

Understanding

TODAY'S YOUTH



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Youth Culture Facts:

- 71% of boys and 34% of girls age 13 - 17 play Grand Theft Auto
- Canadian teens smoke more than a billion cigarettes each year
- Foul language during Family Hour TV has increased 95% since 1998
- Canadian boys age 8-12 spend \$800 million per year

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The Buying and Selling of Teenagers

Paul Robertson, Youth Unlimited

In October 1759, famed French philosopher Denis Diderot wrote to his young friend Sophie Volland the poignant words "you all die at 15." Diderot was describing what it meant to be passing through, what in those days, was known as early adulthood. It would be another two centuries before the word "teenager" would appear.

Though penned almost two hundred and fifty years ago, these words seem strangely applicable to today's generation of kids. In a consumer culture such as ours, many a teen "dies" at the thought of not looking cool and not being adorned with the latest fashions. In many ways, the purveyors of adolescent merchandise have taught them that this is exactly how they should feel. Be defined by what you wear and listen to or you are "dead." It is what Dr. Mary Pipher (Reviving Ophelia) calls the "embracing of junk values in the mass culture."

In her book "**Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers,**" Alissa Quart takes us deep into the troubling world of youth marketing. A world where the dollar is worshipped and kids are treated like just another natural resource waiting to be mined and refined. Young people waiting to be transformed by artifacts that will bring lasting significance to their lives... until another better product comes along.

This book is a "must read" for parents, youth workers, and anyone else serious about understanding the world of today's young people. Let

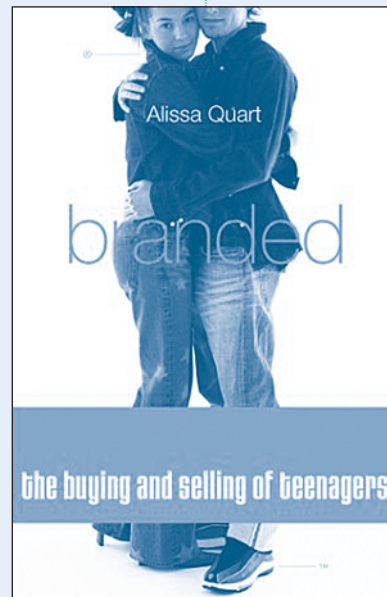
me share a few highlights that I found most insightful and challenging at the same time.

First, Quart points out that this process requires time, starts very early, and takes advantage of our children's vulnerability during the developing years. "*Raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, teen's dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit.*" The marketers' greatest ploy with all of us is to find a point of weakness and exploit it. For our young people, it is the need to belong and be accepted. At times during adolescent development, no need is more vital. Knowing this, corporations spend billions to seize the moment.

Second, we are reminded of the powerful influence of print magazines, especially on girls. Quart writes, "*These magazines construct an unaffordable but palpable world of yearning for girls. We are*

all too familiar with the negative effects of the model body on girls' self-images, but these new magazines do something new: They help to solidify feelings of economic and taste inadequacy in girls... these magazines underline that girls are not complete or competitive if they don't wear label dresses at the junior high school dances." All advertising sells disappointment to our kids and unfortunately, there is a personal cost. Print ads foster the never ending message which says you will never arrive.

Adding to the body confusion for girls is the



Foul Language Turns TV Blue

It is 10:30 in the morning and anyone's child could be sitting in front of the TV. Talk show host Caroline Rhea is interviewing a female guest who finds it quite appropriate to use the word "mother_____ " and the audience just laughs. In the new controversial series *Nip and Tuck* the f-word flows with ease. Last January, viewers heard U2's Bono use the f-word unedited during Family Hour on NBC. Rap and hip-hop artists fill their songs with the word which now seems to carry little significance. It has been relegated to the category of "just another word."

A recent **Parent's Television Council's Television Industry Report** says it should come to us as no surprise that there has been an increase in foul language in virtually every network and in virtually every time slot – including the so-called "Family Hour" of 8:00-9:00 p.m. The analysis took place the first two weeks of November in 1998, 2000, and 2002 and looked at a total of 400 program hours.

Major findings included...

- There was an overall increase in foul language in every time slot. Foul language during the Family Hour increased 94%. It increased 109% during the 9 p.m. slot.
- Fox network, surprisingly, was the only network to show any real improvement during the Family Hour.
- Foul language increased 61% during ABC's Family Hour between 1998 and 2000. Overall, the language on ABC has become much coarser.
- Foul language on NBC went up across the board, in every study period and every time slot.
- Offensive language on UPN increased 104% between 1998 and 2000 during the Family Hour and by a staggering 538% during the 9-10 p.m. time slot.
- The teen-targeted WB network had a 188% increase in foul language during the Family Hour in this same time span. Such language increased by 308% during the second hour of prime time.

