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Understanding Today's Teenagers

Teenagers didn't even exist seventy years ago . . . well, sort of. At least they weren't given their own separate generational distinction until the recent past. The word *teenager* first came into popular use around the time of the Second World War. Though many changes have taken place since the first teenagers arrived formally on the social scene, there are plenty of similarities between the teens of the 1940s and those of the twenty-first century.

From the early days of emerging teenage culture to its contemporary counterpart, the underlying themes have been the same: *independence* and *self-identity*. Throughout the years, teenagers in our American society have been active in searching for their identity while trying to establish independence from their parents. Neither of these themes played too loudly in the “pre-teenager” era.

Before the industrial age, teens worked on their parents' farms until they were married and were given or inherited their own acreage.

Identity was not something the teen sought; he was a farmer from the time he was old enough to work in the fields. The adolescent boy or girl was a child until he or she married—then the child became an adult.

THE SEARCH FOR INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY

Until the early 1940s, independence was unthinkable until the adolescent was married. However, a lot of that changed with the coming of industrialization—one's identity became more a matter of choice. You could learn a trade and work in the factory, thus becoming a machinist, a weaver, a cobbler, etc. Independence was also more of a reality because securing a job could mean moving to a neighboring village where, with monies earned, one could establish a separate residence from parents. Thus, the larger cultural changes became the backdrop for an emerging teenage culture.

Since the 1940s, teenagers have followed this paradigm of developing independence and identity, but they have done so in a rapidly changing world. One by one electricity, telephones, automobiles, radios, airplanes, televisions, computers, and the Internet have expanded the possibilities of developing new styles for seeking independence and identity. The contemporary teenager lives in a truly global society. Interestingly, however, his focus continues to be upon himself—his identity and his independence. There will be much more about this later.

The places where the teenager expresses independence and identity have changed through the years, but the means continue to be basically the same: music, dance, fashion, fads, language, and relationships. For example, the musical genre has expanded through the years from big bands to rhythm and blues, rock and roll, folk, country, heavy metal, rap, and so forth. The teen continues to have

much more variety from which to choose. But you can be certain that, no matter what, the teen's musical taste will be different from that of his parents: it's a matter of independence and identity. The same principle is true in all other areas of teenage culture.

So what characterizes the contemporary teen culture? How is your teenager similar to and different from teenagers of other generations?

THEN AND NOW: FIVE SIMILARITIES

1. Facing Physical and Mental Changes

The basic challenges facing today's teenager are very similar to the challenges you faced when you were a teenager. First, there is the challenge of accepting and adapting to the changes that take place in the teen's body. Arms and legs, hands and feet are all growing, sometimes at a disproportionate rate, producing the reality of "teenage clumsiness" (which can be a source of extreme embarrassment for the teenager). Sexual characteristics are also developing, which may be both exciting and anxiety inducing. And what parent has not felt the pain as they watched their teenager struggle with that most devastating of enemies—acne?

These physiological changes spur numerous questions in the mind of the teenager. "I'm becoming an adult, but what will I look like? Will I be too tall or too short? Will my ears protrude too far? Will my breasts be too small? What about my nose? Are my feet too big? Am I too fat or too skinny?" The parade of questions marches on and on through the mind of the developing teenager. The manner in which a teenager answers these questions will either have a positive or negative effect upon his/her self-identity.

With this physical growth, there is also an accompanying "intellectual growth spurt." The teenager is developing a new way of thinking.

As a child, she thought in terms of concrete actions and events. As a teenager, she begins to think in terms of abstract concepts like honesty, loyalty, and justice. With abstract thinking comes the expanded world of unlimited possibilities. The teen now has the ability to think about how things could be different, what a world without war would look like, or how understanding parents would treat their children. The world of expanded possibilities opens all kinds of doors for self-identity. The teenager realizes, “I could be a brain surgeon or a pilot or a garbage collector.” The possibilities are unlimited and the teen may envision himself in numerous vocational settings.

