

Five Cries of Caring Parents: An evening of encouragement for parents

A high school student in Brampton recently wrote, "The most difficult issue I have with my parents is that they don't listen and they don't understand what it means to be a teenager." Most of us would probably have written the same thing about our parents. So what has changed? Everything. The old saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child is no longer true because most of the village is dysfunctional.

In the current era of shifting family structures, postmodern moral relativism, and constant media invasion, raising children is probably more challenging than ever before; especially if you are trying to raise kids with a biblical worldview. When most of today's parents grew up, you knew and trusted your neighbours; media was family friendly, and companies didn't exploit the young.

Studies show that kids can be greatly helped if they are able to draw on five great sources of strength –

- parents who try to understand themselves
- parents who try to understand their kids
- a close, caring family
- the development of moral beliefs based on truth
- a personal, liberating faith

Interestingly, research also shows that these are the five most important desires or cries of parents. "Cries" somehow fits with the stress of parenting but also expresses a deep desire to do well.

Every caring parent needs to be willing to take an honest look at their own lives to ensure they are doing the best they can. Understanding yourself is the first step to better parenting. The goal is to break old habits and build on better ones.

As a parent, understanding yourself is a breeze compared to understanding your children and their world. *Five Cries*, led by Youth Unlimited's youth culture specialist Paul Robertson, will look at six goals that every adolescent intuitively seeks to achieve during the teen years and how we can facilitate that process.

Creating a close, caring family is the dream of every parent. The four essentials for family closeness – harmony, communication, nurturance, and discipline – will be developed

with practical helps. There is one parenting style that sets you up for success; our goal is to help you be that parent.

"Every caring parent needs to be willing to take an honest look at their own lives to ensure they are doing the best they can."

All parents long to see their children live moral lives based on family values and not on those of the peer group. Moms and dads need to face head-on the challenges of negative peer pressure and postmodern moral relativism.

Finally, most parents of faith, long to pass that on to their kids. Adolescence is often the time when young people begin to question their convictions and traditions. They need to see the faith of their parents being shared through the natural flow of everyday life.

For more details on how to book the *Five Cries of Caring Parents* contact Paul Robertson at 905-453-7991 or paulrobertson@rogers.com. Check out www.paulrobertson.ca for additional seminars and information.



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More culture info: www.paulrobertson.ca

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Understanding



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Youth Culture Facts:

- 8% of Canadian teens have tattoos and 21% want one
- girls represent more than 60% of tattooed young people
- in 2005 US stores sold 96 million T-shirts to tweens
- "to have wisdom" is one of the top values sought by parents

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The T-Shirt is the Message

When Marshall McLuhan penned his famous "the media is the message" he had no idea what life would be like over 40 years later. McLuhan was concerned with how media shaped human behaviour. He saw media as something that made you easily controllable. Well, what happens when the media takes on human form? What happens when kids tattoo (see inside story) permanent messages on their body? What are the implications when young girls wear T-shirts advertising their "wares" as it were?

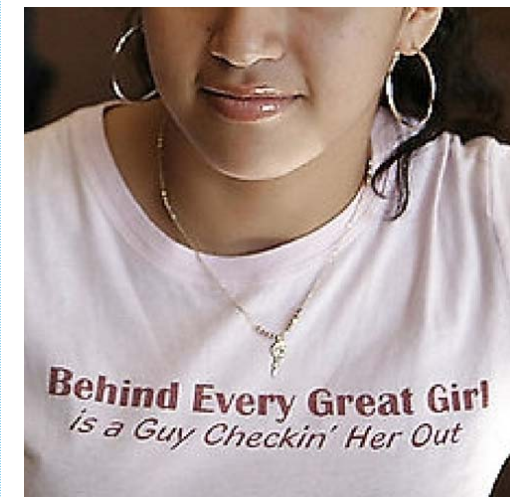
McLuhan knew that the form of the message determines the way in which the message will be perceived. If tweens (the medium) are wearing suggestive T-shirts with quotes such as "I'm Hot" or "Spicy and Juicy", then how is the message to be interpreted by another tween male? If younger girls are adorning themselves with messages like "I Take Candy From Strangers," "I Know What Boys Want" and "My Eyes Are Up Here," what is the inferred meaning for adolescent boys and even men?

The problem with T-shirt messages is threefold. *First*, you have a generation of young girls who have never heard of McLuhan's theory and most likely could care less. Their response to adults is one of shock. How could we think that way when that's not what happens at all? The message isn't the medium. The message is simply cute and besides, everyone is wearing them. To the undiscerning, undeveloped brain, everything is permissible.

