

# Equipping Families to Thrive in Today's Youth Culture

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## **Abstract**

My dissertation argues that it is possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society. This can be achieved by equipping parents and children to understand each challenge through the lens of the child, the caregiver, and the professional; as well as the lens of our Covenant-Keeping God and what He has given us as instruction in His Word. My hypothesis is that it is possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society, however it is improbable that most children will be completely insulated and never have moral failings.

While I contend that it is possible to raise children who do not succumb to societal woes, there appears to be little difference in the incidence rate between Christian and non-Christian kids who are faced with societal moral dilemmas and ensuing consequences. Nearly 40% of all students are involved in cyber and/or face to face bullying as perpetrators, victims, or both<sup>1</sup>. Half of all new drug users are under the age of 18<sup>2</sup>. Nearly half of all high school age students reported having sex within the past three months, and nearly 5% reported having started sexual activity prior to the age of 13<sup>3</sup>. Teen pregnancy rates are reported as declining, however many reports speak of teen births and do not account for abortions in their teen pregnancy statistics. Although abortion rates have declined as birth control use has increased, nearly 30% of all teen pregnancies still end in abortion<sup>4</sup>. The suicide rate amongst Christians is the same as non-Christians<sup>5</sup>, and every 100 minutes a teen takes their own life<sup>6</sup>. Smart phones are now shared with babies just months old, and 80% of teens own them<sup>7</sup>, creating a gateway for the onslaught of technology related challenges.

These statistics are but a foreshadowing of the depth and breadth of the challenges of living in today's world, a world in which only 7% of all U.S. households are traditional family households<sup>8</sup>. Parents, particularly Christian parents, are distressed when they find out their child is one of the statistics they read about; yet few are equipped to raise their children with awareness and ability to withstand all modern society entices them with. Lay leaders and pastors are often no better equipped than parents and in most cases, are unaware of the prevalence of the challenging issues within the families they are shepherding. There are numerous studies and resources available both digitally and in print, however few parents and leaders have the time to sit and research the topics and synthesize it to a usable form. Many pastors and lay leaders have a tendency to utilize Christian data only. It is important to look at data, challenges, and recommended action steps from all vantage points, if we intend to effectively equip families to handle the challenges they will face.

Organizations such as Focus on the Family, whose tagline is 'Helping Families Thrive'<sup>9</sup>, are valuable to parents who access them, but not all take the time to learn from them. There are excellent Christian authors, such as Dr. Kevin Leman and Dr. James Dobson, who are experts and provide timely topical resources. Dr. Myles Munroe wrote several excellent books, including 'Kingdom Parenting'. Unquestionably, the most relevant book for Christians to read is The Bible, which is filled with insight and instruction as to how to train up a child.

There are some foundational parenting methods that are essential in laying the groundwork for building strong families that have little to do with religious beliefs and can be implemented by all. The commitment to learn parenting skills and implement them is based on morals and values,



but the actual topics are not religious in nature. Secular experts offer insight to issues being faced by families today. One such expert is Robert Burns, author of the book 'Becoming Attached', which expounds on the need to create bonds with children. Annette Laroux wrote what is considered by many to be a must-have reference book, 'Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family'. Julia Ross is another parenting expert who writes resources to help parents navigate uncharted waters, including 'Joint Custody with a Jerk', a book that offers help to parents needing to make a difficult situation as easy for the children as possible. Research centers such as Barna, the U.S. Census, and the CDC also offer invaluable data and best practices; as does the National Alliance of Mental Health, the American Pediatrics Association and other reputable sources.

While there are resources available of a topical nature, there is a lack of resources that comprehensively address the challenges faced when raising Christian families in today's society. The data, analysis, realities, and recommended action steps of this project will be a valuable resource when preparing to preach and teach parents and youth to navigate in a society very different than as little as a generation ago, and certainly vastly different challenges than those faced two or three generations ago.

The outcome of this project will be a comprehensive guide that can be used by pastors and lay leaders when shepherding and equipping families in their churches with realities and best practice measures of grounding children in Biblical principles that will create prevention or minimize the impact of societal trends. It will consider the research from a wide array of sources and meld the findings into a conclusive work which will verify that it is possible to raise resilient

children who, while they may struggle and experience occasional moral failings, will not succumb to the trends of society.

## **Hypothesis**

My dissertation argues that it is possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society, by equipping both parents and children to understand each situation through the lens of the child, the caregiver, the professional; as well as the lens of our Covenant-Keeping God and what He has given us as instruction in His Word. My hypothesis is that it is possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society, however it is improbable that the children will be completely insulated and never have moral failings; and that the key to success is how well grounded the children are in Biblical principles.

## **Importance of the Project**

There are numerous studies and resources available both digitally and in print, however few parents and leaders have the time to sit and research the topics and synthesize it to a usable form. Furthermore, many pastors and lay leaders have a tendency to utilize Christian data only. We must look at all data to ascertain whether or not Christian families face the same rate and topics of struggles as non-Christian families, and if there are challenges, are the outcomes different based solely on one's religious beliefs? It is important to look at data from all vantage points and to stay on the cutting edge of societal trends, if the Church is to succeed in helping families raise resilient children. The outcome of this project will be a comprehensive guide that can be used by pastors and lay leaders when shepherding and equipping families in their churches to be prepared

to help children and youth navigate the challenging waters of growing up in a society very different than as little as a generation ago and certainly vastly different challenges than those faced two or three generations ago.

### **Method of Approach**

I will be reading a plethora of articles, research studies, and books on keyword topics, as listed below under the 'research' portion of this proposal. I will primarily be looking at data published within the past 5 years and will access well-respected authors and research centers such as Pew, Barna, the U.S. Census, the CDC, and the American Pediatric Association.

I also plan to do a survey within my sphere of 800 Facebook 'friends', using a questionnaire format to collect data. Within the circle of nearly 800 are those who fall in categories of those listed in my research questions. They are from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, some live urban and some rural, some Christians, some Catholics, some New Agers and some with no religious preferences. Some send kids to private school, others home school, and still others send their kids to private school. Some live in close proximity to family and others live hundreds of miles away. Kids range in age from newborn to adulthood. Within the Facebook pilot group are single parents, blended families, and traditional families. There are stay-at-home moms and working moms. The data will then be analyzed and compared to currently published data that I will be researching and citing.

## Chapter One

### Biblical Foundations of Parenting

The Bible has much to say about the challenges that are being faced by children and their parents today. This chapter will highlight Bible passages as well as explore changes in American families over the past centuries. My hypothesis is that it is possible for families to raise children who do not *succumb* to the morals and trends of current society, however it is improbable that most children will be completely insulated and *never* have moral failings. While I contend that it is possible to raise children who do not succumb to societal woes, there appears to be little difference in the incidence rate between Christian and non-Christian kids who are faced with societal moral dilemmas and ensuing consequences.

If pastors are going to train leaders to shepherd and equip families, there needs to be a clear understanding of best practice measures in combating trends and pressures children face, beginning with grounding in Biblical principles which will prevent or minimize societal trends. The media would purport that America in its post-modern state and no longer wants to be held to Biblical standards, yet we find there are still some standards in place. In that reality, there is hope. For example, the seventh commandment 'Thou shalt not steal' is still upheld today. Stealing results in consequences from an early age and at older ages, the consequences include the justice system. Deeper exploration of the Scriptures reveals many other principles that remain expectations in society. Likewise Scriptures reveal the warnings of consequences now playing out in societal trends of those who refuse to adhere to the timeless directives. That is not to say that the Bible is the only tool necessary when equipping families. This chapter will address the

Biblical aspect and future chapters will address other aspects to guiding kids through societal land mines.

Nearly 40% of all students are involved in cyber and/or face to face bullying as perpetrators, victims, or both.<sup>10</sup> Half of all new drug users are under the age of 18.<sup>11</sup> Nearly half of all high school age students reported having sex within the past three months, and nearly 5% reported having started sexual activity prior to the age of 13.<sup>12</sup> Teen pregnancy rates are reported as declining, however many reports speak of teen births and do not account for abortions in their teen pregnancy statistics. Although abortion rates have declined as birth control use has increased, nearly 30% of all teen pregnancies still end in abortion.<sup>13</sup> The suicide rate amongst Christians is the same as non-Christians,<sup>14</sup> and every 100 minutes a teen takes their own life.<sup>15</sup>

### **Parenting According to Deuteronomy**

Kids in crisis do not happen suddenly. A twelve year old does not wake up one morning and decide to start cussing out a parent. A five year old does not randomly decide to take the money from the kitchen counter. A sixteen year old does not start gossiping and bullying classmates with no precipitating events. With the exception of extreme situations, there are precipitating occurrences that evolve over time. The wise parent will anticipate the potential of any number of decisions to be made by their child, and will begin teaching and training up the child from birth. While it is true that there is an age of accountability where each child will exercise free will and make choices for themselves, it is also true that (American) parents are responsible for their children until at least the age of 18 and through at least high school graduation.

This is not a responsibility that all parents want. In my book 'Return to Eden'<sup>16</sup>, I presented extensive quantitative evidence of parents abdicating their responsibilities well before the child turns 18. In my ongoing conversations with a plethora of parents of young children this past decade since the release of the book, I am more convinced than ever that parents (generally speaking), are not diligent in actively parenting their children. The number one comment I hear is that there isn't enough time and energy to 'stay on them' day and night. Yet, that is exactly what we are called to do.

A general directive is given to parents in Deuteronomy, regarding teaching the Ten Commandments to our children and our children's children; that our lives would be blessed and it would go well with us and our children.

### **Deuteronomy 5:1-22**

*1And Moses called all Israel, and said to them: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them.2The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb.3The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive.4The Lord talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire.5I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up the mountain. He said: 6'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.7You shall have no other gods before Me.8You shall not make for yourself a carved image--any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;9you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,10but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.11You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.12Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you.13Six days you shall labor and do all your work,14but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your*

*stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.15And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.16Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you.17You shall not murder.18You shall not commit adultery.19You shall not steal.20You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.21You shall not covet your neighbor's wife; and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, his male servant, his female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.'*<sup>17</sup>

### **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

*1"Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess,2that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged.3Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you--'a land flowing with milk and honey.'*

*4"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.6"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.7You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.8You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.9You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.'*<sup>18</sup>

The premise is that parents be diligent in teaching their children the precepts of the Ten Commandments. Not just on Sundays, but throughout each day. This passage is not referring to talking about having deep theological conversations with children, but imparting the basics over and over and over again. In doing so, the commandments will be instilled into the minds and hearts of children. At five years old, a child will have ingrained into their minds that stealing is wrong. The twelve year old would be deeply convicted of the need to honor and respect parents. The sixteen year old would understand that gossiping and bullying is akin to bearing false witness and murder (hating in the heart).

Parenting according to Deuteronomy is not for the faint hearted. Effective parenting is a sacrificial act of service that frequently does not bear fruit for years, and will stretch patience thin. Scripture is clear that parents must need to be actively involved with the children during all of the hours the children are with the parents. From the time the household gets up until the time the last one goes to bed at night, parents must intentionally speak into the life of their child. Ever watchful, ever listening for the slightest indication that something isn't right in the heart of the child. Perhaps it is the derogatory comment made against a sibling. Left unchecked, the pattern will continue and before long the child will be making slanderous and rude comments on the school bus, in a classroom, or on the basketball court. The older the child is when correction by the parent takes place, the greater the challenge of reigning in the negative behavior.

Wise parents model the Biblical principles of compliance or consequence. As previously pointed out, parents Christians but practice religions with 'good morals' often teach the cause and effect principle without realizing that the principle is rooted in the Bible. Those with no religion or those who practice a religion not rooted in studying the Bible in its' entirety will only be able to draw a certain amount from remnants left behind by forefathers who relegated such teachings as 'old-fashioned'.

There is nothing 'old-fashioned' about the Word of God. It stands true and unchanging through the centuries. God made it clear to families crossing into the Promised Land that compliance with teaching the Law day and night would ensure things went well for them and for their children. Memorial stones were built as constant reminders to repeat how the Lord delivered the



former generations and of His continued blessings throughout the years. To turn from the Lord's commandments and not comply meant consequences.

Deuteronomy is but one of the passages that admonishes parents to teach the ways of the Lord to their children. Proverbs 22:6 is probably the most frequently quoted parenting Scripture. "Train up a child in the way he should, and when he is old, he will not depart from it."<sup>19</sup> Most Christians interpret this Scripture as meaning training up the child from birth. Dr. Steven Rocco<sup>20</sup> explained to me "This passage does not speak to small children, but rather the male of marriage age. The hermeneutics applied in the New Testament speaks to the fact that it is bad parenting to not teach the children about Jesus."

No Scripture can be a 'stand-alone' when it comes to parenting, no more than it would be ok to look at any other topic and pull a singular Scripture and use it as the basis for living. Teaching the Ten Commandments to a child is important, but will not be enough to combat societal trends on most issues. Let's examine the topic of bullying. If parents have taught the child not to bear false witness against someone, and left the topic as finished, there will be a price to be paid. Wisdom would dictate also imparting Scriptures such as Ephesians 4:29<sup>21</sup> "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Equally as important as imparting Scriptures is the need to balance out Scriptures with today's societal pressures. If a tween or teen is being bullied, it would be unwise for a parent to merely quote Matthew 5:11 and walk away, leaving the child to feel there is no hope. Earlier I cited the

statistic that 40% of students are bullying/cyberbullying perpetrators, victims, or both. Merely saying "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil about you because of me<sup>22</sup>" will not suffice. While adults may be able to simply ignore the insults, children are unable to handle the pressure. A parent ignoring the growing anxiety and moodiness of a child being bullied is missing the critical need to be 'connected' to their child from morning until night, as Deuteronomy urges.

Given that the statistics are that half of all high school age students have reported having sex within the past three mos., vigilance would be the prudent thing for parents. Merely taking a child to church where they will be taught "Thou shalt not commit adultery<sup>23</sup>" is not enough. Young people are inundated with sexual messages daily, on their devices and in the world around them. In *'Sexuality, Contraception, and the Media'*, the American Academy of Pediatrics (APA<sup>24</sup>) reported that the average adolescent will view nearly 14,000 sexual references a year.

Counteracting these stats will require more than telling teens that sex outside of marriage is forbidden. They need to learn the beauty and joy of sex God's way, and they need to be so impressed with that standard that they will not want to settle for second best. The Song of Solomon is a beautiful literary work that expresses the powerful intimacy experienced between a husband and wife, which cannot be replicated by sex in the back seat of a car or stolen moments in a bedroom while the parents are away. The more the Scriptures are discussed in depth in a positive way, the more likely the teen will choose to abstain.

Abstinence eliminates the teen pregnancy and abortion issue. Abortion is a difficult topic to talk with teens about, in terms of absolute truth. In a society filled with controversy over the topic of when it is no longer acceptable to have an abortion, absolute truth is sought by parents. What is the protocol in instances where the Bible doesn't specifically address a topic (such as abortion)? Parents looking for verses on abortion will not find them. Instead, there will be inferences that can be drawn, based on Biblical principle. This is another case-in-point of needing to impart Biblical commandments and principles to a child from a very young age.

While there are no verses specific to abortion, it is clear that the Bible (and therefore God) is pro-life. The most obvious is the Commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill". Be prepared for the argument that this commandment does not apply to the abortion laws, because children have been bombarded with the propaganda that it is a 'fetus', incapable of feelings or pain. The logic therefore, is that since it is not a 'baby', it is not yet a human and therefore the commandment does not apply. Further illogical stances include the debate that God allows all living beings except humans to be killed, therefore abortion is acceptable. It comes down to a moral distinction being made between murder and 'killing'. If a pedestrian is killed crossing a highway, wearing dark clothes and jaywalking; the killing would be deemed accidental and not murder. The moral distinction lies in the courts. Sadly, the moral distinction of abortion versus murder also lies within the courts. At the time of this writing, in some areas of the country, an abortion can include the timeframe of the baby being in the birth canal. At that point, as horrific as it is to write these words, abortion is still legal. Go another hour without making the decision to 'abort' and now the doctor or parent will be committing murder.