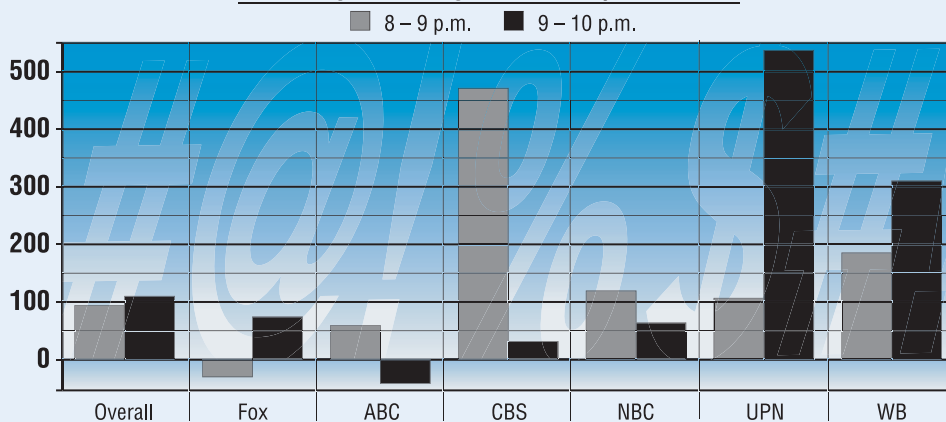
Given that our young people are bombarded with this language, we shouldn't be surprised to hear even the youngest of children using words they don't really understand. In a culture of no truth and no boundaries, the descent into indecency is to be expected. Words no longer mean what they used to and civility seems to be waning.

Syracuse University professor Robert Thompson says, *"Once prime-time television decides to absorb something, it becomes a stamp of normalcy. It's no longer controversial. It's no longer a big deal. It makes it a casual, accepted sort of thing."* Author Geoffrey Hughes adds, *"The influence of Hollywood has become a dominant factor in the shift in attitudes towards swearing, initially for restraint, but subsequently for license."*

The Parent's Television Council stated, "We've seen the pattern time and time again. Once the initial taboo is broken and the shock value wears off, more and more curse words fall into the category of 'acceptable' language, and TV must try to up the ante by introducing new words to prime time TV's obscene lexicon."

The challenge for parents is to model proper language and behaviour. Cursing is still the language of aggression and reflects our character or lack thereof. Profanity is often about abusing the other person, not loving and building them up. Parents need to develop character and integrity in their children and cursing speaks volumes about one's disposition. We should not hesitate to point out that even though "everyone" seems to be doing it, the majority doesn't make it right. In fact, the majority look rather crass and vulgar.

Percentage of Change in Profanity 1998-2002



Vice City: Don't Go There

The video game industry is the fastest growing medium in our culture. This year, video games are expected to surpass the film industry in total sales at \$10 billion! Most of us remember the video games in their infant state. I recall the techno-superiority I enjoyed just out of my teens, when my father brought home this odd electronic accessory called "Intellivision." No matter that the games were simple, had no plot and were mastered quickly. I flaunted the new *cool factor* I enjoyed with my friends. Quantum leaps in technology have produced sharp graphics and elaborate story lines in the

newest generations of games. They resemble films, where each player is a unique director in elaborate worlds of wonder and where small "twirks" of the joysticks command the character's actions and fortunes.

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City is Rockstar Industries' third installment of their first title. This latest version has held the top-selling slot in the market since its introduction late last year. It didn't take long for you to hear the buzz from young gamers. The report of the game carrying an "M" (mature) rating is usually the missing piece of information. Instead, parents heard

descriptions of awesome chases, incredible graphics and humorous characters.

The technology is astounding and the game is engaging. But we need to temper our awe with a diligent discovery process and a consistent template for teaching young people what is right and wrong.

As adults, we need to be concerned about these dark aspects of Vice City:

- The outright goal of the game is to engage in criminal activity to become successful.
- The main plot line begins when Vercetti has a

cocaine shipment stolen from him in the opening vignette.

- Players can't help but slay police officers because they ultimately get in your way.

- Death is in the details. Players can blow heads off and then watch the blood spurt and pool around the victims.

- Most missions include murder and mayhem. Cheating is an essential skill.

- Drugs are a major sub-text throughout the game.

- Prostitutes are everywhere. One mission includes procuring a prostitute's services and then beating her to death afterwards.