2. Entering the Age of Reason

Adolescence is also the age of reason. The teenager is able to think logically and to see the logical consequences of different positions. This logic is applied not only to his own reasoning but also to the reasoning of his parents. Do you see why a teenager might often be perceived as “argumentative”? In reality, he is developing his mental skills. If the parents understand this, they can then have meaningful and interesting conversations with their teenagers. If they don’t understand this, they can develop an adversarial relationship, and the teenager must go elsewhere to flex his newfound intellectual muscles. With this rapid growth in intellectual development and the gleaning of new information, the teenager often believes himself to be smarter than his parents and, in some areas, he may be right.

This advanced level of thinking leads the teenager into a whole new arena of challenges in the field of social relationships. The discussion of “ideas” with his peers and listening to their point of view gives rise to new levels of intimacy on the one hand and opens the possibility of an adversarial relationship on the other. Thus, development of

cliques (small, close social groups) among teens has far more to do with agreement over intellectual ideas than it does with things like dress and hair color. Teens, like adults, tend to feel more comfortable with those who agree with them.

3. Confronting Personal Morality and Values

The intellectual ability to analyze ideas and actions in a logical manner and to project outcomes of certain beliefs gives rise to another common teenage challenge: examining the belief systems with which one was raised, and determining if those beliefs are worthy of one's commitment. "Were my parents right in their views of God, morality, and values?" These are heavy issues with which every teenager must wrestle. If parents do not understand this struggle they will often become a negative influence and actually push the teenager away.

When the teenager questions the parents about basic beliefs, wise parents welcome the questions, seek to give honest answers in a nonauthoritarian manner, and encourage the teenager to continue to explore these ideas. In other words, they welcome the opportunity to dialogue with the teenager about the beliefs that they have espoused through the years. If, on the other hand, the parents reject the teenager's questions, perhaps heaping guilt upon him for even thinking that the parents' beliefs may be incorrect, the teenager is forced to go elsewhere to share his questions.

4. Thinking About Sexuality and Marriage

Another important challenge for the teenager is beginning to understand his own sexuality while learning masculine or feminine social roles. What is appropriate and not appropriate in relating to members of the opposite sex? What is appropriate and inappropriate

in dealing with their own sexual thoughts and feelings? These questions, often ignored by parents, cannot be ignored by the teenager.

The teen's emerging sexuality is a part of who he is, and relating to members of the opposite sex is an ever-present reality. Most teens dream of someday being married and having a family. A few years back, when a survey asked teens to rank a number of the important issues in their future, "eighty-six percent said that having a stable family will be the most important item on the blueprint of their future lives."¹ Making the journey from early adolescence to that stable marriage and family that the teen desires occupies many hours of teenage thought.

Parents who want to help will use the normal flow of family conversation to address issues related to sexuality, dating, and marriage. They will also guide their teenager to the right printed materials and websites that speak on the teenage level while providing practical and sound information. For those teenagers who are involved in church or youth group, caring adults and youth ministers often provide sessions relating to sex, dating, and marriage. These classes provide a social context in which teens can learn and discuss this important aspect of teen development in an open and caring way.

5. Questioning the Future

There is one other common challenge faced by teenagers of the past and present. It is grappling with the question: "What will I do with my life?" This question does involve choosing a vocation, but it is far deeper than that. It is ultimately a spiritual question: "What is worth the investment of my life? Where will I find the greatest happiness? And where can I make the greatest contribution?" As philosophical as these questions may appear, they are very real to our

teenagers. More immediately, teenagers must answer the questions: “Will I go to college, and if so, where? Should I join the military, and if so, which branch? Or should I get a job, and if so, which job?” Of course, teenagers understand that these choices all lead somewhere. There is something beyond the next step and somehow, the next step will influence where teenagers end up. It is an awesome challenge for these young minds.

Parents who wish to be helpful will share something of their own struggle, their own joys, and their own disappointments. As a parent, you cannot and should not offer easy answers, but you can encourage the teenager’s search and perhaps introduce your son or daughter to people of various vocations who can share their journey. You can encourage your adolescent to take advantage of vocational counselors both at high school and later at the university. But ultimately, you should encourage your teenager to follow the example of Samuel. The ancient Hebrew prophet heard God’s call as a teenager, and said, “Speak, for your servant is listening.”² The men and women who have made the greatest impact upon human history have been men and women who had a sense of divine call and who lived out that call in their vocation.