Trying to give a crash course in biblical principles to a pregnant teen will not work. The goal is prevention of the pregnancy by teaching the principle of no sex outside of marriage. If that teaching is not adhered to and a pregnancy occurs, the next goal will be to preserve the life of the baby. By instilling the morals and values from a very young age, pregnant teens will value the life within them, rather than view it as disposable if inconvenient. They need to understand the wonder of being fearfully and wonderfully made, as described in Psalm 139:14<sup>25</sup> *"My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."*

The complexity of emotional and mental health issues for post-abortive parents is extensive. According to a psychologist friend of mine who specializes in post-abortive healing, untreated trauma results in a downward spiral to addictions, depression, suicide and other behaviors of trying to rid themselves of the guilt of having made the choice to take the life of their child. Dr. Ferris<sup>26</sup> has shared with me on many occasions of the behaviors clients' exhibit as they try to rid themselves of the guilt of having made the choice to take the life of their child. He teaches classes at the graduate level, to students who will become counselors for these tormented parents. Thank God for ones like Dr. Ferris, who can counsel! How much better that youth are taught the realities of post-abortive trauma at a young age, so they can truly make informed choices regarding pressures to have sex and to abort if a pregnancy ensues.

Today's youth are battling mental health and emotional disorders of all types, not just those stemming from traumas such as an abortion. Although I give room for and attest to the reality of

genuine disorders, I also bear witness to the fact that many 'disorders' stem from not having any idea of who they are created to be, nor knowledge of the reality that they are uniquely created in this timeframe for purpose. Each one needs to understand that we are uniquely designed by our Creator, as stated in Genesis 1: 26-27. Then God said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”* 27So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Even this truth is not enough to combat the feelings of unworthiness that lead to depression, anxiety, worthlessness, and disposability. Being taught from a very young age of the love God has for them and being given revelation of their being uniquely made for a purpose goes a long ways toward reducing cutting, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide rates.

A major contributor to the well-being of a child and his ability to withstand pressures from society, is the amount and type of media consumption on a daily and weekly basis. Does the Bible speak specifically to children using media devices? No, the Bible does not explicitly address media device usage. There are however, Biblical principles that can be drawn upon to address the challenges and instill a value system. The Bible is relevant in every area of our lives, and the development of media platforms did not take God by surprise.

One of the pros that is also a con of social media is that words can be spoken or written instantaneously. Slander, cyber-bullying, vulgar language, and coarse jesting are a few examples of empty words that will one day be accounted for. Matthew 12:36-37<sup>27</sup> *36But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.37For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned*<sup>28</sup>."

Telling a child to ignore cyberbullying and insulting comments will not be effective in stymieing the impact on kids. The worst-case scenarios result in children attempting or committing suicide. During my time of serving with Focus on the Family as an online mentor, I spent extensive time in secular and Christian chatrooms, doing suicide intervention. Pastors, Youth Leaders, and parents must become educated of the shocking trends today and be knowledgeable of the warning signs. In May of 2019, NBC News reported<sup>29</sup> the staggering rise in the trend of suicide rates of girls ages 10-14. Sources stressed the need for parents to engage children in frequent and real talk about suicide, at earlier ages than would be the normative years just a decade ago.

Social media is not the complete reason for statistical increases in bullying, sexual activity, suicide and other childhood challenges. That said, social media is injurious to many. The reality is that social media is here to stay, as are other types of digital media. Rather than teach against all of the evils of social media, parents would be wise to begin at an early age teaching their children to use platforms to 'encourage and build one another up', as we are exhorted to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

James 5:13 says "*Is any among you in trouble? Let them pray*"<sup>30</sup>. Sharing needs and soliciting prayer is a positive way to use social media. Likewise, parents can teach young hearts to be sensitive to the needs of people posting and respond in love, letting the person know they are being prayed for.

Parents need to be the watchman on the wall of their children's media usage, and should never assume there is no need to safeguard activity. Much as I am sounding the alarm to Pastors, leaders, and parents; likewise Pastors, leaders, and parents must stand watch and sound the alarm when danger lurks. Just last night, I learned of the new Santa App and the dangerous predators lurking on it. Have you heard of it? No? This is what Google Play had to say "This Christmas, amaze your children by requesting a free personalized phone call or video message from Santa Claus!"<sup>31</sup> Most parents think this is innocent, but a North Carolina family started sounding<sup>32</sup> the alarm when Santa began asking their daughter creepy questions such as what she was wearing. I'm thankful for people who are willing to stand up against popular trends and sound the alarm, as we are exhorted to do in Ezekiel 33:6<sup>33</sup>. "But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand." If we know of danger but do not blow the trumpet and sound the alarm, we will be held accountable. Sometimes, alerts will come from the Holy Spirit, not from the news sources or an eyewitness account of something. There's a nudging that happens, to alert each of us that something isn't right. Sometimes, discernment allows us to pinpoint exactly what is wrong with an App or a particular post, or a behavioral change that comes when media channels are viewed. We will be held accountable for the nudging, also.

At first glance, there is nothing wrong with much of what is posted on media platforms. Here is another example of the need to be the watchman on the wall. The tween following her favorite tween star on Instagram may not raise a red flag in the minds of many parents. However, if the parent monitors the account and is attuned to the subtleties, it will soon become evident that tweens are posing in provocative and sensual manners. It seems innocent enough, at first glance. Grievously, there are predators stalking the same sites. Some are using images for child pornography. Some are using the sites to handpick kids to put into human trafficking. Some have even the evil intention of watching for enough information to gain access to a child to kidnap and do unspeakable things to.

I've been accused of being over-protective, mistrusting, and melodramatic. In my 35 years of active parenting, I've watchdogged my kids and their activities, as well as those of their friends. I've researched and read about hundreds of trends and mined out what lurks under the surface. As a professional, I've counseled countless hundreds of parents and teens and worked to help them break free of strongholds created from a seemingly innocent action. I'm now a watchman on the wall with my grandchildren, and it is my experience that there is more need than ever in history to be greatly alarmed over society. I watch the news every night and the tragedies reported tell me I am wise to keep watch.

1 Peter 5:8 cautions each of us to "be sober-minded and watchful, because our adversary, the devil, is prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." A more poignant translation of 1 Peter 5:8 is found in the Message Bible<sup>34</sup>. "Keep a cool head. Stay alert. The



Devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping. Keep your guard up." As parents, grandparents, teachers, and caregivers we need to be vigilant to protect children who often are too naive to protect themselves from the evil lurking amid seemingly innocent activities.

There are numerous types of peer pressures facing children today. Learning to resist pressures to do what is wrong is critical to children not succumbing to societal land-mines. The book of Proverbs, has wisdom for young people. "My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them" (Proverbs 1:10<sup>35</sup>). Parents and caregivers must be diligent in teaching children that one way to resist negative peer pressure is to spend time with people who don't tempt us to sin. We have to consistently reiterate to the child that he must choose the right kind of friends and associates. Children must be taught that while we will undoubtedly meet and have to interact with people who break God's laws, if we are wise, we will spend the majority of our time with those who are also striving to live honorable lives. Not all children will be strong enough in character to make the choice on their own, to separate from certain people. In such instances, parents must impose boundaries to be adhered to , until the child is old enough to successfully make wise choices.

My hypothesis is that it is possible for families to raise children who do not *succumb* to the morals and trends of current society, however it is improbable that the children will be completely insulated and never have moral failings; and that a key to success is how well grounded the children are in Biblical principles.

Grounding youth in Biblical principles, talking to them about the truth and consequences of engaging in societal trends, and building deep relationships with the youth are all vital components. As watchmen on the wall, pastors and youth leaders, as well as parents, need to be knowledgeable of trends as they emerge and be prepared to navigate children and youth through the traps the enemy has laid out in the mine fields of culture.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Youth Trends**

#### **Bullying**

School-based bullying is reaching epidemic proportions, the effects of which is resulting in a range of problems from lowered academic scores to cutting and suicide. I am not referring to the occasional name calling or tossing of insults that most children will engage in. The 'Stop Bullying' government website<sup>36</sup> defines bullying as a repetitive action of a person using personal power (physical size, access to embarrassing information, or popularity) to control or harm others.

The American Academy of Pediatrics conducted a 10 year longitudinal study and reports<sup>37</sup> the statistic to be 48% of all students report being bullied at school. The U.S. Dept. Of Education does not agree, and reports<sup>38</sup> only 22% affirmed being bullied in school, on the playground, or on the bus. The differential in statistics could be linked to fear of further backlash and bullying if a student reports under the Zero Tolerance Policy; which according to an NBC News report<sup>39</sup> some believe does not work. According to a Focus on the Family report, while different studies have different percentage findings, it is safe to conclude that between 20-30% of all school students are involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims, or both.<sup>40</sup> The sobering reality is that one in three students are being bullied.

The advancement of technology has exponentially increased bullying, to now encompass cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place via cell phones, social media, or

through any internet site. An estimated 15% of youth are targets of cyberbullying. The impact of bullying and cyberbullying is far-reaching. According to the online journal 'Medical News Today'<sup>41</sup>, new research is showing that bullying can literally alter brain<sup>42</sup> activity and create mental health disorders. Cyberbullying is particularly harmful because information can be shared with hundreds or go viral amongst thousands in a matter of hours. Additionally, the victim doesn't just sustain the 'injury' once, because of repeated returns to viewing the onslaught of negative comments to the original post.

Willis Raines<sup>43</sup>, a believer in Christ and founder of Reclaiming Ground Inc., reported staggering statistics in a conversation with me just this week. Known across the nation as "Freight Train", Raines performs feats of strength at Boys Conferences, school assemblies, and youth events. After gaining attention by blowing up hot water bottles, breaking bats, and ripping metal license plates in half; Raines talks about two major issues facing youth today. While at a particular middle school stop on his powerful 'Combat Bullying and Suicide Prevention Tour', thirty seventh graders stepped forward to acknowledge they've either contemplated or attempted suicide. Raines explained to me that these sobering statistics are found all over the country as he travels state to state talking with students and combating the bullying epidemic. Raines was quick to say that he turns the collected information over to school counselors, who will then work with the student and their families.

## **Body Image**

Concern over body image at a young age has reached an unprecedented proportion. In the survey that I conducted, a concern over body image was the number one problem faced by kids born in any generation.

Children as young as three years old begin forming opinions about their bodies, according to the Family Doc (A website of the American Academy of Family Physicians<sup>44</sup>.) Many things influence their thoughts, but parents are the primary source of a child having a positive body image in the early years. As they age, the bombardment of media messages as well as input of classmates begins to form deeper opinions of how they see themselves. According to the Melrose Center<sup>45</sup>, over 80% of 10 year olds are concerned about being fat.

Girls are adversely affected from a young age, by the pressures of society to look a certain way. Ballerinas, no more than five years old, compete off the stage to see who can be the thinnest or who looks 'the best' in the new dance costume. The National Alliance of Mental Health<sup>46</sup> compiled meta-data from 25 studies which all examined the impact of media on body image. Body image was found to be significantly more negative after viewing thin media images. Weight isn't the only concern. Photo shopped models appear flawless in media posts and are used as comparisons when the tween looks in the mirror and wishes her nose was shorter, her teeth were straighter, and her hair was curlier. By the age of 13, 53% of girls are unhappy with their body. The percentage rises to 78% by the age of 17.

A survey<sup>47</sup> done by more than 1000 teenage Girl Scouts revealed 9 out of 10 indicated they feel pressured by media and the fashion industry to be thinner. 60% compare themselves to models and 46% say they refer to magazines as their comparative.

Girls are not the only ones who suffer from body image issues. The major difference is that girls want to lose weight and boys desire to gain weight and muscle. Nearly 18% of young boys struggle with self-image. Boston Children's Hospital's Dr. Allison Field<sup>48</sup> stated in response to the recent hospital study, that the trend toward weight obsession amongst boys is a cause for concern. Boys who are overly concerned about their weight are more likely to engage in risky behaviors and use substances.

Concerns over body image leads to unhealthy eating habits. The Melrose Center, a leader in healing eating disorders, states that 40% of elementary age girls and 25% of elementary age boys desire to be thinner. By late elementary school, boys concerns level out however girls concerns continue as they go through middle and high school years. Melrose reports over 30% of 10-14 year olds diet. Narrowing the scope down to 9-11 year olds who are in the throes of emerging puberty, the statics increase to 46% of tween girls dieting. By the time the teenage years are hit, 50% of girls and 30% of boys are using unhealthy habits to control weight.

Are adults in the life of children to blame, in part? Yes. Sadly, 80% of women and 50% of men indicate they are dissatisfied with their body image. With statistics this high, there is little probability that a child will not hear disparaging comments coming from adults in the home, the extended family, in social settings, and in church settings. Nearly half of all 9-11 year old girls

indicate they diet sometimes. These statistics are alarming, as adolescent girls who diet are 12 xs more likely to binge eat later in life.

The lesson for adults is to remember that children mimic what they are exposed to. 86% of girls indicate family member's diet. Kids model what they see. Beyond the observation of the behaviors of prominent adults in their lives is the impact of words spoken to them. Comments and teasing about weight and shape can negatively affect children for years. Adults would do well to remind kids they are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139: 14), rather than point out what can only be construed as 'flaws'.

The importance of having a positive body image cannot be overstated. A poor body image as a tween and teen leads to many other challenges in life. Bullying, as discussed earlier, becomes an issue for the person with a poor self-image. This is especially true if indeed there is an issue with weight, or a deformity.

The Albertus Ellis Institute<sup>49</sup> stated that the negative body image at its extreme, can morph into a mental health disorder, known as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). A person with BDD focuses on one or more 'flaws', to the point where there is clinically significant distress which affects life functions. These individuals spend excessive time in front of mirrors, applying make-up, fixing hair, and modeling outfits. They seek reassurance through posting selfies and looking for positive comments. Negative comments or no comments only serve to cause further distress.

The obvious issue is that confidence is being built in both males and females by losing weight, gaining visible muscle, using beauty products, acquiring the latest fashion trends, and keeping up with the latest hair styles. It was not too many decades ago that nine year old girls were still playing with Barbie's and nine year old boys were out playing baseball in the back yard. Leaders and parents need to be aware that speeding up the time-line of leads to a potential collision of puberty, emotional feelings, and sexuality.

### ***Puberty Emerges***

Puberty is an awkward time for parents and their children. Most people think of puberty as starting when a girl needs to shop for a bra or a boy begins emitting body odor and needs to be gifted a stick of deodorant. The truth is that puberty actually starts much earlier. By the time girls are around the age of 8 and boys are around the age of 10, the hypothalamus begins secreting hormones which travel to the pituitary gland. Those hormones eventually make their way to other glands which produce visible evidence of the puberty process beginning in the body. Many experts agree the adolescence process will continue for most throughout the teen years.

During the early years of hormones beginning to cause bodily changes, those same hormones are causing mood swings and emotional uncertainty. While hormones are raging, emotions are hitting highs and lows by the hour, and the body is changing constantly. All of this is challenging for both the child and parents. In fact, the challenge extends to the classroom, circles of peers, and onto the sports field. It is not coincidental that much bullying starts during the same time-frame, as does the uncertainty of body images.



It is during these critical years that parents and leaders must be intentional about addressing challenges as they arise. To be intentional requires knowledge of trends and of signs of a child struggling. Children are not little adults and do not have the ability to handle the challenges on their own.

Years ago, the norm was for parents to have 'The Talk' with their daughters around the time they began menstruating and with their sons somewhat later into the teen years. Societal changes require a shift in methodology, from having "The Talk" to having a series of talks beginning with the Kindergarten years. The challenges being faced by families today all serve to erode the foundation of innocence, and protect them as we may try, children as young as five and six are exposed to a plethora of woes that once only plagued older teens.

Mintel reports that 80% of tween (9-11 year old) girls use beauty products and over 50% of those ages 12-14 are wearing makeup. 69% of boys are using beauty products. Reportedly, 42 percent of US teens aged 12-14 who use beauty and personal care products do so because it makes them feel more confident, rising to well over half (56 percent) of those aged 15-17.

These same young tweens are some of the 6.5 million subscribers to Brooklyn and Bailey's YouTube Channel<sup>50</sup>, which focuses on hairstyle, fashion, beauty and crafting for tween girls. At first glance, there's nothing wrong with their channel. The Babysitting 101 Tips and Guidelines video had 1.7 million views at the time of this writing. The DIY crafts for kid's videos are equally as popular.

