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## 10 surprising things you need to know about today's youth culture

by Walt Mueller

Hidden deep in the pages of the Old Testament you'll find a description of a relatively small group of people who joined David and thousands of other warriors to liberate the Ark of the Covenant. The Chronicler describes these men of Issachar as people "who understood the times and knew what men should do." (1 Chron. 12:32) As people called to do ministry in rapidly changing times, we must embark on a never-ending quest to know our culture and world. Theologian John Stott challenges followers of Christ to engage in "double listening," by consciously seeking to hear both the Word and the world. Listening to the world allows us to discover how best to relate the Gospel to it.

One large component of today's world that's largely ignored or misunderstood by those of us in ministry is the unique world of our children and teens. Youth culture is the soup they swim in every day. From the moment they are born, kids marinate in a mix they absorb through the "pores" of their life. Eventually, it all becomes a part of who they are, shaping their values, attitudes, and behaviors. Because we want to lead children and teens to hear and follow the Incarnate Word, we must know their world. While the world of today's youth culture is a complex and fluid place, here's a non-exhaustive list of 10 current youth culture trends you not only need to know, but that you might find surprising. Prayerfully "listen to" and ponder each, thinking about the implications for your ministry, preaching, teaching, counseling, etc.



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Walt Mueller, author of [Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture](#)

**1. Advertising is a powerful shaper of kids.** The typical child sees between 3,500 and 5,000 advertisements a day, all of which are carefully constructed by marketers to create a continuous need for products by exploiting kids' anxieties and aspirations. Because of where they're at developmentally, young people's lives brim with anxieties and aspirations, making them especially vulnerable to advertising. Marketing taps into their spiritual brokenness and exploits it by promising redemption, fulfillment, wholeness, and satisfaction through the purchase and use of products. In effect, marketing substitutes a false gospel for the true Gospel we've been called to communicate. But ads don't only sell a product. Their greatest power lies in their ability to sell a worldview. They

serve as a map for curious young hearts and minds that are looking for guidance that will shape their behavior.

**2. Everything's happening at younger and younger ages.** This phenomenon is known as "age compression." Marketers have actually employed this as a strategy to expand a product's market by pushing adult-type products, values, and attitudes on kids at younger and younger ages. What's resulted is an environment where what used to be for 18-year-olds is now for 6-year-olds. Today's 6-year-olds are increasingly looking, dressing, talking, and acting like yesterday's 18-year-olds. Some of the most direct effects can be seen in what children at younger and younger ages know and believe about sexuality, materialism, and violence. The children in your congregation are far less innocent and far more jaded than their peers in previous generations.

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**3. They are engaging new media in new ways.** Because they live in a world where technology is developing at warp speed, today's children and teens are more media-saturated and media-savvy than any prior generation. Researchers report that on average, children ages 8 to 18 spend a total of eight hours and 33 minutes a day exposed to a wide variety of media, including television, movies, books, magazines, video games, computers, and music. Because they are using multiple media simultaneously (yes, they do their homework while instant messaging, talking on the phone, and surfing the Internet!), their average daily media use is just under six and a half hours a day. The amount of time spent in school, at church, and in conversation with their parents pales in comparison. Not only that, but more and more kids are using media alone in their rooms. Seven out of 10 have a television, and one out of five has a computer. This means that family viewing time is becoming a thing of the past. As a result, a growing number of kids are processing everything they see and hear void of adult input. In today's world, media is raising and shaping the kids.

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**4. Family violence is rampant.** It's frightening to think that much of our nation's child abuse and sexual abuse goes unreported. What is reported is frightening enough. It's believed that one out of every four girls and one out of every six boys is sexually abused by the time they reach the age of 16. Most of the abuse is perpetrated by a parent, sibling, or close relative. In addition, studies indicate that between 3.3 million and 10 million children are exposed to domestic violence annually. These realities leave deep, life-long

marks on kids. Children who are exposed to or victims of family and sexual violence are more likely to become perpetrators of violence themselves. They're also more likely to exhibit a variety of health and behavioral problems growing up, including depression, anxiety, self-abuse, suicide, and drug and alcohol abuse. The home used to be a place of refuge and a source of much-needed resiliency for kids growing through the normal difficulties of the adolescent years. In today's world, relational deprivation and breakdown is a mark of the emerging generations.