FIVE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES

With all these similarities, let’s not forget that a mighty gulf exists between the contemporary teenager and teenagers of the past (even the recent past); that gulf is the modern cultural setting in which teens face the challenges noted above. What are some of these cultural differences?

1. Technology

One of the most observable differences is that contemporary teenagers have grown up in a world of highly advanced technology. Their parents grew up with mobile phones, cable TV, and the dawn of the Internet, but the contemporary “digital native” teenager has hardly known a world without mobile Internet, social media, and wired-in classrooms. Every movie ever produced is available through streaming; every song ever sung can be heard on Spotify, courtesy of the teenager’s ever-present smartphone.

The contemporary teen has also grown up with no “pre-Internet” memories; the teenager and the Internet have both come of age together. What we used to call the “information superhighway” has grown into a vast mobile web with both positive and negative influences upon the contemporary teenager. Besides giving our teens immediate access to the latest in movies, fashion, music, and sports, it allows them to have up-to-the-second updates on where their friends are, and who has broken up with whom. In fact, with the proliferation of social networking and mobile updates, the Internet has not only outpaced the traditional telephone as the teen’s method of communicating with friends and discussing ideas, but it has literally taken it over. You are much more likely to see your teenager texting, browsing, and/or playing a video game (often at the same time) on their telephone than you are to see them talking on it. These technological realities put your teenager in touch with the world and the world in touch with your teenager. The contemporary teenager is exposed to far more cultural stimuli than his parents ever could have dreamed at his age.

2. Knowledge of and Exposure to Violence

A second cultural difference is that your teenager is growing up with far more knowledge of violent human behavior. Part of this is because of technological advances, that is, more violence is reported through the media, but a part of it simply reflects our culture's thirst—almost obsession—for violence. Our movies, songs, and novels often rush toward violent scenes. One youth survey found that 36 percent of teenagers had seen a movie or television show containing a lot of violence in the past month.

Interestingly, the survey said that eight in ten teens, 78 percent, told the Gallup organization that they “do not have a problem watching violent movies or television programs.” However, 53 percent of the same teenagers agreed “violence on television and in movies sends the wrong messages to young people.” The same survey indicated that 65 percent of the teens surveyed believe that “movies and television have a great deal of influence on the outlook of young people today.”³

Exposure to violence is not limited to the media and movies. Many contemporary teenagers have experienced violence on the personal level. They have watched their fathers physically abuse their mothers or they themselves have suffered physical abuse from fathers, stepfathers, or other adults. Most teenagers acknowledge that the public school is often the scene of violent behavior.

Some teens are even perpetrators of violence—including homicide. While the overall homicide rate in the United States has remained somewhat steady for the past thirty years, the youth homicide rate has continued to increase. The period of greatest growth was from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when youth homicide increased 168 percent. The FBI reported that there are about twenty-three thousand homicides each year in the

United States, and in 25 percent of these killings, the perpetrator is twenty-one years of age or younger.⁴ Thankfully, in more recent years, statistics show a decline in youth violence—but in many communities, youth violence remains the most serious challenge.

3. The Fragmented Family

A third cultural factor that influences the contemporary teenager is the fragmented nature of the modern American family. According to a Gallup youth survey from a few years ago, four of every ten American teens (39 percent) are living with only one of their parents. In eight out of ten cases, the absent parent is the father. The same survey indicated that 20 percent of American teenagers live with a stepfather or some other adult male who lives with their mother.⁵

Sociologists have observed “in unprecedented numbers, our families are unlike: we have fathers working while mothers keep house; fathers and mothers both working away from home; single parents; second marriages bringing children together from unrelated backgrounds; childless couples; unmarried couples with and without children; and gay and lesbian parents. We are living through a period of historic change in American family life.”⁶ Another researcher noted, “The data is not yet in on the residual of this fragmentation, but a sociological view suggests a direct link with many of the social strains we see every day. Some of the attitudes, stress, alienation . . . and shortened attention spans are directly related to strains of adjusting to new kinds of families.”⁷

It is not news that today’s teen often grows up without the presence of extended family. James Comer, director of the Yale Child Study Center, sees this as a factor nearly as critical as the breakdown of the nuclear family. Speaking of his own childhood, Comer said,

“Between home and school, at least five close friends of my parents reported everything I did that was unacceptable. They are not there anymore for today’s kids.”⁸ In the past, teenagers could depend upon extended families, healthy neighborhoods, churches, and community groups. The contemporary teen (and parent) most often does not have these nets of support.

