

Understanding

TODAY'S YOUTH



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Youth Culture Facts:

- about 60% of teens have a TV in their bedroom
- 45% of Canadian youth 15-19 have smoked marijuana
- fewer teens are smoking compared to 2002
- over 40% Canadian girls 9 years old have dieted

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Toronto YFC
50 Gervais Drive, Suite 302
Toronto, ON M3C 1Z3
416-383-1477
www.youthunlimitedgta.com

Sex On TV — When Life Replicates Art

Growing up with alcoholic parents left Sarah with little guidance on the important issues of life. As she looks back on her adolescence, she concludes that she was raised mainly by the media. Whatever she saw on TV, watched at the movies, read about in teen magazines, she tried. Teen life included an early addiction to drugs, alcohol and sex. As Sarah says, *"I was raised by the culture which basically told me it was OK to do anything I wanted."*

At first this appears to be an extreme example of a life gone wrong in the absence of positive parents. (She is now happily married with children and teaches school.) However, the latest research from RAND Corporation and reported in Pediatrics online journal, now suggests a powerful connection between media and real life.

Psychologist Rebecca Collins reports, "Kids who said they watched more sex-oriented programs at the beginning of the year were more likely than others their age to become more sexually active during the next year. Those in the top 10% for viewing sexually related scenes were twice as likely to engage in intercourse as those in the lowest 10%. The more sex-oriented scenes they saw, the more likely they were to become sexually active."

The RAND study is the first to take into account other factors linked to early teen sex (poor grades, low parent education, having older friends, and living in single-parent home) and tracked how TV-watching might predict sexual activity.

We are then faced with the age-old question of which came first – the interest in sex or sex in their media. One could argue that kids who are already interested in sex will tend to watch

more of it on TV while others will argue that being bombarded with sexual images will heighten the latent interest within them. Added to this untenable equation is the fact that kids, especially girls, are maturing physically much sooner than a generation ago.

Perhaps a more alarming discovery is the fact that even exposure which only included talk about sex was associated with the same risks as seeing sexually explicit television. The study stated, "TV may create the illusion that sex is more central to daily life than it truly is and may promote sexual initiation as a result, a process known as media cultivation. Social learning theory posits that information is gleaned from what others say about a behaviour as well as what they do, because both indicate social approval or disapproval of the activity in question."

Today's youth are growing up in a culture with very few moral restraints. Media largely ignores the negative consequences of premarital sex and glorifies the feelings associated with such activities. This may well explain the growing number of kids, both Christian and non-Christian, who are actively involved in oral sex. An increasing number of teens is also involved in "buddy sex" which is simply a quick sexual fling with a friend. It is devoid of anything except sexual pleasure.

It should come as no surprise the study also found that the most powerful countervailing influence on teen sexual activity is parental involvement. Parents who keep an eye on their kids' activities, parents who were more educated, parents who clearly disapprove of teenagers having sexual relations, and two parent families were the most likely to see their children delay sexual activities.



Joan of Arcadia

In the midst of the decadence and decay we call modern television, a diamond has arrived. At a time when most parents have only disgust for the decline in acceptable programming, Joan of Arcadia (Friday 8 pm. CTV) has appeared with a message of hope and decency for the whole family.

Creator Barbara Hall (credits include *The Newhart Show*, *Moonlighting*, *Northern Exposure*, *Chicago Hope*, and *Judging Amy*) has always been fascinated with the life of Joan of Arc, the peasant girl who said God instructed her to lead the French Army to victory at Orleans in the early 1400's. Joan was later burned at the stake on May 30, 1431. Thinking about the implications that Joan's relationship with God must have had on her friends and family, Hall set out to create a modern day equivalent. The show has won several awards including the People's Choice Award in 2003 and was later nominated for three Emmy awards including best new drama series.

The opening episode in the fall of 2003 sets the scene for a very successful first year. Typical in every imaginable way, 16-year-old Joan Girardi is dealing with her own adolescent issues, which are compounded by that fact that her family has recently moved into a new city. The Girardi family has recently relocated to the city of Arcadia, where her father, Will, is Chief of Police and her mom Helen, works part time at Joan's high school. The family is rounded out by Joan's two brothers - her older brother Kevin, a paraplegic whose accident a year earlier shattered his dreams of continuing his football career past high school, and younger brother Luke, a bona-fide science geek. This transition period for Joan is further complicated by the fact that God decides to pay her a couple of visits in the form of strangers - a cute boy on the bus and the lunch lady in her school cafeteria. Without giving her any reasons, God advises Joan to find a job - which she reluctantly does. It's in taking His advice that Joan realizes that her new friend seems to have subtly started the entire Girardi family on the road to healing, and helps Joan realize that it's the small things that can have the greatest impact (www.joanofarcadia.com).

