

## **Keeping Up with Today's Youth Culture**

*By Jim Liebelt*

It has been said that the pace of change in today's youth culture is quickening. Yesterday's cultural icons are on the ash heap today and what's "in" today will be "out" tomorrow. It is wise for parents to be students of youth culture, but practically speaking, how does one find time to keep up with all of the trends and changes that take place? The realistic answer is, you won't find the time. And I would add, don't waste all of your energies trying!

Allow me to explain: The adolescent years – loosely defined as the time span running from one's puberty to economic independence – has always been about the process of individuation – separating from parents and becoming an independent, functioning adult. Over the past 50 years, this process has been getting longer and longer. As a result, youth culture has become more easily identifiable. Still, changes within youth culture itself are rapid, making it difficult for the average parent to keep up. Yet, no matter what the form of today's youth culture takes, it is important to remember that youth culture is just the expression of that process of individuation – nothing more and nothing less.

Reading a good book on youth culture, periodically thumbing through a magazine marketed to teens or occasionally watching an hour of television that is aimed at teens are all worthy endeavors to keep up with today's youth culture. Another great resource is the *Center for Parent/Youth Understanding*. Under the leadership of Walt Mueller, CPYU is a fantastic ministry that in serves as a clearinghouse for keeping track of important youth culture trends and how parents can not only be aware of but also make the most of these trends as they come down the pike. They do an excellent job of watching global youth culture trends that most parents would find difficult to track by themselves. To check out CYPYU, visit their website by [clicking here](#).

While keeping track of trends in youth culture throughout the country and the world are good parenting practices, the youth culture that matters most to you – and your kids – is the youth culture found in your own community. For instance, it may become trendy on the East or West coasts - for teenage guys to wear Capri pants – but it could also be a trend that never makes it to Milwaukee or Sioux Falls. So, if you happen to live in a place that is, generally speaking less trendy by nature, I wouldn't advise that parents spend time preparing against the "Great Capri Pant Invasion." Further, as a general rule, adolescents in rural towns often do not deal with some issues to the same extent that urban kids do – and vice versa. The point is that ultimately where the "rubber meets the road" for parents these days is not found in keeping your eyes focused on global youth culture – but rather keeping up with the what's going on at your kids' school just down the road.

To keep pace with the issues facing their teenagers, I believe that parents will make the best use of their parenting time and energies by focusing on local youth culture. Let me share some practical tips for doing just that.

1. **Establish, maintain and grow a relationship with your kids.** Take time to get to know them. Be involved in their lives. Learn their likes and their dislikes, their hopes and their dreams, their joys and their fears. This takes communication – and don't forget – perhaps the most important communication skill is listening. Ask your kids about local youth culture trends. They are your in-house “experts.”

2. **Know your kids friends.** The rule of friendship among adolescents operates in such a way that your kids will conform to the interests, behaviors and values of their closest friends. Friendship groups are formed on a voluntary basis, so understand that your child will either contribute to setting the group standards, conform to them, or move away from the group. The one thing they won't do is stay in a friendship group long-term while bucking the group's values. What this friendship rule means to parents is that you should be aware that your kids will be involved in the interests, behaviors and values of their friends – or they'll change friendship groups. A parent who, for example, knows their child hangs out with friends who use drugs, but believes their child doesn't use drugs – is most likely a parent in denial. Learning about kids' closest friends means learning much about them.

3. **Pay attention to local news about adolescents.** This is one area that parents should spend some time doing their homework. Read and listen to learn about what is going on with local adolescents. Ask your own kids what they know about local stories. Look for community wide trends. A few years ago, for example, a community in Georgia experienced a significant increase in the number of adolescents who were contracting sexually transmitted diseases – and soon community health officials and parents discovered that a significant number of community adolescents were participating in sex-focused parties.

4. **Ask local school officials, teachers and youth workers about local culture trends.** Engage in regular dialogue with professionals and volunteers who are in the trenches with adolescents, day in and day out. Ask about what new youth culture trends they see emerging as well as those that are disappearing.

5. **From time to time, put your periscope up and take a glance at global trends in youth culture.** When you see something that concerns you, ask your kids, your local adolescent professionals and volunteer youth workers if they have noticed any similar local emerging trends.

6. **Use your influence with your kids!** While it may not always seem like it, you – not the culture, not the media, not even your kids' peers – are your kids' greatest lasting influence as they grow into adulthood. Don't waste this tremendous influence. Use it! Set the tone for your kids by establishing and providing consistency in boundaries. Build morals and values into their lives. Keep in mind that not all expressions of youth culture are bad. Support positive local youth culture trends. Be an advocate for change against negative local youth culture trends.