Second, you have a generation of parents who think liberalism is a good parenting style. Parents who either don't understand the connection between the medium and the message or they just don't care. It is normally, although not always, these parents who do not have the fortitude to simply say no to the lifestyle choices of their children. This approach is normally avoided because it

requires energy and a time investment with their kids. However, many conservative parents are also afraid to make the hard choices needed to help increase the chances of security and safety.

Third, you have a corporate ethos which says the sexual exploitation of children and teens is a natural part of life in the brave new world. Every year they target younger and younger girls. Marketers are free in an unrestricted marketplace to do whatever it takes to make shareholders happy; nothing makes them smile like large dividends. Like "collateral damage" on the battlefield, lost innocence and double entendre is simply the cultural cost of doing business. It is the job of parents to raise children, not corporations.



McLuhan was right. Modern communication has, and will have, far-reaching sociological costs. Parents need to diligently monitor the pop culture market for warning signs and respond in an appropriate way. What we see and understand about media at this point in time is just the tip of the iceberg. Below the surface drifts a powerful mass of change and consequences heading our way.

A Skin Deep Reflection of Adolescent Life

Although a little hard to see, she never forgets. She wears the discreet tattoo of a small tree on her right shoulder with pride. When asked to tell the story behind her tattoo she replies, "After I was born, my father planted this tree in our backyard in honour of my arrival. He was so proud of me. At 10 years of age, he walked out on us. When I turned 16 I got a tattoo of the tree to remind myself that at one point in my life I was very important to my dad. I haven't seen him in years and the tree is gone but he can't take my tattoo away."

Young people get body art for a variety of reasons. Some do it because they want to fit in while others succumb to peer pressure. Many are a testimony to the power of media to influence our choices. For some youth, it is a mark of shock and rebellion while tattoos make others feel sexier. Some simply see tattoos as works of fine art to adorn their human canvas.

Every generation has had a mark that distinguished it from previous cohorts. Over the past 50 years, prior generations have left us reminders of their passing – ducktail haircuts, cramming phone booths, rock'n roll, transistor radios, long hair, dropping drugs, dropping out, bell bottom jeans, platform shoes, polyester pants, pet rocks, disco, baggy pants and backwards hats, hip hop, rap, sex without boundaries, body modification and lives lived out on the Internet.

So what is left to make them unique when we look back on history? They will be the generation remembered for creating the most personal form of media there is – a permanent story painted on young bodies.

Many of today's youth will look back on this decade and remember it, not with fondness, but hesitation as they recall their struggles to simply survive. They will remember words such as divorce, separation, fatherlessness, abandonment, abuse, and blended. In many ways they are a generation who lost their most spe-

cial place in that thing called family.

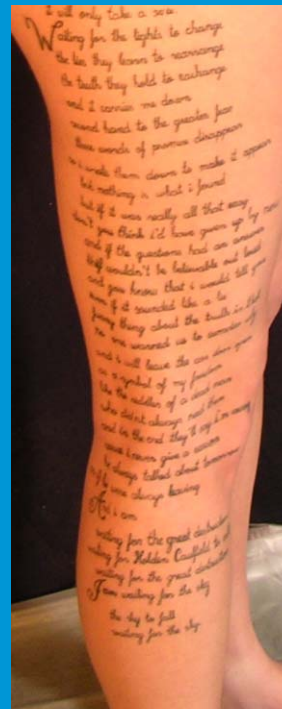
In our research at Youth Unlimited, we have discovered another reason why some kids have tattoos. For a generation of kids consumed by the media, it has in many ways become their closest friend, understanding and listening to the issues many adults miss. In their identification with the media, they in turn have become the medium. If you have a story to tell then why not put it on your body? Why not put it out there for all to see in the hopes that someone, anyone, might take time to listen to your tale? Why not put an enduring picture on your body about a particular "chapter" of your life for all to read? At least this is one thing your family can't take away from you. It is permanent, always there, unlike your family. The medium is the message. You are the medium.

Desiree, 20, says "Getting a tattoo is a right of passage in a time when we've lost all the traditional ones that a kid usually gets in a normal family." Des, as her friends call her, has a pair of angel wings on her back. Growing up in a home where her dad went to jail when she was 18 months and returned when she was 18 years old provided lots of challenge. It was life with a single mom that she could only describe as "hell." Entering her second year of university, the wings are a constant reminder that there isn't anything she can't "rise" above.

Meaghan, 20, sees it similarly. "A tattoo is about 'me'. It is a form of personal expression; part of the culture shift. Tattoos fill a void for meaning in a postmodern culture. We need permanency in a world of constant transition. It forever expresses how I felt at that moment in time. It captures a point in time when I was alive. It is our longing for permanence in a world of disposable everything."