**5. The nature of peer pressure has changed.** I was 12 when I was first exposed to pornography. My friends convinced me to join them, and we hid and huddled behind a neighbor's stone wall to look at a magazine found on the side of the road. We did what we did where we did it because we knew it was wrong. Back in those

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days, peer pressure took the form of a verbal invitation to come and do something that both you and the person inviting you to do it knew was wrong. In today's world, peer pressure usually takes the form of an unspoken expectation to come and get involved in behavior that the overwhelming majority of your peers think is normal and right. Today's peer pressure is much more intense and difficult to resist.

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**6. Materialism is a desirable lifestyle.** The dawn of the new millennium has brought increased economic opportunity and wealth into the lives of children and teens. More and more kids are working long hours, buying cars, and furnishing their rooms with the latest in electronic gadgetry. Many have more monthly discretionary income at their disposal than the average adult. Others are showered with material "blessings" from over-indulgent parents. Young people are going through their teenage years developing life expectations – and related priorities – of having whatever they want, whenever they want it. They are, and will be, accumulating debt at unprecedented levels. Their present situation indicates that today's teens are building their lives around the desire to possess things.

**7. Oral sex is big.** Researchers are just now beginning to look more seriously at oral sex and teenagers. The practice has become so prevalent amongst teens – especially among middle school students – that it's considered to be a recreational activity that takes place casually and without any sort of dating relationship, either when alone with another person or in groups. The most recent data indicates that among 15- to 19-year-olds, more than 55 percent of the boys and more than 54 percent of the girls report giving or getting oral sex. By the time they reach the age of 19, three-quarters of all teens will have engaged in oral sex. When asked if oral sex is "sex," many young people answer "no." The reason? You can't get pregnant from it.

**8. Far too many kids are depressed.** The increased intensity of peer, media, and family pressures has made the teenage years more difficult. The constant barrage of confusing messages and expectations can be too much of a burden for some teens to handle during the normal adolescent developmental shake-up, especially when parents are absent or ignorant of what is going on in their lives. One study of students in grades six, eight, and 10 found that 18 percent of youths reported symptoms of depression. Our children and teens are at increased risk for being more than down in the dumps. Teen depression has reached epidemic proportions.

**9. There's little difference between church and unchurched kids.** There's a sad and sorry trend I've been noticing more and more over the past several years. Increasingly, kids from Christian homes and churches are looking more and more like their mainstream teenaged peers – and less and less like Christ. While many of these kids claim allegiance to Christ, their values, attitudes, and behaviors indicate there's a disconnect between their stated faith and daily lives. This reality is reflective of a growing trend among Christians of all ages who are failing to integrate their faith into the place where it rightfully belongs – all of life. Sadly, more and more students are living disintegrated lives with their faith saying little or nothing to how they relate, learn, date, play, and work, etc.

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**10. There's a deep hunger for heaven.** While my focus has been on some of the more negative and troubling youth culture trends, there is good news as well. Teenagers are displaying a God-shaped

emptiness in their lives filled by God. If you listen and look closely, you'll see and hear it in their music, films, books, magazines – and even in their very lives. Even when they don't recognize it as such, we can rest in the assurance that their hunger is for God and the heaven we proclaim.

Today's youth culture might not be a very pretty place, but it's the very particular place where Jesus sends us – his particular followers – to proclaim the life-changing Good News. Will you listen to their world?

### Recommended resources

- [Purpose Driven Youth Ministry Conference \(October, 2007\)](#)
  - [Purpose Driven Youth Ministry by Doug Fields](#)
  - [Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry by Doug Fields](#)
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Walt Mueller is the president of the [Center for Parent/Youth Understanding](#). To learn more about the culture and world of today's youth and to order a copy of Walt's book [Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture](#) (InterVarsity Press, 2006), log on to [www.cpyu.org](#), a site that's updated daily with the latest on today's youth culture. ©Copyright 2006. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