What should our response be as parents? *First, remember that not all video games are for kids.*

Do you homework. Know what your kids are playing both at home and the neighbours!

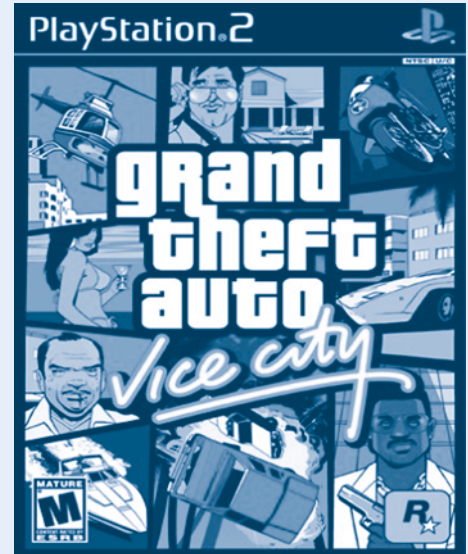
Video games may prove to be even more

potent in the building of value structures, because players are actively making decisions, manipulating the medium and earning immediate "rewards."

Second, remember video games are addictive. Kids are naturally drawn to the consoles where they can escape reality, ignore chores, and disregard relationships. We need to help our kids balance gaming with real life. Keeping all things in balance is crucial.

Third, remember that video games bring deep issues to the fore. There is no common code of ethics in the gaming industry. It's up to parents to lead youth in the right direction. Don't leave character development and values clarification in the hands of marketers who don't really care about your kids.

—**Tom Piotrowski**, Center for Parenting/Youth Understanding, Elizabethtown, PA



Tobacco – Almost Instantly Addictive

Her pink Barbie backpack seems strangely out of place. It makes her appear much younger than she really is. She finishes the last few drags on her cigarette before running off to catch her first period class. She can't remember when this morning tradition started. The grade eleven student is a study in contradiction. Longing for the innocent years of her youth, she is obsessed by a force beyond her control.

For years the experts have debated the addictiveness of nicotine but recent research has finally answered the question.

The first puff on a cigarette can be enough to hook a young teenager for a lifetime. No longer does nicotine addiction require one to be a long-term heavy smoker. The research was released in September 2003 by the National Cancer Institute of Canada.

The report also has serious implications for how our society approaches anti-smoking campaigns. Messages focusing on how to avoid the peer pressure to smoke now seem irrelevant. The study team reported on information gathered from more than 1,200 teenagers over a six year span. It demonstrated that the physical addiction is a much stronger force than peer pressure even among those who smoke only occasionally.

Anne Marie Owens of the National Post summarized the findings this way: *"The young smokers were categorized as triers, who had only smoked once or twice in their lifetime; sporadic smokers, who smoked more than three times in their lifetime, but not monthly, weekly or daily; those who smoked at least once a month; weekly smokers, who smoked more than once a week but not daily; and those who smoked daily.*

The study found despite low cigarette exposure, 16% of those who had smoked in the past three months were tobacco dependent, according to the responses given to the questionnaires.

Although none of the triers demonstrated signs of dependence, 3% of the sporadic smokers and 4.6% of the monthly smokers

indicated dependence symptoms. About two-thirds of the daily smokers, and almost 20% of weekly smokers, were dependent."

All of this continues to spell bad news for young girls. Many females aged sixteen and seventeen are now reading women's magazines such as Marie Claire and Cosmopolitan where they are exposed to endless cigarette ads. Tobacco companies market "slim" and "light" products that appeal to young girls. Advertising messages target where girls

"live" by linking slimness, sex, independence and control over their lives with smoking. **Recent figures show that of the 22 per cent of teens who call themselves smokers, girls outnumbered boy by about four percentage points, despite glossy photos of cancerous tumours on packages.** This is the only age group in which women outnumbered males smokers.

Another major contributor to adolescent smoking is the motion picture industry. A Dartmouth Medical School (New Hampshire) study released in June 2003 involved 2,603 children who were between 10 and 14 at the start of the study in 1999 and had never smoked when they were recruited. They were asked at the beginning of the study which movies they had seen from a list of 50 movies released between 1988 and 1999. Researchers then estimated how many instances of smoking the adolescents had seen based on their responses. After accounting for other variables, researchers found that teens who saw movies in which actors smoke heavily are three times more likely to smoke themselves than those exposed to less smoking on-screen.

Earlier research also reported that actor endorsement of cigarette brands in movies was increasing. Findings also showed that adolescents whose favourite movie stars smoke on-screen are more likely to be smoker themselves and that children who are not restricted from watching R-rated movies are three times more likely to smoke and drink alcohol compared to those who are never allowed to watch them.