Tattoos can reflect the journey, beliefs, values, and hopes of any young person. The Youth Unlimited research has uncovered many different "chapters" represented by their body art. The focus of this article is on the family.

Chanel's story...



Chanel's father was an executive chef who took his family all over the world. She didn't move between cities; she moved between countries and cultures. Putting down deep roots at any one time was not the norm as they lived in Canada, Bahamas, Jamaica and the USA during her first 14 years. Chanel's father was always busy and had little time for her. One Christmas, as best she recalls, he only spent two hours with her.

At 15, Chanel fell into a deep depression. She felt she wasn't wanted and having a mother who yelled "I wished I never had you" didn't help. As usual, her dad was never around and being left to her own, using her own judgment and strength seemed the best she could hope for.

This was the beginning of her rebellion. With her green hair and a fondness for the wilder side of life, she made friends with many guys and fell into a life of alcohol, drugs, sex, angry music and disappointment. The dark sounds of Korn, Beastie Boys, and Nirvana spoke to her empty soul. Her dad was living 7,000 miles away and her mom worked long hours as an esthetician. The words "It's all for you!" rang empty because all she wanted was a family that cared. Even a short relationship with Jesus didn't keep her from falling into darkness.

Chanel got her first tattoo at 17 and now has 10. All of her tattoos reflect her life's journey, values, and interests including a pair of X-wing fighters from Star Wars on her stomach. Another is of a robot boy who never really knew his father - just like Chanel.

Perhaps the most amazing tattoo of all runs the full length of her right side starting just below her shoulder and ending just above the ankle. It contains the complete lyrics to "Waiting for the Great Destruction" by The Matthew Good Band; a song that questions relational happiness and longs for truth. Chanel says it is a song about her male relationships and how many of them she has ruined. She sees herself as the great destruction in having lost many friendships during her short lifetime. It is a reminder to her about the importance of relationships including those with her mother and father.

Jen's story...

For Jennifer, age 20, this small rose speaks of healing and wholeness in a life which was once marked by depression and hopelessness. It is a reminder to never give up.

Jen's life began to crumble when she was in grade 8 beginning with her grandmother's death. As Jen says, "My grandmother was a very, very strong piece of my life." Three weeks after she died her grandfather had a stroke. A few weeks after that, her adopted sister decided to move back with her birth parents for what turned out to be a short adventure. At about the same time Jen switched high schools, a traumatic enough event, and was soon thereafter to suffer a sports injury which meant she could no longer compete.

Jen says she "bottomed out with depression" in grade 9 when her sister left for good. She still misses her grandmother and feels the pressure of trying to keep the family together. Jen was also sexually assaulted during her later high school years. In her own strength, Jen began to look for ways to heal. It was then she remembered a saying she used to share with her sister, "every rose has its thorn" from a song with the same name by the group Poison.

Jen shares how she arrived at just the right location for her blue rose tattoo; the colour of the rose she laid on her grandmother's coffin. As well as being her grandmother's favourite colour, blue also signifies Jen's love for swimming and water. "Everyone has burdens to carry and everybody carries them in a different way. My grandmother always said you carry the stones on your shoulders and you carry the bull on your back. The bigger the problems are, the bigger that bull is. And when I started getting rid of my burdens I realized she was right. And just as a reminder for her, I had the rose put on my lower back."



Scot's story...



Scot's name seems quite appropriate for a boy born in Scotland. He is 21 years old and has inherited his dad's artistic talents. Scot and his dad were very close and

shared many wonderful memories. Sadly, Scot's father James died a couple of years ago. Shortly before he passed away, he was quite impressed that Scot had his father's initials tattooed on his arm. However, his dad was too afraid to get a similar one.

Two months after his father's death from lung cancer, Scot wanted to find a way to remember his father. The grave stone has the picture of a white dove with a Scottish thistle in its mouth. Scot decided to pick up on that theme so he drew a childhood picture of himself releasing the dove as a picture of his father's freedom. It serves as a daily reminder of a father he loved deeply and misses greatly.

If a picture is worth a thousand words, how many books may well be written on some bodies? We have only covered three chapters in abbreviated format. What we cannot capture is their tone of voice - one moment filled with pain and despair and the next minute full of joy and hope. We cannot look into their faces. We cannot feel what they have been through. However, we can be more understanding that some painted people are not what we think they are.

Next time you see a young person with a tattoo, why not ask them to share the story behind it? You might be amazed at what you hear... and be better off for it.