Conversely, their video on swapping places and 'tricking' the boyfriends is questionable material for tweens to view. Likewise, the videos of college are not what I would want my tween grandchildren watching. Video descriptions use hashtags such as #springbreak. Click on the hashtag and the first page that pops up is-well, I cannot even type the words of what is being promoted in these spring break hashtags. Suffice to say, they would have been labeled porn, just a few short years ago.

### **Media Consumption**

Americans spend almost 11 hours a day consuming media and that number seems to be growing. Screens are everywhere – at home, at work, at play, at restaurants. Technology is here to stay. In the coming years, the digital world will become even more integrated into everyday life. As children grow, the amount of time spent using a screen will also grow.

### ***Health Implications***

CBS News released a report<sup>51</sup> in August of 2018, of the American Heart Association's warning to parents that new studies recommend reducing screen time to an hour a day for children ages 2-5, and only allowing two hours a day for children over the age of five.

Vision impairment and eye strain are concerns. The American Vision Council, 72% of parents report their children use screens at least two hours a day, but are quick to say that the amount of time engaged with a screen is likely much higher<sup>52</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics reports

the youth use media more than seven hours<sup>53</sup> a day. The rapid rise of myopia (nearsightedness) is directly linked to the use of electronic devices.

The American Academy of Pediatrics published a 2016 study linking blue light emissions from devices to a 37% increase in mood disorders amongst youth.<sup>54</sup> Although not completely understood, consensus amongst medical and mental health professionals is that the blue light causes sleep deprivation, changes in thinking processes, poor judgement, and cognitive impairments. John Hopkins Medical Center<sup>55</sup> elaborated to say that anxiety, brain fog, irritability and forgetfulness are all linked to the overuse of screens.

### ***Desensitization***

Habitual exposure to passively viewing violent media (tv shows, movies, video clips) is directly linked to predicted aggressive behaviors and cognitions.<sup>56</sup> The American Psychology Association and the National Institute of Mental Health concur that the younger a child is when first beginning to watch violent media, the more likely the aggression will be by the teen years<sup>57</sup>.

Not everyone who feeds on a diet of violent media becomes aggressive. Many 'merely' become desensitized to the plight of human suffering and pain, and do not exhibit anxiety when viewing tragic or violent events in real life or on the nightly news.

Another common cause of desensitization is video gaming. Many popular games such as Fall Out and call of duty create a 'normalcy' and allow the gamer to detach themselves emotionally, even when in a real life situation. Again, not all who are avid gamers become aggressive or

desensitized. The cautionary flag is raised when other factors exist that would pre-dispose the gamer to having difficulty transitioning between gaming and reality; such as is the case for those with certain mental health disorders or cognitive disorders.

Watching TV shows or video gaming are not the only sources of desensitization. The nightly news is filled with coverage one tragedy and violent crime after the next. Parents who watch the news with young children in the room are unwittingly feeding the desensitization monster. A University of Massachusetts study<sup>58</sup> supports the idea that heavy local news consumption can contribute to a blunted response to news stories regarding real-life violent events when individuals have low trait empathy. I am personally guilty of barely pausing when I hear of another shooting in our state capitol, a city where just last week there were 3 shootings in 24 hours.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Pornography***

Young boys and a growing number of girls, are regularly viewing pornography online. The viewing doesn't start out as viewing porn, but rather the addiction starts with the bombardment of sensual images. Webster's dictionary defines sensuality as relating to or consisting of the gratification of the senses or the indulgence of fleshly appetite. Using the example referenced above, the innocent parent-approved viewing of babysitting tips can quickly turn into a pornography session. The hook has been set, Pandora's Box is opened, and the tweens will develop a thirst for more.

Unwittingly, parents are allowing the thirst to be quenched, by allowing their children access to seemingly innocent platforms such as Snap Chat, an App rated for ages 12+. Youth leaders who are not intentional about staying informed may also be unaware that Porn Hub is on SnapChat<sup>60</sup>. Twitter and Instagram also have porn content available to young eyes.

Instagram is another major seedbed for causing tweens and teens to be drawn to the sensual, as the entire platform is built on photos. Tween girls are drawn to hashtags such as #tween, #tweenmodel, and #tweengirls. Beyond the issue of the combined 100,000 posts that are causing girls to feel poorly about the above discussed topics of body image, hair, makeup etc.; is the number of boys who view the sensual and provocative posts from girls their age. The sensuality exhibited causes arousal in the pubescent males and the fantasies ensue.

Not only does viewing sensual poses lead to unhealthy thinking patterns, but it also causes the young males to begin comparing female classmates to the unattainable beauties of Instagram. Such comparisons, left unchecked, can lead to bullying or disdain for females in future years. For those who are doing the posing, it puts them in a potentially dangerous situation with online predators.

### ***Sexual Predators***

There is reason for concern of sexual predators and human traffickers who stalk these same posts. The website 'Protect Young Eyes'<sup>61</sup> is a website dedicated to defending kids from online danger. One article warns of pedophiles grooming young children on Instagram. Predators stalk all social media platforms. How many predators? The FBI<sup>62</sup> reports over a half million a year

and the most sought out group are 12-15 year old girls. Predators seek out the vulnerable and then begin a methodical journey of luring them through compliments, flattery, and attention. Luring them to what? Sometimes, the lure is to get them to post pictures of themselves. Not all predators are looking for nude pictures. A predator with a foot fetish will be very happy with foot pictures. Another may like the curve of the neck. Yet another may ask them to expose certain body parts. Sometimes, the goal of the predator is to get them into sensual conversations. Sadly, sometimes the predator lures the child to meet somewhere, and then does unspeakable things to the victims they have lured.

Cyberflashing is a danger iPhone users can be subjected to, even if the child is not using social platforms or intentionally searching risky sites. Cyberflashing is done by airdropping images to iPhone in close proximity (20-30 foot radius). While it was created as an easier method to share photos amongst a group of friends or colleagues, it is now being used to circumvent other means of sharing pornographic or sensual images.

Airdropping does require the person accepts or declines the photo, but the image is visible immediately, before it is accepted. Practically speaking, this means if a tween or teen is on the bus or at the mall, a photo could be airdropped and viewed unsolicited and without the parents knowledge. Explicit pictures flash the child with no risk to the flasher, whereas flashing in person comes with the risk of being caught and arrested. It is more difficult, nearly impossible, to discern who airdropped the photo, as the action can be made to any iPhone in the 20-30 foot radius without the requirement of contact information.

Why would a 12-15 year old girl allow herself to be lured by a 20, 30, 40, or 50 something male? She would not. She is being lured by a predator that has created a pseudo name and online identity, posing as another teenager. Young girls are more likely to be lured by a slightly older teenage boy, who shows an interest in her. The lower her self-esteem and body image, the more vulnerable she is. Girls who haven't had a positive relationship with their fathers are more vulnerable than those who have excellent fathers who are their protectors. Focus on the Family warns<sup>63</sup> parents to adequately prepare their children to be watchful of predators who seek to cultivate relationships with them. The Center for Missing and Exploited Children has issued<sup>64</sup> even stronger cautions regarding online enticements, where sextortion is on one end of the exploitation spectrum and abduction, sexual assault, and sex-trafficking are on the other end of the spectrum.

### **Sexual Activity, Teen Pregnancy and Abortion**

Fatherless girls are seven times more likely to become pregnant as a teen. Girls who have consistent contact and a sense of closeness with their fathers are much less likely<sup>65</sup> to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Nearly half of all high school age students reported having sex within the past three months, and nearly 5% reported having started sexual activity prior to the age of 13.<sup>66</sup> Shockingly, 14% report<sup>67</sup> having already had four or more sexual partners, according to the Biblical Counseling Coalition.

Sex has become commonplace and casual, no big deal and certainly no longer viewed as a sacred Act of Marriage. Moreover, there is a disparity over the definition and understanding of what constitutes 'sex', according to the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). For example, oral sex

is discounted by teens who report being sexually active. The dangers of teenage sex are very high, physically and emotionally. Physically, multiple partners give way to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STD), the more detrimental of which carry lifelong ramifications. The invention of vaccines to protect against disease has continued to feed the thought process that it is an old fashioned, obsolete, outdated concept to save sex for enjoyment within marriage. Despite vaccines the Heritage Foundation <sup>68</sup>reports 8,000 teens a day become infected with an STD. (Three million teens a year)

The Center for Disease Control (CDC<sup>69</sup>) reports that the birth rate has declined 10% amongst 15-19 year old girls, but acknowledges the statistics do not account for pregnancies that result in abortions. While an 18.8 percent birthrate among teens seems low, it is substantially higher than other Western civilizations. The fact is that other cultures realize there is more at risk than just the physical aspect of sex.

The truth is that teens are not mature enough to handle the emotional aspect of sex. One study<sup>70</sup> involving 8200 students, ages 12-17, found that those involved in romantic relationships had significantly higher levels of depression than those not involved in romantic relationships. The lies of the media bombardment take a toll on teens who, in most instances, have been raised with the moral belief (if not biblical teaching) that sex



## **School Culture**

The debate over school choice is one that has been raging for decades. On one side are the proponents of public education, on the other are those who are die-hard private school advocates. Public schools include charter and magnet schools, as well as vocational schools. Private school consists of brick and mortar institutions as well as varying forms of homeschool options; and may be religious or secular in nature.

There were four research questions related to education that were posed in the Dissertation Proposal:

- Do kids who go to private school face the same social issues as kids who go to public school?
- How do home schooled kids compare to both private and public school students?
- Does involvement in extracurricular activities change outcomes? Which activities?
- Is there a difference in outcomes based on the amount of involvement the parent has?

## ***School Violence***

As I write, the 20th anniversary of the Columbine school shooting is 3 days away. Yesterday, plans were discovered of a high school senior who had flown from Florida to Colorado and purchased a pump action shotgun and ammunition,<sup>71</sup> with the intent of doing a copycat shooting at Columbine. Just hours ago, police announced she committed suicide today as SWAT closed in on her. She left behind her personal journal, containing writings and drawings of details of both the former and her intended school shooting. The 18 year old teen became obsessed with the Columbine shooting, and her infatuation became public knowledge through social media and her personal blog. The plan was discovered after an investigation into a missing person's report.

The real question should be "What went wrong in the life of Sol Paris, that she became delusional and filled with fantasies of re-enacting the crime?" A man identified by CBS as Sol's father said "It's like a bad dream. We don't know. We don't have any idea", when asked about his daughter. A neighbor who watched Paris grow up said Sol was a quiet person and well behaved. "She always kept to herself. She never got in trouble at school. So surprising and I feel sorry for the family."

Are school shooters linked to playing violent video games? Sometimes. For example, the Columbine shooters were heavily immersed in the video games 'Doom'<sup>72</sup>. The video game "Super Columbine Massacre RPG" released in April of 2005, just six years after the school shooting that riveted the nation. Just shy of the one year anniversary of the tragic 2012 Sandy Hook, CT school shooting, a gamer released "The Slayings of Sandy Hook Elementary".

To say that all school shootings occur because of video games would be an unfair statement. I point out the following examples for the purpose of showing that in each case, there were emotional issues that accompanied each of the shooters, and the mental health status played the major factor in the shootings.

There were numerous deadly school shootings that took place in American history<sup>73</sup>, prior to Columbine and during eras when video games did not exist. In the mid 1700's, violence claimed the lives of nearly a dozen, at the hands of tomahawk wielding Native American Indians. In the 1800's, a shooting took place in front of a Catholic school, wounding a group of children. In 1940, a school principal shot and killed a number of faculty members who he deemed to be

against him. In 1955, a college student killed a dorm mate while he slept, citing the reason as having been harassed. In 1966, an engineering student killed his family before going on the University of Texas campus and killing 13 more and wounding an additional 30. The autopsy showed the ex-Marine sharpshooter had a brain tumor in addition to the known condition of depression and anger issues. In 1979, a female high school junior shot 30 rounds of ammo from her home into the crowded elementary school across the street, killing two and wounding nine others. Her reason? "I don't like Mondays." In 1996, a 14 year old middle-school student used a hunting rifle to kill a teacher and two classmates.

Not only is it untrue that school shootings are directly linked to video gaming, but (Despite what main-stream media purports) it is also untrue that all school violence is related to guns and that all school violence is deadly.

Statistically speaking, 25% of all schools in the United States are private and account for 10% of the overall U.S. student population. School shootings are far more likely to occur at a public school<sup>74</sup>. Over the past fifty years, 94% of school shootings have occurred in public schools.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released a report<sup>75</sup>, based on the Dept. of Education statistics, and provides a breakdown of school violence. Types of school violence listed includes a physical fight or attack with or without a weapon, possession of a fire arm or explosive device, possession of a knife or other sharp object, rape, sexual assault, robbery, theft, larceny, drug and alcohol related offenses, possession of prescription drugs, and vandalism. Of the reported instances, less than 10% of the incidents were listed as being committed with a weapon of any type and reported to the police.

Bullying is not categorized as school violence and will be discussed in the following segment, but the NCES findings<sup>76</sup> show that it is an ongoing, every day issue for middle and high-school students, in particular.

The U.S. Department of Education 2019 statistics make it very clear that the main-stream media hype regarding school violence is misleading and void of making the public aware of realities. Does that mean that school violence is not a problem? Not at all. It is a problem, and is actually a much larger problem than the issue of school shootings (not to minimize them in any way). The point of the matter is that the incidence rate of non-gun related violence is much higher than the average person is aware of.

Mild violence includes disruptive acts that include bomb threats, death threats, and threats of chemical or biological danger. Reported incidents in 2015-2016 in public schools reached close to 1/3 of all schools having at least one incident per school year.<sup>77</sup> Over 50,000 public schools in America experienced some type of mild violence during the school year. Of those, 27% were elementary schools, 32% were middle schools, and 44% were high schools.

### ***Bullying in Private versus Public Schools***

Private school students are not exempt from the issue of bullying, however the incidence rate is low enough that some states are now turning to private schools as the solution for bullied public school students. The NCES reports that only four out of ten bullying incidents are reported in the public schools, by families or the student. There is an overwhelming agreement that reporting would only result in more severe bullying and that nothing will be done to curb it. In March of

2018, Florida became the first state to offer private school vouchers to students that are bullied or physically attacked in their public schools<sup>78</sup>.

An article<sup>79</sup> released in September of 2017 by Ed Choice looks at reasons why bullying is substantially lower in private schools. Factually speaking, parents surveyed believe private schools are safe. Ed Choice speculates that some reasons for lower incidence rates include a smaller student body, a more attentive staff, and common values held by all families attending the school. This all makes it easier for private schools to create a school culture that minimizes bullying and allows for severe discipline (expulsion) for anyone who engages in bullying.

Another major difference between the incidence rates in public versus private schools is the role of the bystanders. Focus on the Family aptly stated<sup>80</sup> "The role of the bystander is where the power of bullying truly lives and dies, because bystanders often have the ability to influence the dynamics of their peer group." Private school students are far more likely to speak up and immediately defend the bullied student or report the incident to an administrator. Parents interact more frequently with teachers and administrators, many of which were also shared with Ed Choice in the surveys conducted.

Willis Raines<sup>81</sup> is a Christian and the founder of Reclaiming Ground, a non-profit established to teach young children and young adults about anti-bullying as well as other challenges facing youth today. His Combat Bullying and Suicide Prevention Tour is popular amongst elementary and middle school students. He recognizes the epidemic and has determined to do something about it.

Psychology Today ran an article<sup>82</sup> on December 24, 2012 stating that Jesus Christ is the solution to bullying. The author, Izzy Kalman, stated that while the modern world searches for answers to the bullying epidemic, Jesus already provided the solution when He spoke the words found in the Mosaic Law. Kalman expounded on the command to love others as ourselves and that includes loving bullies, regardless of which school or other arena of society they are found in.

### *Academics*

In decades past, public school teachers were paid substantially more than private school teachers. Similarly, public school teachers had better access to staff development. The Washington Post reports<sup>83</sup> a major shift from the salaries of public education teachers earning well above average salaries in most states to now, in 2019, earning below average salaries in all states except Rhode Island.