There are a number of reasons for the

success of the show - great writing, excellent acting, intriguing real life characters who all reflect what it means to be human. Let's take a look at the characters and the role they play in overall theme of the show.

Will Girardi (Joe Mantegna) is a dedicated father and police officer whose own life is filled with trials and challenges. Real life for all of us involves seeing some

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bad things. In the world of good and evil, Will faces it all without any belief in God. *"I wanted a man who was a good man," states Hall, "who had a really strong sense of right and wrong, and dealt with the world where he literally had to look at good and evil. There was a literal physical fight between good and evil... He has a strong sense of morality, and it didn't come from religion. I wanted that world bumping up against a very, very spiritual world... I don't know how much Joan's interaction with God would mean if we weren't seen in a world more like the one we live in, where you have to look at really awful things... like 911."* The father lives in a world like we do - a world without pat answers.

Helen Girardi (Mary Steenburgen) is your typical, hardworking mom who thinks Joan has an overactive imagination. As an art school drop out, Helen now works as an office assistant at her children's high school. She also has an opportunity to teach some art classes and is very involved in the lives of her kids. As a loving mother, she goes to great lengths to stay connected with her children both at school and at home while dealing with her own issues. At the beginning of the second season Helen

decides to back to go back to church and have her confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church. Her new faith journey begins as a secret from Will as she is not sure how he, as an atheist, will respond to her renewed interest in religion.

Kevin Girardi (Jason Ritter, son of the late John Ritter) is 19 years old and was paralyzed in a car accident. After attending a party, Kevin decides to take a ride with his best friend Andy who has been drinking heavily. Although he attempts to take the keys away from him, and thinking he will never get into an accident, Kevin finally gets into the car. Andy ends up flipping the car as he tries to avoid an oncoming vehicle. He now works as a fact checker at the local newspaper while struggling to put his life back together. Kevin has trouble dealing with the fact that as a once proud athlete, he is now confined to a wheel chair for life.

Luke Girardi (Michael Welch) is the youngest of the three siblings. He is very interested in the sciences which makes him your typical TV geek. Luke resents his brother Kevin for being the star of the family and was actually happy when the doctors told them Kevin would never walk again. In the beginning, Luke struggled with his relationship with his father thinking they had nothing in common - a fairly normal process for most growing teens. He also has a budding romance with a similarly strange girl at school. Luke represents all those kids in the world who never feel like they will ever fit in.

Joan Girardi (Amber Tamblyn) is turning 17 and plays the starring role in the series. In an age of thin, obnoxious, sexually preoccupied teen heroines, Joan comes as a breath of fresh air. She isn't wealthy or obsessed with her self-image. She feels out of place in her family and is struggling to discover her own identity both individually and in a group. Having God popping into her life appears to be an unexpected complication yet we are drawn by her sincere desire to work at her relationship with him. She works hard to fulfill his guidance for life even when it brings her to the brink of a mental collapse at the end of the first season. No one said following God would be easy.

So what accounts for the popularity of a show that focuses so much on God? What's the draw to young people and adults alike?

First, it is just simply a decent show in a decadent world. The Janet Jackson "wardrobe malfunction" of January 2003 did a lot to push pop culture "over the line." Millions of people finally had enough. Part of the backlash to the lack of morality on TV opened the door to respectable shows such as this.

Second, Joan appears at a time when most in North America are reflecting on their spiritual sides. The horror of 911 left many people without a worldview that could make sense of such tragedy. We were faced with our own immortality and pop culture colloquialisms just didn't cut it. Many were forced to look for answers beyond themselves. Joan is a model for us of what it means to be open to God – a God that came in human form. Recent research even seems to indicate that God has been hardwired into our genes (The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes – Dean Hamer.)

Third, the Girardi family is something we can relate to. None of them have all the answers, they are all working through their own issues, wealth is not their saviour, and life comes unraveled at the most unexpected times. These are ordinary folks we can relate to. They are faced with a myriad of everyday issues and cope using a variety of mechanisms, one of which includes taking cues from God when nothing else seems to work.

