

# ***CPYU Trend Alert:*** **Back-in-School History and Homework**

by Walt Mueller

The young man's comments left me scratching my head. I was cleaning up after presenting a seminar on today's youth culture when he approached me to say "thanks" for the information I had just communicated. "I want you to know," he said, "that I've returned to the high school I graduated from to do some after-school ministry with students. What you shared with us today has helped me to understand why kids are so much more different today than they were when I was in school." "How old are you?" I asked. "Nineteen," he said. "I just graduated from high school 10 months ago."

Like a snowball picking up speed and mass on a trip down a never-ending mountain, youth culture is changing at warp speed. With children and teens back in school, you need to be aware that the school youth culture they've headed back to is not the same as the one they left just a few short months ago. Everything is changing. To help you keep abreast of the world your kids live in, let me give you a short history lesson along with some homework.

First, the history. . . . history that will help convince you that every day your kids get out of bed, their world is new in some way, shape, or form. It all starts with the relative newness of adolescence as a distinct period of life and the concept of "teenagers" as we know it today. While there have always been chronological teenagers (humans aged 13 to 19), teenagers as we know and understand them in our contemporary situation are a relatively new development. There was a time – not long ago – when there were no such things as teenagers or a distinct youth culture, at least not as we know them today.

Believe it or not, it wasn't until 1941 that the term "teenager" was first coined and used, in all places, *Popular Science* magazine. So where have teenagers and youth culture come from? Most people don't realize that teenagers as a distinct group are actually a social and economic invention. In 1930, teenagers didn't exist. In 1930, the concept of teenagers didn't exist. You simply jumped from being a child to being an adult. Only 50% of young people ages 14-17 were going to school. The other half were in the work force. An effort was made to get them out of the work force and into school so that they could get an education and so that jobs would open up for family men.

When the GI's came home after World War II, America experienced an unprecedented "baby boom." This growing youth population combined with extraordinary economic growth and opportunity in a mix that left marketers drooling. Lots of children and teens with lots of money to spend were too hard to resist. Those who had something to sell segmented teens away from children and adults, creating a distinct youth culture that was targeted with food, clothing, cars, books, movies, and everything else imaginable – all of it made and marketed just for them. By the mid-1950's teens had their own music that spoke specifically to their interests and experience.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about how teenagers and adolescence developed in the U.S. during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Avon Books, 1999).

Unless you've been asleep, you know the rest of the story. Media and marketing have continued to create and reformulate a youth culture (on a daily basis) that now includes children and teens. Because our teenagers are growing through the change-filled years of adolescence, they are incredibly vulnerable to the youth culture's ability to shape their values, attitudes, and behaviors. The fact that there are a growing amount of competing messages coming at our teens from a variety of different directions, makes it that much more confusing, frustrating, and difficult for parents of teens to understand and connect with their kids. In effect, these changes have made "normal" adolescent development far more complex, added pressures and tensions to the process that never before existed, and widened the cultural-generational gap between teenagers and their parents.

Now, your homework. As a parent, you have been given primary responsibility for the spiritual nurture of your children (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9; Ephesians 6:4). Because you grew up in a world that's different from the world of your teen, you must view this calling as a cross-cultural missionary venture. As a result, you must work to stay in touch – like foreign missionaries – with the language and culture of your mission field. Here are three assignments that aren't meant to be burdensome, but helpful.

First, take the advice of the theologian who once said that every Christian should start their day with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other. In other words, you must begin your day spending time getting to know the One who has sent you, and the message that One has called you to communicate. Be sure that God's truth is coursing through your veins. Then, take the time to use your newspaper to get to know today's world so that you can communicate the Word's truths to the needs of your teenager and his/her world.

Second, read what they read, watch what they watch, and listen to what they listen to. Because of its pervasiveness, media is now the most powerful shaper of the values, attitudes, and behaviors of teens. What media are your teens engaging with, and what are they hearing/seeing/learning as they engage with those media? You can only know by checking it out for yourself. By getting to know your teen's media, you are getting to know your kids. Knowing their media will offer you great opportunities to discuss life in the light of God's Word. You will be able to affirm what they are learning that conforms to God's will and way, and challenge those things that don't.

Finally, spend time perusing the growing number of internet organizations and resources that serve to open your eyes to the changing world of today's teenagers. Our Center for Parent/Youth Understanding website ([cpyu.org](http://cpyu.org)) is a valuable gateway into all things youth culture. The site is updated daily, features growing archives, and includes dozens of links to other helpful organizations that deal with every conceivable type of youth culture pressure and reality.

Now that your kids are back to school, decide that you're going to go back to school as well. If you become a serious student of your teen's culture, your teen will find it easier to navigate the hallways of that culture in a manner that glorifies God.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the  
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at  
[www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org).**