrassment. The modern response "I would have felt so guilty" no longer applies most of the time in a world of postmodern moral relativism.

**"I base what I do on what I feel is right and wrong. I work on the spur-of-the-moment thinking, and whatever my body wants to do I do. Impulse is what I go by."**

Relating to a generation of youth whose truth is so nebulous can be a challenge. As evangelist Ravi Zacharias states, "How do you communicate to a generation that hears with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?" It needs to begin with us modeling to all of the kids in our sphere of influence a life of honesty and integrity that is not marked by moral relativism. Our kids are growing up in a moral no-mans-land and it will require all of us to help them through in a culture bent on ethical corruption.

## Sexual Revolution Starts Early

A recent USA Today article draws our attention to an alarming trend on both sides of the border – kids are engaging in sexual activities at a younger and younger age. They cited indicators such as sex prevention programs for grade five students because too many seventh graders were already having sex, explicit sexual talk among young students, and the sensual dress styles of very young girls. A lot of the blame has been placed at the feet of the media.

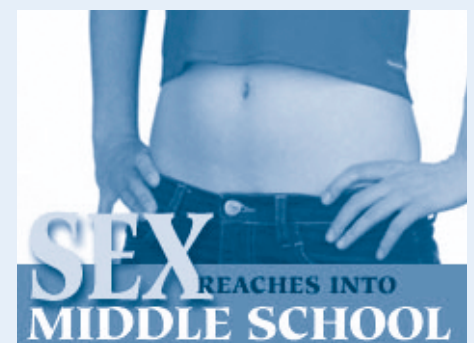
In Canada, a Durex study reported that among 21-year-old respondents, 16.7 was the average age for loss of

virginity, while among the 16-year-olds in the study, 14.3 was the average – "a staggering 2.4 year" drop. While some argued that the Durex study was based on a small Canadian sample, it still points towards a changing attitude among our youth. The National Population Health Study (National Post, September 22, 1999) found that 24% of girls and 18% of boys first had sexual intercourse by age 15.

Regardless of how you want to interpret the data, there is plenty of evidence that sex is on the minds of more and more children. A look at our culture provides us with the clues as to

why this is happening.

In a world of mass media, many of our children are influenced to dress and act like their favourite, sexualized



pop stars. Le Chateau offers a wide range of "sexy" clothing for little girls who want to imitate their pop heroes. One salesperson, a 21-year-old single girl, was baffled as to why parents would come in and buy these clothes for their innocent little children. Perhaps parents are part of the problem.

The average child spends hundreds of hours, often unsupervised, in front of the television. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that teens view an average of 15,000 sexual references per year. However, this type of viewing isn't limited to teens. A child can now

experience everything the world has to offer via television before they are old enough to cross the street on their own.

The media has taught our kids that sex is nothing more than a recreational sport. This is never truer than in the issue of oral sex. Over the last twelve months, many sources are reporting an increasing number of younger kids engaging in this sexual practice. It is viewed as "safe", "not really sex", and doesn't have a stigma attached to it like intercourse. More youth pastors are also reporting this as a growing

problem among Christian youth.

It's not likely that marketers are going to clean up their acts anytime soon. Our kids are bombarded with new sexual messages every day, especially in their music videos. Parents need to be diligent gatekeepers over the hearts and minds of their children. Schools need to take an even more active role in teaching media literacy. The church must take a stronger lead in teaching a healthy biblical view of sexuality. Indeed, it will take all of us to raise healthy kids in a village lacking ethical guidelines.

## Girl Bullying a Growing Problem

Jocelyn is a diminutive and quiet grade nine student. She is a loyal friend, does well in school and appears to have it altogether. However, she is also a target of girl bullying.

For no reason she can think of, Jocelyn is tormented and intimidated by an older, overweight grade eleven girl that she hardly knows. She lives in fear for no apparent reason other than she is an easy target. She is another innocent victim of "relational aggression." A term used to describe the cattiness, meanness and malice that happens between some people, but especially among young girls.

**It is survival  
of the fittest in  
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relationships**

Girl bullying was recently brought to the forefront when a 16-year-old British Columbia girl was found guilty of uttering threats and criminal harassment in the suicide death of 14-year-old Dawn-Marie Wesley who hung herself with her dog's leash, looped over a rafter. She left a note indicating that she could no longer deal with the bullying she was enduring from three girls.

While boys can be loud and physically intimidating, the weapons of choice for inflicting pain by female

bullies are quite different. They may gossip, spread nasty rumors, send malicious emails, give the silent treatment, exclude people from social events, betray secrets, snicker about someone's clothes or mannerisms behind their backs. A girl may be threatened with exclusion from the group if she doesn't give into their demands.