4. Knowledge of and Exposure to Sexuality

Today’s overtly sexual atmosphere, the one in which our teens are growing up, is a vastly different situation. The baby boomers of the 1960s rebelled against the traditional sexual mores of their parents, but they remembered what the sexual rules were and sometimes even experienced guilt in breaking them. But the contemporary teenager has grown up in a world without sexual rules. Movies, media, and music all equate sex with love and depict sex as an expected part of a meaningful dating relationship. Thus, vast numbers of teenagers are sexually active.

Teenagers who are not sexually active struggle with thoughts such as *Am I missing out on something important? Is there something wrong with me?* Meanwhile, those teens who are sexually active have other negative feelings: They often feel used, abused, and empty.

The contemporary teen lives in a world where sex is not only an expected part of the dating relationship but living together before marriage is more and more common, and homosexual relationships are being promoted as alternative lifestyles. Indeed, the words bisexual and transgender are common vocabulary for the modern teen. In a very real sense, sex has become the American goddess, and the shrines and venues for worship are as varied as the mind can imagine. This is the world in which the contemporary teenager must navigate the already scary waters of his/her own emerging sexuality.

5. Neutral Moral and Religious Values

Finally, the contemporary teen is growing up in a world that is truly post-Christian. In the area of religion and morals, there is no sure word. In past generations, most Americans could have defined moral and immoral behavior. These moral judgments were primarily based on the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. This is not true for the contemporary teenager. For the first time in American history, an entire generation is growing up without certain moral values. Values are often neutral; the teen is told that what feels good—is good. Right and wrong are relative.

The teenage years have always been the time to explore religious beliefs. Teens are asking questions about the religious beliefs—or disbeliefs—of their parents. As in other areas of life, they are seeking to clarify their own identity. The difference in the contemporary world is that because of the global nature of today's world, our teens are exposed to numerous religious beliefs—both by means of modern technology and through friends who are involved in other religious groups.

Religion is important to the contemporary teen. A recent survey indicated that about half of teenagers (51 percent) see religious faith as important in shaping their daily lives.⁹ More than three quarters of teenagers (82 percent) identify themselves with an organized religious group. A third of the teenagers (36 percent) say that they feel “very” or “extremely” close to God and more than half have made a personal commitment to live their life for God (55 percent).¹⁰ Four in ten teenagers (40 percent) reported that they attend services for religious worship at least once per week.¹¹ Today's teenagers are more interested in the experiential, relational nature of religious groups than abstract religious belief. If the group is accepting, caring, and

supportive, they are drawn to the spiritual group even though they may disagree with many of the group's religious beliefs.

PARENTS CAN GUIDE

This is the world into which your teenager has come of age. The good news is that contemporary teenagers are looking to parents for guidance. In a recent survey, teens reported that parents have more influence than peers do in the following areas: whether to attend college, whether to attend religious services, whether to do homework, and whether to drink. Parents also had an impact on the teens' job or career plans. Friends had more influence on their decisions in terms of immediate issues such as whether or not to cut classes, who to date, hairstyles, and what kind of clothes they wore.¹²

The survey found that when teenagers were asked to report "Who has the greatest influence on your decisions? Parents or friends?" the decisions most heavily weighted toward parental influence were those that appear to have a major effect on what kind of person the teen will be. Yes, your teenager will be influenced by friends on some issues, but parents are still the major influence on their teenager's thoughts and behavior. The remaining chapters of this book are designed to help you learn to effectively meet your teenager's need for love and thus lay the foundation for influencing your teen more effectively in all other areas of life.