There are many debates regarding which schools have better test scores and why. Each segment reports in varying ways, that their style of education produces better test scores. The NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) reported in a 67 page report,<sup>84</sup> that private school students consistently score higher than public school students. The results include "In grades 4 and 8 for both reading and mathematics, students in private schools achieved at higher levels than students in public schools. The average difference in school means ranged from almost 8 points for grade 4 mathematics, to about 18 points for grade 8 reading." Private high school students score higher on ACT tests. Homeschoolers also score higher in testing.<sup>85</sup> The Washington Post ran an article<sup>86</sup> in March of 2018, written by Valerie Strauss raises questions as to how test score data is utilized, and ultimately concludes that the success (or lack thereof) has far more to do with intangibles that are not measured by SAT and ACT scores. She states that

scores only reflect the ability to memorize, but negates to measure skill levels and conceptual understanding.

### ***Extracurricular Activities***

There is a plethora of evidence to support the concept that extracurricular activities help keep kids out of trouble, boost self-esteem, and better position them to go to college. Doing extracurricular activities helps children gain confidence and find purpose by engaging in physical, mental, or creative activities. The older children get, the more the benefit is multiplied. High schoolers see the activities they engage in as self-identifiers.

Extracurricular activities should be less about winning and more about helping a child get involved in something that expresses passion and will add value to the child's life. Activities range from varied athletics to dance to creative arts to Scouting to babysitting for another family.

The Wyoming Liberty Group<sup>87</sup> cited a number of articles that point to the statistics that extracurricular activities are an excellent preventative measure for keeping kids out of trouble. The Group cited the Global Post as saying that the more time a student is involved in after school activities, the less time he will have to get into trouble, and the strengthened self-esteem makes it easier to resist dangerous temptations. A DuPage College study was also cited. Dupage conducted a study which showed, in part, that engaging children in afterschool activities of value exponentially improved their test scores as well as their involvement in behaviors such as crime, drugs, and other anti-social behaviors.

Our current Presidential Administration recognizes the value of after-school programs and approved a budget of 1.2 billion in funding for programs that offer after-school homework assistance, enrichment activities, and nutrition supplement in high poverty areas. The U.S. Department of Education<sup>88</sup> oversees 21st Century Learning Grants that operate the programs to families in need. Schools, community based organizations, and collaboratives all work to provide an array of activity option to millions of school children each year.

A growing number of churches are providing after-school programs<sup>89</sup> /clubs for children to attend, as an alternative to being a 'latchkey kid' or going to a study center. The church option isn't just for those who attend the church, but is open as a safe-haven for the community. Some offer homework help, many engage their seniors to function as surrogate grandparents, some offer dinner, and most offer Bible stories, crafts and the opportunity for kids to be loved on. The River of Life Church<sup>90</sup> in Minnesota offers 'tracks' to after-school participants each weekday, tailored to meet the individual needs. The school district busses kids to the church; who then engage in educational, faith, recreation, and social tracks.

### ***Parental Involvement in Education***

The National Education Association (NEA) speaks to parental involvement as 'The Enduring Importance of Parental Involvement'<sup>91</sup>. The leading experts acknowledge that parents are the single most significant factor of success, particularly when the connection is made on the home front. The State of Michigan created a one-sheet<sup>92</sup> for parents, explaining why their involvement



is important and giving statistics of 40 years of research that gives evidence to benefits to the child in terms of both academic and social outcomes. There are many other sources that point to the difference made when parents engage children in doing homework, in communicating with teachers throughout the week, and being pro-active.

If the NEA and other entities recognize how important it is for parents to be involved in the process, surely most parents are involved with their children's education? While there are improvements in the percentage of parents involved on some level, there is still a huge disparity. The disparity widens as the parent's level of education decreases. In a 2016 study,<sup>93</sup> only 25% of parents with less than a high school education went to school or class events, compared to 65% of parents with a graduate/professional degree. The same pattern holds true for parents living in poverty versus higher income.

Evidence is clear that students with involved parents exhibit less behavior problems (excluded are those with diagnosed issues) and better academic performance. Regardless of income or background, students of all grades are more likely to have higher grades and test scores if parents are involved in the school setting as well as on the Homefront. Dr. Robert Pianta has worked and published extensively<sup>94</sup> in the realm of education, as well as child and family psychology. He is quoted as saying of his research "It was the family factors that carried the day in determining the children's performance in high school. It wasn't the school they went to."<sup>95</sup>

## **Substance Use**

Between 50% and 75% of high school students use some type of substance on an occasional basis. Christian teens are not exempt. Extensive studies and data<sup>96</sup> collection verify that, despite what teens report to youth leaders or parents, they are engaged in substance use nearly as frequently as non-religious students.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism indicated<sup>97</sup> that underage drinking is becoming a national public health problem. Statistically, youth who begin drinking before age 15 are four times<sup>98</sup> more likely to develop alcoholism than those who begin at 21.

In 2015, over 7.7 million teens reported drinking alcohol in the past month<sup>99</sup>. Despite ongoing media campaigns, underage drinkers account for 10% of the alcohol consumption in the United States. Christian teens are consuming along with non-Christian peers, beginning in middle school and continuing 'getting hammered' throughout high school.<sup>100</sup>

NIDA (National Institute for Drug Abuse for Teens) provided statistics dated 2013 of more than 46,000 teens surveyed. Reportedly<sup>101</sup>, 13 percent of 8th graders, 30 percent of 10th graders, and 40 percent of 12th graders say they have used a drug at least once in the past year. Ongoing media campaigns regarding the dangers of opioid usage, as well as drug education programs in schools, is attributed to a large drop in the use of prescription opioids. In the past five years, Vicodin use notably dropped by 58.4 percent in 8th graders, 75.4 percent in 10th graders and 67.2 percent in 12th graders. Interestingly, teens also think these drugs are not as easy to get as

they used to be. One in three 12th graders (32.5 percent) said that prescription opioids were easily available in the 2018 survey, compared to more than 54.2 percent in 2010.

While teens are becoming aware of dangers and using less opioids, cigarettes, and alcohol; the use of vaping products and marijuana is on the rise. The relatively new trend of vaping (aka JUULing), is the practice of inhaling and exhaling a vapor produced by adding a 'juice' to an electronic cigarette or other device. Second only to alcohol use, vaping is of particular concern is that many of the products are not regulated and little is known about the toxic chemicals in the vape juice. Overall, rates of vaping are second only to alcohol among substances surveyed, with 17.6 percent of 8th graders, 32.3 percent of 10th graders, and 37.3 percent of 12th graders reporting<sup>102</sup> past-year vaping.

The nicotine content in a singular pod is the equivalent of smoking a pack of cigarettes. Nicotine consumption by teens and college age students is attributed to stunting brain development, which continues until a person is approximately 25 years old. As if the nicotine is not harmful enough, most e-cigarettes devices produce an aerosol by heating a liquid that usually contains nicotine, flavorings, and other chemicals that help to make the aerosol. Users inhale e-cigarette aerosol into their lungs. It has long since been an established fact that breathing aerosol is dangerous, yet unsuspecting teens are sucking it into their lungs with little thought. Aerosols contain potentially harmful chemicals including ultrafine particles, oil, heavy metals like nickel, tin and lead, and other cancer-causing materials.

Given that e-cigarettes are a new product, the depth and breadth of the long term health impact is unknown. It is reasonable to expect that lung problems will develop in users. Several states are beginning to report lung disease and complications, with the common denominator of e-cigarette (vaping) use. Common symptoms presented in the cases so far include shortness of breath, fever, coughing, vomiting and diarrhea, with other symptoms including headache, dizziness and chest pain. Left untreated, the symptoms turn into severe respiratory problems that often require hospitalization.

Dangers extend to bystanders can also breathe in this aerosol when the user exhales it into the air. Other dangers include e-cig devices blowing up due to malfunctions when the liquid heats and the aerosol is produced. The burns requiring Emergency Room treatments is averaging<sup>103</sup> 1,000 a year, or 3 incidents every day. Teens are experiencing explosions requiring facial reconstruction, as the explosions knock out teeth and shatter jaw bones.<sup>104</sup> My local news just reported four incidents this past week in another state. The high number of those injured was men who had put e-cigarettes in their pants or shorts pockets, and subsequently experienced severe burns to their legs, arms and hands. In an extreme case, a 38 year old man lost his life when his device malfunctioned and exploded, killing him instantly<sup>105</sup> when the metal lodged in his cranium. In another instance, a 24 year old lost his life when his device exploded and the shard of metal severed an artery in his neck.

Vaping marijuana is also trending. While not widely used by the majority of teens, the numbers are increasing exponentially as the trend begins to catch on, coupled with more states legalizing the use of marijuana and CBD products. While vaping marijuana rates are still fairly low—

reported by 2.6 percent of 8th graders, 7.0 percent of 10th graders, and 7.5 percent of 12th graders—these numbers represent respective increases of 59.7 percent, 62.7 percent, and 50.6 percent over 2017 rates.

Daily conventional marijuana use continues to outpace daily cigarette use across grades, reflecting a steep decline in daily cigarette use and fairly stable daily marijuana use.<sup>106</sup> One in four tenth graders admit to using in the recent past and the majority of high school students see no harm in using the substance, even while they are still not of legal age to use it. The increase in prescriptions for medical marijuana gives the illusion that since others their age can get a prescription, it is safe for them to also use.

## **Mental Health Issues**

### ***Anxiety***

All children experience some level of anxiety and stress from time to time, just as adults do. It is within the range of normal to experience fears, doubts and anxieties when facing new settings or tasks. It is common for students to be 'stressed out' about exams, project deadlines, and finding a school-life balance. Teaching time management and effective study skills significantly reduces<sup>107</sup> the felt stress<sup>108</sup>.

Ensuring children eat a healthy diet and get enough sleep<sup>109</sup> at night also contribute significantly to reducing felt stress. The CDC recognizes the need for healthier nutrition programs within schools and has launched an initiative commonly referred to as the WSCC (Whole School, Whole Community, and Whole Child). The initiative calls for a comprehensive overhaul of

school breakfast and lunch programs, nutrition education, and staff role modeling. Other initiatives target parents and promote the need to eat dinner together at night. One study of third graders concluded that children who gather routinely for family dinner (defined as a meal with most or all household members present) at home eat healthier experience less stress and better overall health<sup>110</sup>.

Stress and anxiety of the nature discussed above is within the realm of 'normal' and in comparative terms, is a more easily resolved problem. The difference between 'normal' and a cause for concern is the severity of the anxiety. A child feeling anxious about the first day of class in a new school is normal, while a child frequently feeling anxious about going to school in an established setting is not normal. Severe anxiety can manifest emotionally as crying, tantrums, clinging to a parent, and pointblank refusing to go to school; while a physical manifestation may include headaches, stomach aches, or bathroom issues. Teachers may notice the child is having a difficult time focusing in class, is frequently fidgeting and restless, and exhibits agitation.

Symptoms exhibited at home should always be questioned by the parent inasmuch as teachers should question symptoms noticed in the classroom. Children do not exhibit anxiety without a root cause. Bullying is certainly a cause of anxiety, as are fears of school violence. The fear of failure is also another cause of anxiety. Yet another cause may be things unrelated to school that are happening in their personal life.

Children who worry excessively about academics and sport can develop a clinical disorder<sup>111</sup>.

Boston Children's hospital cautions that left untreated and with no coping skills, the anxieties can

turn into a Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), an identified mental health disorder. GAD and Depression often go hand in hand. A child with an anxiety disorder tends to withdraw and isolate, which in turn leads to a lack of purpose and feeling left out; resulting in a developing depression. One triggers the other, in the case of clinical disorders and will need to be treated clinically.

### ***Depression***

The Cleveland Clinic<sup>112</sup> defines childhood depression as being different than the everyday 'blues' that most children will feel from time to time. Clinical depression is marked by extended weeks or months of sadness, moodiness, loss of interest in activities, and feelings of hopelessness. The Clinic cites the National Institute of Mental Health estimating at least 3.3 percent of teens are clinically depressed, and that the American Academy of Adolescent Psychiatry estimates the percentage to be five percent. Putting this in perspective, one in every classroom of twenty teens is clinically depressed and will require counseling treatment.

There are many causes of depression. In some cases, there is a family history of depression. The majority of the time, it is the result of a child's home environment or stressful life events.

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development<sup>113</sup> (NICHD), youth who are cyberbullied are more likely to develop depression than those who are bullied face to face at school. As stated earlier under the bullying heading, cyberbullying allows the victim to view the derogatory comments over and over.

### ***Cutting***

Kids who find no relief from the stressors and guilt of life sometimes seek relief by cutting themselves, as a form of self-injury. Cutting is not an actual DSM Mental Health Diagnosis, but is often (not always) associated with a verifiable diagnosis including eating disorders and anxiety disorders.<sup>114</sup>

It may be unfathomable to a parent and non-professionals, but it is important to understand that, from the youth's perspective, cutting produces a temporary relief from their internal pain. In the mind of a cutter, physically cutting themselves relieves the internal pressure that builds up. The frequency of cutting depends on the perceived amount of pressure and the ability to cope with it. Others cut as a means of self-punishment. Others do it as a means of numbing something in their life, to block pain.

The rate of self-injury increased by 51% over the course of 15 years, according to research<sup>115</sup> published in the Journal of American Medical Association. The largest increases are amongst teen girls who cut, with an upward trend of 18.8% a year. A possible explanation for girls having a higher incidence rate is that it is more socially acceptable for boys to outwardly express anger and pent up emotions by throwing things, squealing tires,

Many leading experts attribute the increase to the emergence of social media platforms and subsequent cyber-bullying as well as the engagement of 'comparison'. Facebook, Instagram, and SnapChat are three popular platforms used by teens. Often used and frequently the seedbed of endless drama and bullying, teens who are not secure in their self-image and emotional well-



being are turning to cutting to relieve their pain.

Untrained parents and teachers, as well as youth leaders, may not realize that cutting can be addictive, as much as any other habit. Yet, addictions are linked to achieving a high and cutting allows the cutter to achieve a high as endorphins are released. Most cutters don't want to cut, but they don't know what to do to stop the addiction. While researching, I located a YouTube Video entitled 'How to Cut Yourself'<sup>116</sup>. Like the 17,296 other viewers, I clicked, expecting a 'how-to' video. Thankfully, the misleading title was written by a young YouTuber wanting to help people.

On the popular website 'Cracked', one girl wrote<sup>117</sup> this: "When I was 16, I began hurting myself to cope with emotional stress. It started as an outlet for my pain and developed into a full-fledged addiction, one that led me to eight different therapists, four different psychiatrists, four crisis hospitalizations, multiple suicide attempts, and a 30-day stint in SAFE Alternatives' Adult Intensive Unit for self-harm. While I'm no longer actively self-injuring, the habit shaped my life for most of the last decade."

There is help and recovery awaiting the cutter who will seek treatment. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a counseling model used in Christian and secular counseling both and is a recommended treatment model. CBT allows the cutter to identify negative thought patterns that lead to cutting, as well as identify positive thought patterns and coping mechanisms.

While it may seem logical to link cutting with suicide, it is important to note that cutting is a non-suicidal action and the intent of the cutter is to relieve pain, not to end their life. Rather, cutters concur that their choice to cut is actually a way to avoid suicide.

### ***Suicide***

Teen and young adult suicide rates are on the rise. In 2017, adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 had a suicide rate of 14.46%<sup>118</sup> (per 100,000). Girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to commit suicide (22% to 12% respectively) as well as attempt suicide (9% to 5% respectively). Suicide is the second leading cause of adolescent and teen deaths in the United States.

The answer to the question of whether or not Christian teens and young adults commit suicide is emphatically yes. That said, as with anyone who reaches the desperation level of attempting or committing suicide, there is typically an accompanying mental health disorder or substance use/abuse. Teens who struggle with being bullied, have experienced abuse and other stressors are in the high risk category. If the home life is unstable and a support system is lacking, suicide is perceived as the only answer. From a Biblical perspective, teens are human and humans are not immune to suicidal thoughts and tendencies.

The Jason Foundation reports<sup>119</sup> that every day, there are over 3,000 suicide attempts by high school students. Four out of five of the teens have given clear warning signs that they were hovering on the edge of an attempt, yet the warning signs went unheeded or undetected. As adults responsible for raising children, we need to be keenly aware of the warning signs and take them seriously.

Teens who talk about suicide or dying are 30 times more likely than average to kill themselves. Phrases like "I'd be better off dead", "I hate my life", and "You'd be better off without me around" are all warning signs. Adolescents and teens don't always verbalize their thoughts but may do it through social media posts. Posts of a 'dark' nature or those that express hopelessness and depression are all warning signs that the child is in trouble. Never should the warning signs be viewed as merely being done to get attention, but always the warnings should be taken seriously and action taken to seek professional help, through an Emergency Room or Mobile Response evaluation.