Research indicates that 15 per cent of children are involved in bully-victim interactions (Toronto Star, April 12, 2002). Victims tend to be shy and timid children, who may have some significant difference from their peer group. Signs that a child may be a victim of bullying include torn clothes, missing belongings (extortion), headaches, stomachaches, nightmares, anxiety, unwillingness to go to school and difficulty making friends.

Why are so many girls into bullying? Sharon Lamb, author of *The Secret Lives of Girls* suggests that girls are under tremendous pressure to be nice and sweet but unlike boys, they have few opportunities to openly express their aggression or anger so they opt for covert ways. Lamb also suggests that girls go after each other as part of their process of competing for boys' attention. It is survival of the fittest in the culture jungle of beauty and relationships.

Children prone to bullying may show poor impulse control, aggression and lack of empathy. They may also have experienced family difficulties or rejection by peers.

The media has also given our girls the incentive and models to be aggressive. Ten years ago we didn't have any women using violence as a means of settling issues and dealing with life. Today their world is full of them - WWF female wrestlers, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the girls of Charmed, and Lara Croft: Tomb Raider to name but a few. Media icons say it is OK to be aggressive, and violent if necessary. As violence among girls continues to skyrocket, girl bullying may well be the tip of the iceberg.



Parents need to watch for signs of bullying. They also need to take the time to teach their girls how to handle confrontation in a healthy manner. It is important that parents give their girls a chance to talk about the issues they are facing. Kids are longing for adults who take time to listen. It is up to us to make it happen.

## Searching For Spiritual Direction

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connection with the stars. She believes that whatever you want to happen when you die is what will happen.

Role-playing games have introduced many youth to the world of wizards, witches, and the occult. Television programs such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Charmed, Sabrina the Teenage Witch, and Angel feature characters that routinely delve into darker spirituality and the possibility of reincarnation.



Teen Style (September 2001) ran a full-page ad on how to become a witch. One line in the ad reads, "You've always known deep in your heart that witchcraft was real, that there is a connection to the world beyond and that you would be able to master it if only you could find the key." Wicca, the modern term for witchcraft, is very popular among teen girls 13-16. It is one of the fastest growing belief systems that young people are looking into.

Teen girls magazines have monthly horoscopes. Young people searching for clues to the future and how to best maximize life put their trust in another person's look at the stars. They long for direction in a culture where the usual sources like family and church no longer play a big role

for a lot of kids. Reginald Bibby, in his new book, "Canada's Teens" discovered that about one in three teenagers read their horoscopes at least once a week while only one in eight indicate they are reading the Bible or some other form of Scriptures that often.

One magazine recently ran an article on how to read tarot cards and actually provided a page of perforated cards that could be detached and put into practice immediately. Additional special features include numerology, palmistry, psychic readings, and how to use your intuition to tell the future.

Perhaps the newest entry into the search for adolescent spirituality comes in the new book "Conversations With God For Teens" by Neale Donald Walsch. Canadian pop singer and icon, Alanis Morissette, writes the foreword for the book. In it she explains that at age 12 she needed to leave her church religion behind because of its hypocrisy and exclusivity. In her search, she was finally able to reconnect with "my newly defined god in a way that I felt clear and good about."

Morissette found her "newly defined god" in Walsch's earlier best selling books written for adults. The god of all his books, including this one for teens, is one of extreme moral relativism. "God" says that anything (sex, cheating in school, etc.) and everything is all right if it is all right with you. The only exception seems to be drugs.

Neale Walsch claims that he communicates directly with "god" and speaks on his behalf. After answering hundreds of questions for adults, he has now turned his focus toward teens. His most recent work involves an outreach to the world's teen population, including specifically produced teen retreats and his new book.

The spiritual solution seems to

have brought peace to a troubled Morissette. In a recent issue of RollingStone magazine, she says, "Well, I believe I am God. But I also believe everybody is God. So, yeah, I believe I'm a little piece of God all the time. But so are you."

Finally, a look at spirituality and pop culture would not be complete without at least mentioning The Simpsons. God, Christianity and Christians are more of a part of the Simpson's daily lives than any other

prime-time network series not specifically devoted to religion. As eight-year-old Lisa once said to Bart, "Whether or not the soul is real, it's a symbol of everything fine inside us." Perhaps we have a generation of young people simply trying to get in touch with their God-given souls but are missing the True route to peace.

In the midst of all this spiritual searching, the church is also seeing signs of encouragement. Many churches are now developing effective youth ministries that are designed to focus on the needs of young people. They feature contemporary music and casual dress with an emphasis on interaction and experience that brings a deeper awareness of God. Some denominations are reporting significant increases in youth participation.

*\* Names have been changed.*



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