The Buying and Selling of Teenagers

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fact that most of the celebrities they are trying to emulate are likely to appear nearly naked in public. One only has to recall the bit of cloth that Jennifer Lopez wore to the music awards a couple of years ago or flip through the latest issue of Seventeen. As Quart states, "Today's adolescents are surrounded by more exposed flesh than girls of previous generations, especially from the quasi-pornography of laddie magazines *Maxim*, *FHM*, and *Gear*." Just the other day I was



in a major book store and there sat three teenage boys on the window sill flipping through these magazines comparing pictures of half-naked women. Recently, I was reviewing six hours of music videos from 1998 and couldn't believe how much clothing the artists wore compared to today. It is these images that our young girls are trying to attain.

Third, male body sculpting and the selling of nutritional supplements has become big business. We now see more and more boys spending endless hours in the gym trying to perfect a body that would make Vin Diesel proud. Quart cites the fact that 35% of 60,000 weightlifting injuries in 1998 were for those aged from fifteen to twenty-four and an amazing 12% were suffered by children aged from five to fifteen. A Blue Cross-Blue Shield 2001 survey of ten-to-seventeen-year-olds showed that half the children interviewed were "aware" of sports supplements and drugs, and one in five take them! Forty-two percent did it to build muscle and

16% just to look better. The bottom line is body enhancement at this age has very little to do with athletic competition and everything to do with looking more attractive to the opposite sex; to look like all the

guys in the girls' magazines.

Fourth, with the marketplace filled with thousands of different products, burning your "brand" (branding) into the psyche of kids has become critical for marketing success. Alissa Quart puts it perfectly, "The reliance on brands has shifted: brands have infiltrated preteens and adolescents' inner lives." Is there a teen on planet earth that doesn't recognize the Nike swoosh? In many cases, teen magazine ads have been

reduced to a single picture of product fantasy and of course the logo. Soft drink companies such as Coke and Pepsi buy the hearts of kids for a lifetime by becoming school sponsors.

Branding has become one of the necessities for companies competing for brain space in young consumer minds which often see as many as 16,000 ads, brand names, and logos in a single day. For many young people, their personal identity has become intrinsically tied to their favourite brands.

Finally, Quart sees the attitudes and actions of parents as part of the problem. "The parents of the middle-class Millennials have surrounded themselves with brand names and creature comforts, and they tend to fill their work driven

The ever-consuming, ever-changing world of today's youth is nothing to fear but it does demand our attention if our kids are to make it through with a healthy perspective on life.

Kids need to learn to be content with what they have and that model needs to begin with us as parents.

absence in their children's lives with DVD players, TiVo, and magazine subscriptions. They have taught their children, now teenagers, to need luxury products rather than simply want them." This is a generation of kids who have learned that there is no such thing as "enough."

Michael Wood of Teen Research Unlimited says that 47 percent of all teen incomes directly from parents; many of whom have replaced relationships with resources when it comes to their kids.

So if we, the parents, are part of the problem in the buying and selling of our kids, how do we respond? Knowing we are targeted by marketers, how do we counter the pressure to conform to a consumerist culture? I would like to suggest three things.

FIRST, LET'S TAKE A STEP BACK AND DO A QUICK SURVEY OF OUR OWN PRIORITIES

When we examine how our time is spent, are we giving an adequate amount to our children? You will never have quality time without quantity time. If a year from now you were lying on your death bed, would you be willing to trade all the "things" you gave to your kids for a few more hours "with" your kids? More time at the office might mean more money but if it's not what your kids really want then you are wasting a lot of valuable time.

SECOND, IF OUR KIDS ARE LONGING TO BELONG AND YEARNING FOR ACCEPTANCE, LET IT BEGIN AT HOME

I know we all wish our kids were perfect. They would be so much easier to like. However, they deserve to be loved and cherished simply because they are our own. Spend time with your kids doing things that they enjoy even if it's a stretch for you. It will pay you bigger dividends than any stock investment.

THIRD, LET'S TALK TO OUR KIDS ABOUT WHAT THEY SEE GOING ON IN THEIR WORLD OF MARKETING

Discussions about how products are marketed to your kids will not only be insightful for you but will provide you with windows of opportunity to counter so much of what is being communicated to our kids. We need to talk with our kids about how they see their friends being affected and then how they see their own values and attitudes being impacted. Bring a couple of teen ads to the dinner table for a discussion starter. You might be surprised what you learn about your own children



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To book a speaking engagement call: 905-453-7991