### **Summary of Youth Trends**

The only generation with an official designation of the U.S. Census Bureau is the Baby Boomers, and varying agencies differ on the ages of other generations. I am using terminology as defined by Pew Research<sup>120</sup>, defining Gen Z as anyone born between 1997 and 2012 and the Alpha Generation as anyone born after 2012. This puts Gen Z as those currently aged 7-22 in 2019, and the Alpha Generation as anyone under the age of 7 in 2019.

Technology is without a doubt, the single most influential factor in what makes Gen Z and the Alpha Generations tick. According to Pew Research, 95% of all teens own smartphones and 45% say they use their phones almost constantly. Smartphone ownership is nearly universal among teens of different genders, races and ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Phones are used to connect with friends and family, obtain news, watch videos for entertainment, and a

plethora of other purposes such as ordering food, using the GPS, taking notes, and so much more. Anything Millennials could do on a laptop, younger generations do with their smartphones. The need for going to a bookstore or library or to watch mainstream TV has been rendered all but obsolete.

With the uptick in media consumption comes the affiliated challenges and outcomes that have been discussed in this chapter. Issues that arise with the use of technology are not the only challenges facing families today. Bullying has become a national epidemic and is attributed to the primary factor of youth suicide attempts and completions. Technology has compounded the concerns youth feel over their body image, as social media platforms are flooded with filtered images of tweens and teens wearing the latest fashions; all of which serves to create pressure for to look, behave, and talk like the photo shopped images. The domino effect continues as part of the pressure to conform leads to early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and an increased abortion rate.

As if all of these challenges were not enough, there is a continued downward spiral in public school culture where 90% of students attend. School violence is on the rise, ranging from knife fights and bomb threats to school shootings. Teachers continue to experience decreased pay and increased demands to produce rising test scores, in the midst of growing disruptions and violence in their classrooms and on grounds. Parental presence is markedly absent. Once the norm to volunteer in classrooms and at extracurricular events, the void continues to widen as some mothers work to supply income and others remain apathetic to the plight.

Substance use has always been a factor with underage youth, but never have the statistics been as staggering as they are today. Despite what is reported to parents and youth leaders, a whopping 75% of high school students reported using substances at least occasionally, in an anonymous CDC survey. The most recent trend of vaping nicotine or marijuana is being cited as another national epidemic, as tragedies play out in emergency rooms across the country each day.

Anxiety and depression often emerge as ill-equipped youth attempt to process and resolve the onslaught of ramifications of the tangled web of culture they find themselves immersed in. Parents, teachers, pastors and youth leaders are of little help in many cases; not for a lack of love and caring but for a lack of knowledge and understanding of the trends facing youth. Left to fend for themselves, a growing percentage of youth are turning to cutting as a means of trying to relieve the internal pain that is leaving them tormented and unable to escape. Tragically, attempted and completed suicide rates amongst youth continue to grow as the pressures continue to mount throughout their teen years.

There is hope. The following chapter will discuss determinants that are solid predictors of positive outcomes for children whose families are committed to staying involved and connected, talking openly about trends, and teaching precept upon precept, the values and beliefs that are adhered to in the home.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Determinants that Impact Outcome**

It is important to examine variables that impact outcomes, to gain a better understanding of the youth culture and predictors of positive outcomes. Variants include family composition, differences in parenting styles between generations, family lifestyles, residential locations, socio-economic factors, family morals and beliefs, and school choice.

### **Family Composition**

The challenges within families continue as the relationship decisions made by parents continue to impact children.

The term 'traditional family' defined by the PRB (Population Reference Bureau) speaks of households where parents are still married to their first spouse and are the joint parents of all children in the home and the father is the only income source. Dual income traditional families are those described above, with the exception that both parents work.

The shift from fathers only working to both parents working began in the 1960's, and by the 1980's, there were more dual income households than singular incomes<sup>121</sup>. By the late 1990's, a near inversion has occurred and households that include the mother working rose to nearly 70%.

Family life continues to change as divorce, remarriage (blending, and cohabitation are on the rise and traditional households continue to decline. In the 1960's, children were typically born within

the confines of marriage. Today, 4 in 10<sup>122</sup> births occur in single women or women who are living with a non-marital partner.

In 2015, only 62%<sup>123</sup> of U.S. children lived with both of their parents-then deemed an all-time low. Those numbers continue to decrease with each passing year. While only 62% lived with both parents, 15% of children were in a parental remarriage situation, 7% lived in a home of a parent cohabiting, and 26% were living in a single parent home.

In addition to the movement away from a secure traditional family is an increase in the fluidity of those who would fall into the 'other' category (divorce, single, remarried, blended, co-habitation). Millennial and Gen Z parents feel less need to embrace traditional marriage as a lifestyle, particularly those who have are on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. The fluidity and uncertainty of the family composition serves only to destabilize children and cause them to seek comfort elsewhere.

### **Parenting Styles Vary with Generations**

Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials are all parents of today's youth culture. Younger boomers are now in their mid to late fifties, and are continuing to raise teens born to them while in their thirties. Gen Xers are now 40-54 years old, and Millennials are now 25-40. Parents of today's youth culture can be found in all three generations and parenting styles vary extensively.

Boomers tend to be highly invested in their children and involved in all activities as do the older Gen Xers. This grouping of younger Boomers and older Gen Xers are sometimes referred to as

'Helicopter Parents'-known for hovering and being overly involved and protective. Younger Gen Xers (those now in their early 40's) tend to be less involved and more focused on their careers and providing for the family. Millennial parents are the product of helicopter parents and are swinging the pendulum in the other direction, and take a more responsive approach to parenting, rather than direct and control every detail of life.<sup>124</sup>

Parenting styles evolve as values change in evolve in society. Having a solid work ethic was an important value instilled in previous generations. Baby Boomers grew up with parents who worked hard and provided much but were detached and uninvolved in their lives. Determined to do raise their children differently, the Boomers and older Gen Xers began to sacrifice their own desires and interests for the sake of their children. Out of this era came the 'soccer moms', the 'classroom parents', and the 'band moms'. Where the kids go, the parents also go.

In the same youth culture are children of Millennial parents. These parents, now 25-40 years old, are the ones who are experiencing macro-changes in society. As a result, they are more open-minded, more tolerant, and gain most of their parenting skills from the internet; preferring the trends and ideas of strangers to the perceived 'old-fashioned' ideas of non-millennials.

### **Family Lifestyle**

Millennials have different values regarding the need to sit down and eat a home-cooked dinner together as a family. In generations past, it was a given that a home-cooked meal would be served each night, and that everyone in the family would come to the table and eat it together. Millennials value food service more<sup>125</sup> than home-cooking. According to the Food Institute, 90%



order out at least once a week. Coffee shops and fast-eateries are frequented throughout the week, by parents who have children.

Millennials with no children tend to cook at home more frequently. One probable factor to the difference is that millennial parents are also working parents with kids who need to get to after-school activities, leaving little time to cook some days.

Rather than concern themselves with the hassle of shopping for, preparing, and cooking food; millennials opt<sup>126</sup> for convenience stores and healthier fast food options such as Chipotle.

However, they are not the only generation opting to spend nearly 50% of their food budget<sup>127</sup> on food purchased somewhere besides the grocery store. Gen X parents and Boomers are also dining elsewhere besides home, multiple times per week. In essence, there is a cultural shift in how families eat.

Despite the cultural shift, nearly 60%<sup>128</sup> of parents with children under 18 say the family still sits down to dinner together at least five nights a week. Evidence is clear that youth who eat dinner together frequently are less likely to be involved in negative trends and behaviors and are more easily able to handle temptations and pressures. Columbia University found<sup>129</sup> that youth are less likely to use drugs often if eating family dinner frequently is a part of a lifestyle. Children and teens that eat family dinner at home develop healthier eating habits<sup>130</sup> than those who fend for themselves.

## Technology

With the advancement in technology has come a more disconnected family. It is not unusual for family members to disperse to their own space to watch videos or scroll social media on individual devices, or to sit in the same room and do the same. The average American child spends 7.5 hours a day using a device, and most reach for their phone within minutes of waking up. Much of the time spent using the device is time that, in past years, would have been spent interacting with family members.

Staying connected face-to-face with humans, beginning with family members, is critical to the well-being of children. If they do not obtain the needed connections at home, they will seek connections elsewhere. In 2018, one study<sup>131</sup> showed the average weekday time spend with children was only 37 minutes. Somewhat more encouraging is the statistic that weekend time together increased to just over 2.5 hours per day. Daytrips and vacation increases the time of connectedness, because hectic work and extracurricular schedules are left behind.

Creating healthy boundaries with technology usage is essential to maintaining family connections. Setting ground rules early is important. Establishing the number of hours it can be used at each age bracket, what monitoring software will be installed, what apps are allowed, and where the devices are able to be used all create more positive outcomes for families. Clear rules such as devices are not allowed at the family dinner table, but are allowed on the way to dance class are important.

Follow-through is important. A new term 'digital grounding' has emerged and 65%<sup>132</sup> of parents report they have taken away cell phone or Internet privilege's as punishment for not following the set ground rules. Not all parents are willing to be tenacious in checking online activity. 40% admit to never checking accessed websites, and close to 60% say they are not friends with their teens on social media platforms and have never checked the profiles. A full 48% of kids use their cell phones without parents ever checking their texting and call history.

### **Religious Beliefs**

Many parents feel that giving a child a religious upbringing means the child will be protected and insulated from the trends of today's youth culture. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that proves that (most) children will have moral failings, despite their religious upbringing. The good news is that in the majority of the situations, it is only a 'season' of experimentation and as they will return to the sure foundation laid in their formative years. In researching conceptual links between parental religiosity and child/adolescent well-being, Dr. Briggs and Dr. Moore<sup>133</sup> concluded the younger the child when parents begin teaching, the greater the impact for life.

A University of Southern California researcher highlights the need for fathers to take their children to church. His study<sup>134</sup> showed that 44% of children who went to church with their father followed in his footsteps, even if the mother never went to church, continued in their faith as adults. In households where the mother and father both attend church, 75% of children maintain a level of their faith into their adult years. Families that volunteer to serve at their

church increase the likelihood of children avoiding a majority of pitfalls, as 55% of teens report enjoying volunteering<sup>135</sup>. Teens volunteer at church or in the community an average of 3.5 hours a week. Those who volunteer do better in school and are more likely to graduate.<sup>136</sup> A study conducted to determine the correlation between teen volunteerism and the incident rate of illegal behaviors, arrests and convictions dropped by 11%, 31%, and 39% respectively<sup>137</sup>.

Does teaching precepts at home, going to church together, and volunteering/serving together guarantee no moral failings?

In an interview<sup>138</sup> with Focus on the Family, Dr. Jim Burns spoke to the reality of not an 'if', but a 'when' a child will have moral failings and how parents should respond to the situations. A leading expert on marriage and family issues, Dr. Burns candidly shared that it is probable that every child will make choices that are not wise and come will make choices that could have enduring consequences.

### **School Violence**

There is evidence<sup>139</sup> that the size of the school and the location of the school, both geographically and a neighborhood within a geographic region are all factors in the bullying incidence rate. Strongly associated with all bullying outcomes is the fact that girls are more likely to be significantly bullied, whether face-to-face or cyberbullied.

Urban public middle and high schools are experiencing an increased percentage of the student body that use substances, report being sexually active with multiple partners, and engage in

illegal behaviors that lead to unintended consequences.

The Federal Commission on School Safety did a comprehensive study<sup>140</sup> on school safety, in the wake of the deadly school shooting in Parkland, Florida. The 180 page report looked at 19 different aspects to school safety and concluded that every geographic region and every school within a geographic region has variables that do not allow for a 'cookie cutter' plan.

It is noteworthy that mass school shootings don't happen 'in the hood'. The same holds true for school violence as a whole. One plausible explanation is that the government spent substantial funds installing metal detectors in inner-city schools, whereas suburban and rural schools often have no protection other than a 'locked door policy' after students are in the building. Most school violence is at the hands of loners or social outcasts. Those in inner-cities are less likely to be violent as they always feel connected to their neighborhood (the 'hood').

The mentality of inner-city students is different than rural or suburban counterparts, in that the school is often looked at as a safe-haven. In a community where violence is rampant out in the streets and home life is unstable, the school is where student come to be fed meals they may not get at home. The school is where there are teachers who care about them, and a family of students can be found. If there is an altercation between students, it is rarely more than a mild fight. Knife or gun fights happen back 'in the hood', off school grounds.

Private school violence is less likely due to a smaller student body and the ability of staff to better manage or avoid main risk factors. For example, a student who has been violent once is

much more likely to be violent again. Private schools can implement a 'no tolerance' policy with no questions asked, however public school students cannot be removed without extensive hearings before the Board of Education and potentially the courts. The student can conduct dozens of acts of mild violence before ever being expelled. Private school students may get a second chance, but not always. Likewise, private schools typically implement a no-tolerance policy on bullying, sexual misconduct, substance usage, and other undesirable behaviors.

### **Socio-Economic Factors**

Low income schools have fewer resources than more affluent schools and frequently test scores reflect the disparity. The school resource inequity is not the only factor in the test score disparity. Research<sup>141</sup> at both Harvard and MIT shows that low-income children have different brain functioning and capacity. Childhood stress and trauma, less exposure to the spoken and written language, and learning English as a second language are also significant factors. High income families typically include college educated, working professional parents who not only interact differently with their children, but also give higher level pre-school opportunities. The MIT study revealed the achievement gap could be as high as 44% less in the low-income students.

In homes where the father is present and the income is higher, the choice is often made for the mother to stay-at-home. This one factor is attributed to a much higher brain development in children. The simple fact is that stay-at-home moms have the time to spend with the child, bonding and engaging in numerous educational activities. There are literal physiological and neurological changes that take place in the brain as time is spent talking and engaging with children. Babies of stay-at-home moms are advanced to the point of toddlers demonstrating the

same skill sets as pre-school peers of working parents, and four year olds are as advanced as the mainstream kindergarten student.

The impact of school-age children having a stay-at-home mom (SAHM) cannot be negated. The SAHM has time to get up and make a healthy breakfast for the kids, pack healthy lunches, and calmly get kids ready for school. It is the SAHM that is the primary volunteer in the classroom. The SAHM has time while the kids are at school to properly manage the home, time to shop for and cook healthy dinners, and be there when school is over. Because of being home during the day to tend to the other responsibilities, the SAHM is there to supervise homework completion, oversee screen time usage, monitor whereabouts and activities, and most importantly-interact with children. These are all luxuries that low income mothers do not have, as they often are either single moms or in a necessary dual income situation.

Twenty five million low-income students in America are left unsupervised after-school and during school vacation. The 'summer slide' tendency to watch TV or 'hang out on YouTube' instead of reading leaves kids of low income families 2-3 grade levels behind their peers by 5th grade<sup>142</sup>.

## **Mental Health**

Unsupervised time, whether because a parent is working or just apathetic, can lead to being bullied or becoming a bully, to low self-esteem rates, and to ineligibility for extra-curricular activities. Depression can become a factor and mental health issues further compound the situation.

Wealthier kids deal with eating disorders and anxiety disorders more frequently<sup>143</sup> than low income kids. Students of white-collared, highly educated parents attend affluent schools are struggle to keep up with expectations. The National Library of Medicine<sup>144</sup> reports that girls in the suburbs experience three times more depressive episodes than their inner-city peers. In an effort to 'heal themselves', the wealthy students more frequently self-medicate by turning to opioids and stimulants.

Wealthier students in affluent public schools and communities are more vulnerable to drug and alcohol problems than their low income peers<sup>145</sup> in neighboring areas. A study of affluent students in the Northeast confirmed earlier studies that indicate students from wealthy families are more likely to binge-drink, use CBD and marijuana products. More concerning is the statistics that indicate the rich kids are twice as likely to use stimulant drugs including Ritalin and cocaine, and party drugs such as Ecstasy. That is not to say that low-income students do not also use substances, but the rate is much lower.