Fourth, although much time is spent focusing on God's interaction with Joan, no one is excluded. Joan's time with

God is not meant to be offensive to others who cope with life differently. Will Girardi tackles the issues of right and wrong without God, Helen is feeling a call back to her Catholic roots, Kevin deals with the resentment of not having God heal him, one of Joan's friends is Jewish, and Luke it open to the fact the "God" makes sense from a purely scientific perspective.

Fifth, Joan of Arcadia is good family viewing at the end of a busy week. Most people are exhausted from their frantic schedules and finding a place of comfort and solace on Friday nights is a good thing. Bruce Springsteen sings, "At the end of every hard-earned day, people find some reason to believe." Joan brings a renewed hope in humanity and our ability to rise above the chaos with a little help from a Friend.

Sixth, Joan is a positive role model for girls in particular and teens in general. She hasn't found the need to take drugs in order to cope with the pressures of everyday life. She doesn't like drinking or smoking. She is not rich or overly bright or good looking or savvy. Joan is honest, hard-working, loves her family, cultivates good friendships, has a part-time job, and does her best to do the right thing. What more can we ask for?

There are many more reasons why Joan of Arcadia continues to do well in the ratings. Check out the show

and discover your own motive for staying tuned in. You might just be surprised how well the show works for you and your family.



Joan of Arcadia

Is Anyone Really Listening?

A new study released by Philips Consumer Communications indicates that even though our culture forces kids to grow up too soon, parents are taking little time to talk with their kids about the stuff that really matters. The "Let's Connect" study examined the communication patterns and content of middle school students (grades 5-8) and their parents. Here are some of the findings:

Parents and their middle schoolers don't spend enough time talking. The survey found that most parents (58%) and almost three-quarters of the kids (73%) say they spend less than one hour a day talking to each other. Sadly, nearly half the kids (46%) and a quarter (27%) of the parents say they talk less than one-half hour a day.

Parents don't know what's important to their kids. If parents aren't listening, they can't understand. That accounts for the difference in parents' perceptions of kids' priorities. Parents said the



top ones are: 1) fun; 2) friends; and 3) looks. While these things are definitely important to kids, here's what the middle schoolers listed as their top priorities: 1) their future; 2) their schoolwork; and 3) family matters.

Kids don't always find it easy to talk to dad and mom. Only one in five kids (20%) say it's easy to talk to their parents about the things that really matter. More than a quarter (26%) said it was "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" to do so.

Parents and middle schoolers both say they aren't allowed to explain themselves. Ever find yourself listening harder to what you think your teen is saying rather than what they're really trying to say? You're not alone. Most

Do you want to make your kids feel valued, special and important? Ask their opinion on a regular basis, and don't forget to listen as they share it!

kids (57%) said their parents don't always give them a chance to explain. Just more than half the parents (51%) felt the same way, saying their kids do the same.

Middle schoolers like the opposite sex. Some two-thirds (62%) of the kids said the opposite sex was an important issue. Only half (52%) of parents thought their kids were interested in boyfriends or girlfriends.

Overcoming these communication barriers is an important key to leading our children from childhood into a spiritually and emotionally healthy adulthood. The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding echoes the communication tips for parents offered by the "Let's Connect" researchers. Here are those suggestions:

Make time to communicate. **Your kids want to talk.** They need time and opportunity to talk. Make and take the time for communication. Start with simple things that are often forgotten, like eating meals together or talking while riding in the car.

Listen to the little stuff. You may

not think it's important to listen to what your kids have to say about school, friends, homework or what you consider "trivial" issues of early adolescent life. If so, you're wrong. These things are important to your kids. If they know you aren't listening about the little stuff, they probably won't come to you about the big stuff. Take an interest in everything they have to say.

Listen between the lines. Sometimes they find it difficult to open up about the difficult issues they are facing. At other times, they may struggle to find the right words. At all times you must pay special attention to what they might be trying to say. Read their expressions. Listen to their emotions. Ask clarifying questions. You'll be helping them open up.

Ask their opinion. Do you want to make your kids feel valued, special and important? Ask their opinion on a regular basis, and don't forget to listen as they share it! Ask about the important and not-so-important issues – everything from school to friends to the job you're doing as a parent to politics, etc.

Don't interrupt. Give them time to explain their opinions, even if you think you know what's coming next. If you've been interrupted, you know how quickly good communication can get cut off.

—The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, Elizabethtown, PA



Paul Robertson is the youth culture specialist and Director of Church and Family Resources for Youth Unlimited.

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