### **Physical Health**

Low income families depend on free breakfast and lunch for their school age children, as well as groceries given at local food pantries. The foods purchased by low income families at the grocery store tend to be processed foods easily made by latchkey kids or tired moms after work, as well as foods that fill the stomach, such as pasta, but are void of high nutrition. This poor nutritional lifestyle leads to childhood obesity in many instances.<sup>146</sup>



Families who have a higher income are more prone to have fruits, vegetables, protein bars and shakes and healthy meal options available. Also, the children of wealthier families lead more active lifestyles attending after school recreation, dance classes, and sports teams.

### **Summary of Determinants that Impact Outcomes**

There are many variables in the life of a child growing up in America today. Gone are the days of everyone growing up in a home with both parents married since a young age, and of dad going to work while mom stays home and bakes cookies. Gone are the days of all schools being safe, neighborhoods safe enough for young kids to walk around without parents. Gone are the days of innocence, where sex remained an unknown until puberty hit. Gone are the days of the majority of mothers volunteering in schools and being an integral part of the school culture. Gone are the days of parents being able to decide what children will be exposed to in terms of sex, drugs, violence, bullying, and a plethora of other trends that threaten to undermine the family.

There is hope, however. While, nearly without exception, it is probable that a child will experience some moral failings as well as experience unprovoked external pressures such as bullying; it is also probable that with intentional parenting, they will weather the storm and come out on the other side as solid young adults who are not living the lifestyle of one who has succumbed to youth trends.

There are large disparities between those who have the luxury of having a stay-at-home mom and those who do not. Low income children with working moms, especially if she is a single mom, often struggle in all areas of life; while low income children with attentive stay-at-home

moms fair nearly as well as their wealthier classmates. Similarly, children from wealthy middle-class homes are starving for attention and affection; and no amount of after school activities will fill the void. If parents do not engage their children daily and stay intimately involved in their lives, their children will seek love and comfort in all the wrong places.

School violence is becoming an increasing reason for alarm, particularly in rural and suburban areas. Inner city schools tend to have reduced violence as students view the school as beneficial in providing food and a safe space. Violence involving inner city youth predominately occurs off site, so as not to violate the unwritten code of ethics in their 'hood'.

Religious upbringing and conviction plays a large role in the life of the child. While volunteering and attending church with the mother is important, the factor that offers the most staying power is if the father attends church with the child (with or without the mother).

Character education plays a vital role in outcomes and it starts with and is modeled in the home. Kids begin to mimic adult language and behavior at a very young age, whether positive or negative. The foundation of their character is formed before they ever get to kindergarten. What parents and others around the family model, the media input they are allowed to consume, as well as the school environment all play a part in the formation of character.

The single most important factor in determining a positive outcome in youth trends is having parents who are available and aware of, and involved in every facet of their lives. Facets include education, being present on and off school grounds, involvement with friends and parents of

friends, talking about cultural trends, and pointed awareness and monitoring of media consumption and the sites accessed by kids at varying ages and stages. A parent being attuned to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the child is critical.

Ensuring kids get enough sleep, are physically active, and eat healthy foods are all a part of intentional parenting. The involvement and oversight will not always be met with gladness, but the vigilant parent will reap higher rewards than those who remain uninvolved and uninformed, unwilling to set aside their desires in a sacrificial investment into their children.

Vigilance and intentional parenting will not guarantee a child will have no moral failings, but will minimize the type and extent of involvement in detrimental activities and will improve the likelihood the child will not succumb to trends in today's youth culture.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Survey Design and Results**

In the abstract written in the dissertation proposal, I outlined the Method of Approach I would take to conduct a pilot study within my sphere of 800 Facebook 'friends', using a questionnaire format to collect data. The abstract indicated within the circle of nearly 800 are those who fall in categories of those listed in my research questions. They are from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, some live urban and some rural, some Christians, some Catholics, some New Agers and some with no religious preferences. Some send kids to private religious schools, others home school, and still others send their kids to magnet or charter schools. Some live in close proximity to family and others live hundreds of miles away. Kids range in age from newborn to adulthood. Within the Facebook pilot group are single parents, blended families, and traditional families. There are stay-at-home moms and working moms.

In this chapter, I will analyze the pilot data and compare it to published data I researched and cited in earlier chapters of this project.

In May of 2019, I created a survey that would elicit responses to over 180 data points. I created it using Google Forms and in June of 2019 I posted it repeatedly across my Facebook platform. I also made it sharable, to allow my circle of 'friends' to share to their pages. Despite efforts to draw more responses from the potential of 800, only 33 responded and filled out the survey. Nonetheless, responses in each case represent a cross-section of circumstances and variables and

I consider it to be a valid pilot study.

Of those who responded, 19% are either single parent, divorced or widowed; while 81% are married or living with and raising children as unmarried couples. Pew Research indicated 62% of children lived with both parents in 2015 and projected numbers would continue dropping to new record lows. My 2019 survey indicated 47% of children currently live with both parents. Nationally, 15% of children are in a blended remarriage. My survey indicated 31% are in a blended remarriage. Nationally, 26% of children under 18 are living in homes with only one parent. My survey results indicated 22% of children are living in the home of only one of their parents.

Summarized, the household composition in my pilot study is in keeping with the Pew Research projections of 2015 which projected there would be a continual decline in traditional homes and an increase in blended families, and the continued expectation of the existence of single parent households.

Of those who responded to the pilot study; 39% are Baby Boomers, 39% are Gen Xers, and 22% are Millennial parents. In keeping with national research, the pilot study reveals a significant difference in parenting styles and family lifestyles. The younger the current parents are, generally speaking, the less involved they report being in the day to day lives of caring for and nurturing their children.

The national statistic for mothers (with children under the age of 18) in the Labor Force is 70%.

In my pilot group, 65% of mothers are in the Labor Force, slightly less than the national average. Compare this to the statistic that only 38% of mothers worked in 1960, and today's percentages take on a higher significance. As the percentage of women in the workforce has risen, the identifiable concerns in the youth culture have also risen.

With few exceptions, pilot study families rarely read books together, play board games, or have movie nights or watch TV together. Most families do have at least once a week activities together at sporting events or outside. Keeping family traditions at holidays and birthdays is an important part of family life, for 85% of the pilot study respondents.

Nationally, 90% of Millennials report ordering out at least once a week and the pilot study reports similar averages. All generations report cooking at home using pre-packaged foods and there is a direct correlation between those who cook healthy foods from scratch and those who work. Not surprisingly, women who work tend to pick up prepared food on the way home or order take-out several times per week.

Despite the cultural shift in what food is eaten, 60% of families nationally eat dinner together at least 5 nights a week. Of those responding to the pilot study, only 33% eat dinner together at least 5 nights a week. 19% indicated they eat dinner together 1-3 nights per week. Closely mirroring national averages, 48% indicate they eat only dinner together a few times a year as a celebration of a holiday or special occasion.

Technology plays a major factor in family life and in today's youth culture. Dinner time without

technology is still revered, as 99% of pilot respondents indicate phones are not allowed at the table. The absence of technology allows for the critical and necessary time of connecting, communicating, and encouraging one another. National studies indicate that the average American child ages 8-18 spends 7.5 hours a day using their device. There is a large disparity between the national statistics and the pilot study. Pilot study respondents indicate same age children spend 2-4 hours a day using devices, with few exceptions.

In analyzing all data points collected in the pilot study, I propose one reason for the disparity is pilot parents also reported they are not closely tracking device usage and they allow devices to be used in bedrooms. It would be reasonable to conclude pilot parents are underestimating the actual screen time usage in the home, given the same parents indicated a lack of family activities and connectedness. While possible, it is not probable that their device owning children are merely studying or reading or for leisure or engaged in creative play during unsupervised time.

While many do not closely monitor every downloaded app and site history, 31% of pilot parents report being aware of the cyberbullying taking place frequently. This is double the indication of medical field data, which reports 15% of youth nationally are cyberbullied.

Likewise, the reported pilot study statistics of school-based bullying is much higher than national averages. The pilot study reports 44% of school age children experience bullying, and 57% of those bullied deal with it on a daily or weekly basis. These statistics are more in keeping with the American Academy of Pediatric statistics of 48% being bullied at school. The Dept. Of Education reports the percentage of bullying to only be 22%.

Given that the pilot study aligns with the American Pediatrics, I concur that between 45-50% of students being bullied is an accurate report. The probability for the differential would be a fear of backlash if students or parents report the bullying to the educational institution. Backlash from the institution or the student or parents of the perpetrator creates an increase in bullying, not a decrease.

Bullying and cyberbullying is directly linked to suicidal ideation, thoughts, and behaviors. Parents in the pilot study reported an 18% incident rate of children verbalizing 'wanting to die', and are the parents of children reportedly being bullied. These findings are in keeping with the national statistic of 17.2% of teens reporting they've seriously contemplated suicide.

There is an uptick in suicide contemplation, up 25% in just 8 years. The trend is being combated by programs like "Combat Bullying and Suicide Prevention", founded by Willie Raines, who travels the country spreading hope to middle and high school students.

My professional experience as a Mental Health Counselor concurs with the thought process that bullying is an epidemic and left unresolved, leads to suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Hopelessness and seeing no way out of the situation causes people to take action to end their pain. Through the Focus on the Family Online Mentoring ministry, I have counseled hundreds of teens over the course of a year who reach out digitally yet have not talked to a family member or school counselor, believing the lie that it will do no good to talk to anyone.



Body image is another major concern of youth. Nationally, as much as 80% of youth are concerned about their weight and body image. Fifty percent of the parents of the pilot project report children being anxious and 58% report both boys and girls dealing with body image concerns, including a number with children under the age of 10.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the media plays the major influencer role in shaping body image thinking. Parents are also influencer's, whether aware or unaware of the reality that children mimic what they are exposed to. If the parents are overly concerned about their looks and are constantly dieting, it will increase the concern of their children about their own image. A poor body image leads to a poor self-image, which then opens the floodgates for years of harmful behaviors.

Technology may seem harmless and using it for numerous hours per day may seem 'normal' in today's youth culture and indeed, it is. The fact that technology is the gateway to viewing pornography should not be negated. It is nearly impossible for a male or female to avoid viewing porn at some point. Having it flash on the screen unsolicited is one concern. Another is the number of teens who intentionally search out porn of all types.

Nationally, 6 out of 10 teen girls are viewing porn and 9 of 10 teen boys are viewing porn. Surveyed pilot study parents only revealed 18% of their kids are known to have ever viewed porn.

This disparity may be attributed to a lack of monitoring and parental knowledge of how easily

youth can access porn. For example, many apps can easily be a gateway in as little as 5 clicks.

Parents answered for youth in the pilot project and may legitimately be unaware of the activities, whereas national studies collect data anonymously directly from the youth.

Only 20% of parents of teens report known sexual activity yet the national statistics reported by teens to the CDC in annual anonymous surveys done at school reveals that 50% of high school students have had sex within the past 3 months. It is noteworthy that sexual activity that excludes intercourse is not deemed as 'having sex' by most teens. If the sexual related actions were included, the percentage skyrockets to nearly 100% of high school students being sexually active. One is left to speculate the reasons for the disparity, of which there could be many.

My hypothesis is that given close to 85% of pilot study parents indicated they adhere to a religion that teaches against pre-marital sex, it not probable that youth are not going to admit to being sexually active. I base my hypothesis on my ministry background of 20 years a youth leader, my professional background of 25 years in the field of education, and my own parenting experience of raising four teenagers.

School culture and safety is becoming a cause of increasing concern. In addition to the aforementioned bullying is the added concern of school violence. Nearly half of the 10 parents who reported the occurrence of mild or moderate violence, reported multiple incidents since the child has started school. The incidents are not limited to public school settings, but also occur in private, private religious, and magnet/charter schools. Those inclined to fight and threaten with or without knives and non-gun related weapons can be found in all schools, although the rate is

much higher in public schools.

Mild violence in a private school will result in a suspension or expulsion, due to no-tolerance policies, whereas public schools have little recourse without going through extensive proceedings with the Board of Education. This reality is the probable reason for higher incident in public school settings, as those inclined to cause trouble are keenly aware that little discipline will be instilled for mild to moderate offenses.

Academically, there is a direct correlation between family connectedness, supervision and monitoring of activities, and GPA's. Students with parents involved in monitoring and helping with homework, volunteering at the school, and communicating frequently with teachers achieve primarily A/B report cards. Those with less involved parents are reported to be average B/C students. This pilot study did not assess test scores, only letter grades. Nationally, private school and homeschooled students score higher on standardized tests in all grade levels, and on SAT/ACT tests.

Students with involved parents achieve primarily A/B grades, are involved in extracurricular activities, and are less likely to use drugs and alcohol on a regular basis. That said, it is likely there will be experimentation and occasional use.

Nationally, between 50% and 75% of high school students report using substances on an occasional basis. In the pilot study, only 25% of parents acknowledged that their child had ever used drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or e-cigarettes. As is the case with other behaviors, the disparity is

probable because parents are unaware of what their tweens and teens are doing when unsupervised.

When considering disparities and outcomes of youth, it is important to look at determinants that impact outcomes. One thing is certain: If youth do not gain the needed connections at home, they will seek the connections elsewhere. The national average of weekday time parents and children spend connecting is 37 minutes.

While my pilot survey did not ascertain the number of minutes per day spent together, conclusions can be drawn nonetheless. The majority of families surveyed do not (on a daily basis) play together, eat together, spend 1-1 time with their kids, read books together, or pray together. Additionally, the majority of kids are in one or more extracurricular activities, after being out of the home at school all day. As I wrote in my first book "Return to Eden: Exposing the Lies that are Destroying the Family", people other than parents(whether virtual or face-to-face) are often the primary influencers in the life of a child.

In the abstract, I outlined the intent to determine what difference religion and religious upbringing makes in the outcomes in life of the child. I cited in chapter four, in homes where families attend church together, 75% of children who maintain a level of faith into their adulthood. If the family serves together in church, the likelihood of children avoiding pitfalls of the youth culture increases more.

In reviewing data submitted in the pilot study, I found that 85% of parents responding in the pilot study named a specific religious affiliation, yet less than 50% attend(or did attend while kids were under 18) church together as a family more than once a month and only 30% volunteered in the church as a family. In those same families, children only attended youth group and activities intermittently.

Not surprisingly, parents reported that 55% of their adult children no longer follow the religion they were raised in.

Another research question was if teaching precepts at home, going to church together, and volunteering would guarantee no moral failings. Dr. Burns, cited in chapter four, said moral failings are not a matter of 'if' but 'when' and to what extent. The pilot study I conducted confirms that most children in surveyed families have experienced some moral failings.

I did not specifically ask pilot survey parents about the full extent of 'immoral' behaviors of their teen; however the responses given do not indicate the failings resulted in *succumbing* to the trends of current society.

### **Summary of Survey Results**

Almost without exception, in every case where the child experienced two or more of the challenges listed in the survey; there are the common denominators of the mother being in the workforce, and an absence of regular church attendance.

Many variables exist within each family. When viewing each submission from a clinical standpoint, it is clear that where intentional parenting exists, children of the pilot study parents are reported experience less emotional problems and engage less in destructive behaviors.

I am defining 'Intentional Parenting' as spending time with their friends and parents of their friends, volunteering at school and at extracurricular events, as well as at church as a family.

Intentional parents in this survey include those who plan, prepare, and serve wholesome meals and insist the norm be that the entire household eats dinner together.

Intentional parents who shine in the pilot project closely monitor the usage of technology, and maintaining filtering software on the devices. Moreover, the intentional parent is one who spends 1-1 time with their children, communicating on deeper levels; rather than merely sharing a funny social media post.

In chapter four, I cited the single most important determinant of positive outcomes is having parents available and involved in every facet of life. I have conducted the pilot survey, researched extensively, and considered my experiences as a ministry leader, professional counselor, and a parent. I concur that while there is no absolute guarantee, the more intentional a parent is about each data point, the larger the probability of avoiding moral failings or at the very least-having children succumb to the trends of the current youth culture.

My research was limited to only particular data points. There is much opportunity to delve

further into each aspect of my personal research as well as the data available of a topical nature in print and on-line. I plan to expound on each data point in future writings and teachings.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Comparative Case Studies**

*Disclaimer: For the sake of comparison, I have written sketches of two very different families. While the data is taken from the survey that I conducted, each case is a composite sketch. Any seemingly authentic representation is merely coincidental and in no way are the names, ages, or exact circumstances of any family that submitted confidential surveys. Furthermore, extreme care has been taken to ensure there would not be any possibility of pointing to a singular survey. The purpose of the composite sketches is to demonstrate the necessity of intentional parenting and the dire consequences of not doing so.*

### **Case Study #1 The Henderson Family**

#### **Background**

Sue is the wife of Harry and the mother of their five children. She is a lawyer and has an hour commute to the city. Harry is a Physician's Assistant at the local hospital. Their daughters, ages 10 and 14, attend the local elementary and middle schools, while their 16 year old son makes the daily drive to the STEM magnet school two towns away.

#### **Presenting Situation**

Family life is busy and after school hours are filled with dance classes, golf lessons, private tutoring, and trips to the mall. As busy as everyone in the family is, they hold fast to being home



by 7:00 to have dinner together. It is the one time during the week they are all together, except for the occasional Sunday they all make it to church together.

Sue works an hour from home and hits commuter traffic most nights. She calls for curbside pickup most nights, knowing she has no time to cook and put dinner on the table for the family. She prides herself on maintaining the value of dinner together and believes her family is doing well, individually and collectively. She wishes there was more of a connection and closeness, but brushes thoughts aside and accepts this hectic disconnectedness is normal family life.

Harry leaves the house before the family is awake in the morning and keeps late hours at the hospital, often barely making it home for 7:00 dinner. He admits that keeping long hours helps avoid the drama having three kids and a wife create. He also secretly enjoys spending time lingering with the office staff, especially the new nurse.

The 10 year old, Carrie, depends on carpool pickup and drop-offs for her after-school sports and dance activities. She often goes into her room after dinner and cries alone, due to the bullying that has happened in school, related to her being overweight.

Cassandra, the 14 year old, gave up drama club a year ago. She asserted to her parents that she is old enough to come home after school and focus on doing homework. Her parents are unaware of the time she spends with the boy next door, who she claims to have no interest in. Her evenings are spent on social media and texting her boyfriend.

Matt, the 16 year old son, attends the STEM magnet school his parents enrolled him in. He is failing math and his parents have hired a tutor. He frequently skips tutoring sessions and hangs out with friends while playing in their garage band. Unnoticed by his parents, he hangs out with friends and often comes home high. The red eyes are passed off as the result of studying extra hours.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

This family is disconnected on every level. Both parents are busy working professional jobs and have little time for the children they have created and are responsible to raise and nurture. It is good that they are eating dinner together each night. Other than the fact that dinner is takeout and not as healthy as cooking from scratch, it is a solid time each can depend on, as a connection point.

Each person in the home is vulnerable in their own way and has no accountability. The mother is happy with her new career and oblivious to the needs of her family. She sees the exterior factors such as income, dance lessons, math tutoring, sports, and attending church as a family at least once a month. What she fails to see is the reality of what is going on just behind the masks of each family member. Her priorities have shifted and are not in line with the need to be a watchman in her family.

Her husband is vulnerable as are many men, and is beginning down the slippery slope of preferring time in the drama-free office zone with the new nurse rather than with his wife and three precious children. While he is attending church with the family when they go, he is not the

leader of the home. He is not implementing Biblical principles as a husband or father and is not spending the time with men who can hold him accountable in thoughts and deed.

Each of the kids is dealing with issues synonymous with today's youth culture. They need both parents to slow down and connect with them. Parents who rarely slow down enough to actually listen, or are chronically distracted when they're at home, send a message to kids that they're not a high priority.

Carrie needs her parents to know she is being bullied for being overweight. With a mother too busy to cook healthy foods and a physician father too pre-occupied to deal with the bullying issue and the weight issue, Carrie is headed down the road of major emotional problems.

Cassandra is on the brink of becoming sexually active and is only fourteen. She is desperate for connectedness and feeling loved and important to someone, anyone. While the boy next door isn't her favorite 'type', he is available and her parents are unsuspecting. She needs to get involved in extra-curricular activities again and have less time unsupervised. Monitoring of her device usage also needs to happen!

Matt is headed down the wrong path. The fact that he skips tutoring and plays in a garage band indicates he does not like the STEM school his parents enrolled him in. A conversation needs to happen to find out what goals he has for his future and to give him opportunities to move in that direction. He needs to be held accountable and asking him to get a part-time job to repay the

wasted tutoring lessons would give consequences and a more responsible activity to do than getting high.

### **Further Recommendations**

Harry and Sue need to immediately carve out time for their marriage. Life often gets so busy that married couples raising kids don't date each other anymore, don't have fun together, don't text each other during the day, and don't take a night away for a little romance. Healthy families begin with healthy marriages, in homes where there are two parents.

The fact the family attends church at least once a month gives opportunity to get better connected to groups that can benefit each in their age category. Matt likes playing in the garage band, so perhaps his musical talent would be appreciated and utilized at church. Many churches have dance and drama groups that the girls could get involved in.

Mom needs to learn to cook healthy meals in a short amount of time. Numerous television shows, You Tube channels, and magazine articles show parents how to maximize their time by using Instant Pots, Slow Cookers, and Rice Cookers. Adding a salad and some steamed veggies will allow Sue to serve a home-cooked dinner 20 minutes after arriving home. Setting the table together will begin the connection process.

As busy as the family is there are multiple ways to connect with the kids each week. Taking daytrips, going on breakfast dates with a different kid, driving to the store together, doing a chore together, or sharing social media videos are all ways to connect.

## **Case Study #2 The Jones Family**

### **Background**

Angie is a single mother of three. Her husband, a businessman, was killed by a drunk driver five years earlier, as he commuted from the city to their suburban home. With no post-secondary education or professional skills, she was unable to afford keep their home after her husband died. No longer able to rely on her husband to translate, Angie enrolled in an ESL (English as Second Language) program, knowing primarily Spanish would impede employment as well as her ability to intervene for her children.

### **Presenting Situation**

Angie and her children live in an affordable housing unit in the city projects. It is not a safe place for her fifth grade and eighth grade daughters to walk. Her son made the freshman soccer team.

The girls walk across the street from their middle school to the high school soccer field each afternoon and wait for their brother to finish practice. The three of them then walk home together, always wary of trouble-making schoolmates who heckle them along the way home.

Angie works a minimum wage job during the day and comes home a half hour after the kids get home. For an hour, the family works together to make dinner and do chores. After dinner is cleared, Angie sits down to help kids with their homework, while also beginning to do her own. She is a semester away from earning her nursing degree.

Never one to wallow in self-pity, Angie and her children have made the commitment to be at the local soup kitchen and food pantry every Saturday morning with the outreach team from her church. Together, they serve breakfast and then hand out supplies for those in need. Angie is looking forward to using her nursing skills in the future, at the free health clinics offered once a month.

### **Observations and Recommendations**

Angie's case demonstrates that she is by no means the stereotypical single mom who works a minimum wage job and raises her kids in subsidized housing. Rather, she is a widowed mother of three who was fortunate to be able to be a suburban stay-at-home mom of three until her husband was tragically killed.

While working a minimum wage job Angie is still placing a top priority in being available to her children. She is maintaining her values of cooking healthy meals and having dinner together. Her kids help with the chores and then sit as a family to do homework. She is connected to them in multiple ways.

The siblings are also well connected to each other, and stick together on the school grounds and on the walk home. Bullies heckle them at school and wait for them as they walk home, but Angie has taught her children how to just keep walking and talking amongst themselves and not respond to the bullies.

Angie is doing an excellent service to her children by taking them with her on Saturdays to

volunteer in the community. It is teaching them to give of themselves, is teaching them valuable work and team skills, and is deterring them from being involved in negative situations often associated with families in their living situation.

The fact they are serving at the soup kitchen as a part of the church outreach team is an indicator of regular church attendance. An added benefit in this family's case is that it gives them a stronger sense of belonging, essential when they're grieving and have been displaced from their home.

### **Further Recommendations**

Angie needs a cell phone to send with the kids, so they can call for help if the situation gets out of hand. She can call 2-1-1 and get the information for a 'Safe-Link' phone, as well as other resources she may benefit from, including free job placement services.

Given that Angie is a single mom and the father has passed away, Angie would be wise to seek out a man to mentor her teenage son. While some single mothers do an incredible job of rearing their children with solid biblical principles and core values, boys still need men in their lives.

### **Comparison of the Cases**

The comparison between cases shows the fallacy of stereotyping families who are most likely to be successful. At first glance, the Henderson family is doing everything right and is enviable. They are professionals who are wealthy, known in the community, live in a great neighborhood, send their kids to excellent schools, and give the kids private lessons, cars, phones and more.

Comparatively, the Jones family appears to be the stereotypical uneducated, low-income, 'going nowhere' family who lives in the projects.

Closer inspection reveals that the Jones family is a close-knit family, whereas the Henderson's are not. Both families eat dinner together, however the Henderson's dinnertime is a hurried obligatory nightly event, whereas the Jones' look forward to their time of connectedness around preparing and eating dinner.

In both homes, the mother is working. The Henderson's are at an advantage, in that both parents are in the home. Theoretically, the father would share the load and responsibilities, however this is not the situation in the Henderson family. Nonetheless, there are inherent benefits, particularly since it is a traditional marriage of married and mutual parents of all of the children. Angie Jones finds herself the unwilling widow raising three children by herself, shouldering the full load of responsibility.

In chapter two, I referred to a parenting style called 'Parenting According to Deuteronomy'. Angie is doing it, successfully, despite her circumstances. She keeps a close eye on the children and their whereabouts, is communicating with them on deep levels, takes them to church with her regularly, is teaching Biblical principles regarding how to handle bullies, having a good work and study ethic, and serving others. Angie is the watchman on the wall and intentionally keeps her finger on the pulse of the youth culture, watching for signs of impact on her own children. Although probable that each struggles with life without their father and the loss of their home, there is a daily connectedness that predicts a probability of positive outcomes for each child.



Conversely, Sue and Harry are remiss in their parenting responsibilities. Neither parent is aware of the bullying happening with their overweight youngest daughter. A lack of wisdom is displayed concerning their teenage daughter and her unsupervised interactions with the boy next door as well as on-line activities. Their son Matt has been skipping out on private math tutoring, yet somehow neither parent is aware of his rebellious refusal to go. Furthermore, neither seems to be suspicious of Matt's explanation of his red eyes. The family lives each in their own world. The obligatory nightly dinner and monthly trek to church as a family wanton for genuine relationships and connectedness with each other. The marriage is suffering, the children are all on dangerous paths of succumbing to youth culture trends as they struggle to navigate life with little parental direction.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Much has changed since the early-eighties when I graduated college, entered the arena as a professional, and birthed my firstborn daughter. The year was 1983. The Internet had just been created, however the world-wide web itself had not been created yet<sup>147</sup>. It would be another seven years before the web would become an on-line community of a few hundred websites connected through the internet services. My second-born daughter was an infant when I went to work one day and was introduced to the web and 'our' U.S. Department of Education website. Today, there are 1.94 billion<sup>148</sup> websites.

I recall the day I went to a meeting on Capitol Hill and the concept of electronic emails was introduced. I recall how many people revolted and said they would never accept anything other than paper brought to their door. That was in 1994, the year my third daughter was born. Today<sup>149</sup>, there are nearly 4 billion email users.

Not long after the introduction of the world-wide web and electronic mail, I was gifted with my first mobile phone. In fact, it was one of the first within the Department of Education in Maine, given to me because of my constant travel through "Moose Country" to the schools I was responsible for on the Canadian Border. Known as a 'Bag Phone', it plugged into my cigarette lighter while on the road and I took it into meetings and plugged it in. It was an oddity, something never seen before by many. Curious, young and old alike asked why I'd want to take a phone with me wherever I go. In September of 1999, three weeks after my son was born, the

Blackberry was introduced. Today there are 5.5 billion cell phone users in the world.

Shortly after the getting my 'Bag Phone', I took my first-born daughter to Disney. One of my favorite exhibits was the smart home, built by NASA and powered by AT&T. It was yet another glimpse into the future in which we now live, one with computers built into refrigerators and phones that allow us to video chat with people thousands of miles away. The futuristic home boasted of a time to come when appliances could be remotely controlled by computers while in my office, where robots would clean my floors, and dinner would be delivered to my door almost as quickly as I placed the order.

Little did any of us realize how much technology would play in the shift of youth culture and in family life. It has allowed us access, for better or worse, to unlimited information. At the same time, it has created distractions and families have become disconnected. Technology has given us the opportunity to get places faster, keep in touch with people without seeing them face to face, and make 'friends' with people all over the world. With all of the advancements has come Pandora's Box of Trouble. The task faced by Pastors, church leaders, and parents is to help youth navigate today's culture.

My dissertation and research is founded on the question "Is it possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society?"

In my hypothesis written at the outset of research, I stated my belief that it is possible for families to raise children who do not succumb to the morals and trends of current society,

however it is improbable that the children will be completely insulated and never have moral failings. I stated I felt it would only be possible by equipping both parents and children.

This project is the culmination of my working in and around the youth culture and their families for the past 35 years, professionally and in ministry. During the three and a half decades of work, ministry, and child-rearing; I have continued reading hundreds of books, taking classes and researching; to stay on the cutting edge of what is transpiring in youth culture.

As 2020 looms on the horizon, youth culture and family life is filled with challenges on every side. In my research findings, pilot survey, and personal experience of raising kids and now being a grandmother to many; I am more convinced than ever that parents must be informed and equipped to raise their families. There is simply too much for any one parent to spend their time reading and synthesizing.

Given that the family is a God-created institution and that the Bible is filled with instruction on how to raise families, I write these findings primarily to Pastors and Church leaders, who can then equip the families in their flocks as well as successfully pastor the youth.

Parents, particularly Christian parents, are distressed when they find out their child is one of the statistics they read about; yet few are equipped to raise their children with awareness and ability to withstand all modern society entices them with. Lay leaders and pastors are often no better equipped than parents and in most cases, are unaware of the prevalence of the challenging issues within the families they are shepherding.

There are numerous studies and resources available both digitally and in print, however few parents and leaders have the time to sit and research the topics and synthesize it to a usable form. Many pastors and lay leaders have a tendency to utilize Christian data only. It is important to look at data, challenges, and recommended action steps from all vantage points, if we intend to effectively equip families to handle the challenges they will face.

## **Youth Culture Trends**

### ***A Review of Chapters 3-5***

Bullying is an epidemic in youth culture, both face to face and cyber bullying. While sources differ in their findings, all sources agree that no less than one in three school age students experience bullying at school. An estimated 15% of youth are targets of cyberbullying and numbers are increasing annually. Organizations such as Reclaiming Ground, are actively combating bullying in school assemblies.

Reclaiming Ground, founded by Willis Raines, also deals with the topic of suicide, as often suicide ideation, attempts, and completion are rooted in some form of bullying. During the writing of this dissertation, Raines reported to me that 37 seventh graders stepped forward in a singular school assembly, acknowledging they've either contemplated or attempted suicide.

These are sobering statistics, yet many youth leaders think their youth are exempt, as do parents. Christian teens are not exempt from suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completions. Biblically

speaking, there are many references in the Bible to those who cried out in desperation that their lives would end. Suicide prevention is a topic which must be addressed by the churches and families within. There are resources available and experts who are willing to come and equip parents and leaders to recognize signs and take action if a teen speaks of wanting to die. On average, those who verbalize are 30 times more likely to take action.

Another trend in youth culture which is trending younger and younger is that of a poor body image, resulting in lowered self-esteem, eating disorders, and emotional problems. Melrose Clinic warns boys are as vulnerable as girls and that it is a combination of media posts and adults who express dissatisfaction with their appearance; that cause youth to form negative thoughts of their own body image.

Being self-conscious of the body at 7 or 8 years old is complicated by the pre-emergence of puberty. As changes come in the body and hormones fluctuate, emotions fluctuate as well. Tweens may be very stressed and anxious, or the pendulum may swing the other way and the tween begins an early journey to sensuality and sexuality.

Media consumption plays a direct correlation to how a tween handles the puberty zone years. Pew Research indicated that 95% of all U.S. teens now own smartphones and use them almost constantly. Unsupervised tweens are exposed to Instagram, SnapChat, and YouTube posts that are provocative and sensual in nature. By the time boys and girls are teens, the majority has viewed pornography. Nationally, 6 of 10 girls and 9 of 10 boys view porn on a regular basis. In addition, frequented sites by teens include those depicting bestiality, gay and lesbian

relationships, and various other sexual behaviors.

Filtering software eliminates much of the access to sites, including Covenant Eyes, which blocks sites on phones and computers. There are also Apps that parents can download. Nothing will take the place of a parent monitoring usage, yet the majority of parents (including in my pilot study) do not monitor usage, or have a password to the devices.

Many parents and youth leaders remain unaware of the ability to get to a porn site in just five clicks on SnapChat. SnapChat's 'Discover News' feature is not your typical news headline site. Available to every SnapChat user, they are taught how to engage in risky sexual behavior, sell drugs, and go incognito on parents monitoring their internet activity. Not to single out SnapChat, it is important to note that there is a plethora of Apps and dark web sites that are dangerous yet available to every youth who owns a smart phone and has access to the App store.

Parents who are aware of deviant behavior on some platforms feel they are savvy, until they discover their child is texting and sexting through the messaging component of the Bible App<sup>150</sup>. Pastors and youth leaders are understanding of technology and may even use the electronic version of the Bible to teach from. I wonder how many realize that teens may not be sharing Bible verses when the Bible App is open. I appreciate the sentiment of exhaustion felt by pastors, youth leaders and parents. It can be exhausting, trying to stay ahead of the curve and on trend with youth culture. I recommend signing up for the Digital Trends newsletter, available from Protect Young Eyes<sup>151</sup>. It has proved an invaluable resource to me.

Unwitting parents and youth leaders of middle school students may only be gearing up to have purity discussions, while the youth have already been viewing impure media on-line and may have already become sexually active themselves.

The antidote is to start conversations early and maintain communication daily. Due to young ages and each parent differing on how and when their children should learn about varying matters, my recommendation is that pastors and youth leaders impart information to the parents rather than the youth, certainly if the child is younger than 13. There are experts who can do presentations during church sponsored 'parent only' nights, designed to alert parents and church leaders of youth trends. Another way to inform parents is to design an email list for adults only, and give updates and alerts frequently.

Beyond the intention act of viewing sexual content is the danger of on-line predators that are waiting for vulnerable girls (and boys) to click links. The FBI reports over a half million predators a year are stalking social media platforms, with the most sought after group being 12-15 year old girls. This doesn't preclude 8-12 year old girls and boys, or teen boys from being equally pandered to, methodically luring through compliments, flattery, and attention.

Predators create pseudo names as an online identity and pose as one in the same age range as their prey, sometimes pretending to be of the same sex and at other times, pretending to be of the opposite sex. Focus on the Family and the Center for Missing & Exploited Children are just two entities that issue strong warnings for parents to be absolutely vigilant, knowing that sextortion, abduction, sexual assault, and sex-trafficking are awaiting those who fall prey to the predators.



Vigilance is necessary, but so are difficult conversations that are critical in safeguarding vulnerable and innocent children who feel they are old enough to handle situations, but in reality are not cognitively or emotionally developed with the ability to handle situations of this magnitude.

America has a youth culture where sex is now commonplace among high school students, nearly half of whom report as having had sex within the past three months. According to the Biblical Counseling Coalition, 14% have already had four or more sexual partners. Moreover, 'having sex' is defined as sexual intercourse. Teens dismiss other acts of sexual behavior, such as oral sex, as being 'no big deal' and still tout being a virgin.

The movement away from a secure traditional family of a mother, father, and their children living in the same home has staggering consequences. The breakdown of the family has contributed immensely to the teen pregnancy epidemic.

The CDC report that fatherless girls are seven times more likely to become pregnant as a teen as those with a father in their life, whether living in the same home or not.

Previous chapters speak to the reality that pregnancies do not equate to births. The good news is that teen abortion rates continue to decline as options are made available through crisis pregnancy centers, such as giving the child up for adoption or choosing to keep the baby while given supports to help with success.

The rate of Christian teens having abortions remains a concern and a somewhat unknown in Christian circles. Many teens, fearful of how their family and church family will respond, hide out in abortion clinics when pregnant; opting to abort their baby rather than face the wrath that awaits them.

If we are to stop the trend of Christian girls having abortions, then we must begin to have conversations with them about supports that exist if they become pregnant. Is that to say that we preach acceptance of sexual impurity? No. We should always teach the Biblical principles of purity, as well as teach on the practical consequences of being sexually active. STD's, emotional drama and trauma, and the post-abortive mental anguish are all teaching and talking points that parents and pastors must be willing to broach.

In the event it is discovered that a child has had an abortion; Focus on the Family <sup>152</sup>cautions parents, and church leaders to take care to hate the act of abortion, but not the person who had the abortion. As John 8:7 <sup>153</sup>reminds us "He who is without sin be the first to cast the stone." We must be compassionate.

While technology morphed and continues to change and influence youth culture; the school culture has also changed and is now the seedbed for bullying, threats, fights, and school violence in schools across the country.

There is an ongoing debate over school choice, and certainly Christian parents and church leaders make a strong case for private religious education being the tool of preventing immoral

behaviors of all types. One of the research questions I had at the outset of this project is "Do youth who go to private school face the same social issues as those who attend public schools?"

The short answer is yes. Private religious school students still do drugs, still have sex, still bully, still get into fights, still cuss, still lie, and still steal. There is still the possibility of school violence. The difference lies in the frequency of occurrence and the swiftness of discipline. Minor infractions in a public school setting are basically ignored by teachers and administration. In a private school, no-tolerance policies mean immediate detention is doled out. More serious infractions such as bullying or a fight result in an automatic suspension whereas public school students are typically not suspended without a hearing. In some cases, private school students are expelled. Rarely is a public school student expelled.

School shootings are an ever increasing concern as the number of incidents per year continues to rise. In 2018<sup>154</sup>, there were 24 school shootings in the United States, in which at least one person was hurt or died. By July 31st of 2019<sup>155</sup>, 22 school shootings in the United States had already been reported.

In terms of which schools are the safest, private schools and inner city urban schools are the safest. 94% of school shootings in the past fifty years have been in public schools, and the majority of those have not been in urban inner-city schools.

A study done by the Federal Commission on school safety reported that one plausible explanation for less inner-city shootings is the presence of metal detectors, whereas suburban and

rural schools depend on the 'locked door' policy to protect them. Not having metal detectors allows loners, social outcasts, and angry parents or alumni to come into the school carrying weapons, completely undetected until the first shot rings out.

A negative school culture is attributed to the uptick in emotional and mental health issues. Anxiety is cited by both students and parents as a daily challenge and that being 'stressed out' occurs with few exceptions, in all youth. In an attempt to self-medicate, 75% of high school youth turn to substances to 'take the edge off', at least occasionally. Whether their substance of choice is a drug, nicotine, or alcohol; youth are using at unprecedented rates. Charisma magazine reported that Christian teens are consuming alcohol along with non-Christians, beginning as early as middle school. They also use drugs and nicotine.

For some, the pain isn't relieved by substances. They live in torment in their minds as traumas bestowed upon them replay over and over in their mind. Whether small incidents of large, perception is the driving force of the relentless battering of the mind. Some begin cutting as a means of alleviating the stress and emotional pain of the day. Others develop eating disorders as a means to control something in their life. Still others sink into a clinical depression. Many times, the school environment is the primary cause of the pain.

In counseling parents on the best school choice for their family, it is necessary to speak on a case by case basis. There are many factors and variables that will play into making a decision. Private schools, whether religious or secular, can be pricey and many families cannot afford tuition rates. Some parents value all the public education system affords their child, while others feel their

child can be the positive impact in a negative school culture. Others live in areas where the public school culture is much better. Looking at all factors while offering prayer and counseling to the parents is the best course of action in each situation that arises. Regardless of individual choices, wisdom dictates that support is offered to all members of the family, as school culture continues to be impacted by youth culture that has little to do with academics.

There is a shift in parenting styles and family lifestyle between generations. Currently, there are three generations of parents who are raising school age children. The youngest Baby Boomers who waited until their late thirties and early 40's still have children in the nest (A grouping of which I am included). Gen Xers also have school age children they are raising, and Millennial parents are in the midst of birthing babies and building their families.

Boomers tend to be considered 'old-fashioned' by the younger generations. Boomers, sometimes known to be helicopter parents, are highly involved in the lives of each child. To the point of Ad nauseam at times. Older Gen Xers also sacrifice their own desires and interests for the sake of their children. These are the proverbial soccer moms and basketball coach dads. Millennial parents, tired of being micro-managed as children, are open-minded and more tolerant of behaviors their parents shuddered at and disciplined them for.

It is important to understand the general differences between generations, as there are direct links to positive outcomes. Younger Gen Xers and Millennial parents have very different values concerning the need to sit down and eat a home-cooked dinner together, as a family. The mindset is more of food being a necessity to ward off hunger pains, and any food will do. There are dance

lessons, soccer practices, and a plethora of other extra-curricular activities to get to and family dinner is relegated to holidays and special occasions.

The fast food industry is happy to oblige the 90% who order out dinner at least once a week, many doing so multiple times per week. Of those who 'cook' at home, many prefer prepared, packaged food to cooking from scratch. Many surveyed parents admit they have no idea how to 'cook from scratch' like their mothers and grandmothers used to do.

The drift away from home-cooked meals served with the whole family at the table is not a positive one. Eating dinner together each night is cited as one of the most important actions that will have a lifetime of positive impacts on a child. It is at the dinner table that close communications are developed (no phones allowed!).

As each family member shares about their day, opportunity arises to talk about the aforementioned challenges that are plaguing youth today. The more relationships are fostered and deepened, the more support and encouragement can be given and the more problem-solving can occur. Pastors and church leadership can point to the biblical models of breaking bread together as a way of teaching the value of family dinner.

Earlier, I discussed the growing number of youth dealing with anxiety that (left untreated) can morph into more serious mental health disorders. The CDC recognizes one of the easiest ways to combat anxiety, which leads to other behaviors, is to for families to eat dinner together at night.

With respect to parents who do not know how to cook, there is little excuse in today's technology world. Recipes can be Googled in an instant, and Pinterest is filled with ideas. There are slow cookers, Instant Pots, and rice cookers available to make the job easier. Home cooking is cheaper and healthier and more enjoyable to families than going through a drive-through or opening curbside pickup containers. Churches looking for an opportunity to minister to families need look no further than offering family friendly cooking classes.

Church attendance as a family is another strong determinant of outcomes. This does not mean that children will have no moral failings, no stress, and no challenges to contend with. There is strong evidence to the contrary, despite religious upbringing, there will be struggles. However, the youth and their parents will have tools with which to cope with the challenges of growing up in today's youth culture. Those who attend evangelical churches put their hope in the sure and firm foundation of Christ and learn Biblical principles that will carry them into adulthood.

As with other lifestyle value differences between generations, so it is with Millennials and their view on church attendance. They see little reason to attend organized church, particularly if their previous experiences have not been stellar. Moreover, younger Gen X and Millennial parents are not as much disillusioned as they are apathetic to the importance of church attendance. Sunday games, family daytrips, and using the day to 'relax' are all reasons given by those who typically only attend church on a monthly basis. Opportunity exists for church leaders to bring well-meaning parents together and highlight statistical benefits of attending church as a family, with the bonus information of improving the odds exponentially if the family serves at the church together, volunteering once or twice a month.

## **Conclusion**

In a world riddled with bullying, school violence, domestic situations, and unsafe neighborhoods; youth are hungry to fit in, to find emotional fulfillment, and will engage in any behavior that will temporarily dull the pain of their lives. Pastors and youth leaders must be educated and knowledgeable of the trends and challenges; that they may equip parents to be the front line, first responders in the day to day crisis' and challenges youth face.

There is a place for the leadership of the church to counsel youth, but ultimately, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the parents. It is the parent who needs to learn what the pitfalls are and how to respond to any number of unwise choices their child may make.

There are many variables within the structure of today's families. Socio-economic factors contain dozens of variables, as does the composition of the household. The type of religion followed, the school of choice, the experiences a youth has had, the personality type, and aptitudes all are factors, and within each factor are hundreds of variables. In fact, there are no two situations exactly alike. With so many variables, the question remains as to whether or not there is a primary determinant that projects the likelihood of a positive outcome.

The single most important factor in determining a positive outcome in youth trends is having parents who are available and aware of, and involved in every facet of their lives. Facets include the faith taught at home, church attendance, education, being present on and off school grounds, involvement with friends and parents of friends, talking about cultural trends, and pointed



awareness and monitoring of media consumption and the sites accessed by kids at varying ages and stages. A parent being attuned to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the child is critical.

Vigilance and intentional parenting will not guarantee a child will have no moral failings, but will minimize the type and extent of involvement in detrimental activities and will improve the likelihood the child will not *succumb* to trends in today's youth culture.

### **Future Work**

I am called to research, teach, and equip. Earning my doctorate does not mean that I'm done my quest to stay on the cutting edge of youth and family culture and trends. Rather, it propels me forward in my thirst for life-long learning; doing the work pastors, church leaders, and parents often do not have time to do for themselves. My intent is to research, synthesize, publish and present information and findings in an easy to read manner that allows others to stay aware of trends and dangers that continue to challenge the ability of parents and youth to veer clear of the societal landmines designed to steal, kill, and destroy futures and destinies.

One possible pilot study would be to specifically survey parents living in other geographic areas of the country using my questionnaire; as the majority of my pilot study respondents live in New England. It would be interesting to compare responses region to region.

It would also be of value to confidentially survey both the parents and the children of the parents, with the child survey being done similar to done in school, for the CDC and Dept. Of Education. In doing so, the parent's knowledge of behaviors youth engage in could be measured against the youth's admission of reality; such as media consumption, substance use, and morality issues. The benefit to the findings would be to illustrate to parents the need to stay connected and vigilant, lest they be deceived into thinking national statistics merely refer to other families, and not their own.

The purpose of my service is to build strong healthy families, who have deep relationships with each other and their Creator God; because of which they will withstand the schemes of the enemy who lives for the sole purpose to steal, kill and destroy. (John 10:10<sup>156</sup> "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*")

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/parenting-challenges/bullying/how-to-deal-with-bullying>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.addictioncenter.com/teenage-drug-abuse/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://recapp.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.StatisticsDetail&PageID=555>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-q-and-a/for-teens/teen-sees-nothing-wrong-with-premarital-sex>

<sup>5</sup> <http://thelivingwellnetwork.org/christians-and-suicide>

<sup>6</sup> <http://suicide.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.johnshopkinshealthreview.com/issues/fall-winter-2017/articles/the-rise-of-teen-depression>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.prb.org/traditional-families-account-for-only-7-percent-of-u-s-households/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/parenting-challenges/bullying/how-to-deal-with-bullying>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.addictioncenter.com/teenage-drug-abuse/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://recapp.etr.org/recapp/index.cfm?fuseaction=pages.StatisticsDetail&PageID=555>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-q-and-a/for-teens/teen-sees-nothing-wrong-with-premarital-sex>

<sup>14</sup> <http://thelivingwellnetwork.org/christians-and-suicide>

<sup>15</sup> <http://suicide.org/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Return-Eden-Exposing-Destroying-Family/dp/1933204443/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ajr=0&keywords=return+to+eden+exposing+the+lies+that+are+destroying+the+family&qid=1563843119&s=digital-text&sr=1-1-catcorr](https://www.amazon.com/Return-Eden-Exposing-Destroying-Family/dp/1933204443/ref=sr_1_1?ajr=0&keywords=return+to+eden+exposing+the+lies+that+are+destroying+the+family&qid=1563843119&s=digital-text&sr=1-1-catcorr)

- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?q=Deuteronomy+5&ver=nkjv>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?q=Deuteronomy+6&ver=nkjv>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Proverbs+22%3A6&version=NKJV>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/steven.rocco.10>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/bible-verses-about-bullying/>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/5-11.html>
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/topics/ten-commandments-list>
- <sup>24</sup> <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/126/3/576>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/PSA.139.14.ESV>
- <sup>26</sup> <http://www.ajourneytothepottershouse.com/about-a-journey-to-the-potters-house#bio>
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- <sup>28</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+12%3A36-37&version=NIV>
- <sup>29</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/suicide-rates-are-rising-among-young-girls-study-finds-n1006911>
- <sup>30</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+5%3A13&version=NIV>
- <sup>31</sup> [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.retropixel.CallSanta&hl=en\\_US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.retropixel.CallSanta&hl=en_US)
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