



UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S YOUTH

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YOUTH UNLIMITED: 50 Gervais Dr., Suite 302 | Toronto | ON | M3C 1Z3 | Tel: 416-383-1477 | Fax: 416-383-1447

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CULTURE QUOTES

“Too many modern parents have made the mistake of idealizing their children instead of truly loving them.”

The Narcissism Epidemic
Jean M. Twenge

“The World Should Revolve Around Me.”

Music Video
Little Jackie

It's All About ME

In a culture as obsessed as ours is with celebrity and appearance, it is hard to believe there actually was a time when famous actors and singers hid their flaws for fear of being ostracized by Hollywood.

Those were the days when everyone from Marilyn Monroe to Rock Hudson kept their dirty little secrets under wraps. Today your notoriety is enhanced and contracts sweetened when all your worst behaviours hit the news.

Starting with this significant shift in celebrity ethics, Dr. Drew Pinsky sets the framework for *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism is Seducing America*. After drawing on an almost too long a list of celebrities gone wrong, Pinsky does a good job of developing the genesis of narcissism as we understand it today. It is interesting to see his contrast between egotism, the preoccupation with oneself and narcissism marked by a disconnection with self exhibited in chronic feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and self-loathing. The true narcissist tries to cover up these traits by fuelling their own sense of self-importance in a variety of public ways.

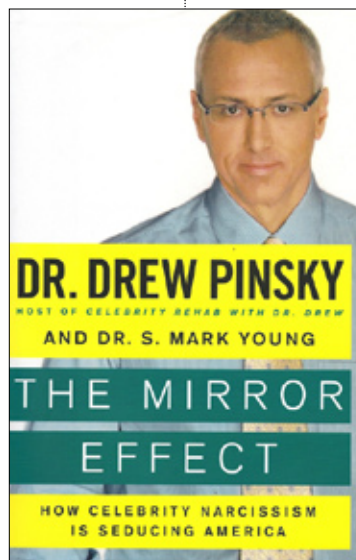
All of this has significant implications for our young people. As Dr. Drew points out, “Teens, tweens, and young adults are biologically, environmentally, and culturally predisposed to desire what celebrity promises: wealth, special privileges, and unlimited attention.” The danger comes when young people who are already prone to imitation, engage in often dangerous and risky behaviours put on display by their media heroes.

What we need to realize is that celebrity isn't necessarily associated with talent or performance.

Today, being famous seems like a game anyone can play, especially the younger generation. Parents don't understand that while youthful experimentation can be normal, it can quickly spill into more problematic behaviours such as Internet addictions which lead to meeting strangers (who adore you, of course) in person. Signs of problems can be expressed through obsession with body, sexual acting out, volatile anger, or excessive drinking or drug use. Pinsky points out, “Unfortunately, it is precisely those behaviours that were highly valued by parents in the sixties and seventies and now glamorized by TV and magazines today.”

The book also includes a great chapter on parenting to prevent narcissism. Today's parents, themselves bombarded with messages encouraging attention seeking, must take constructive steps to arrest narcissistic tendencies in their kids. It's nice to see a book which is full of unsettling facts and issues on this cultural extreme, end with some hope and direction.

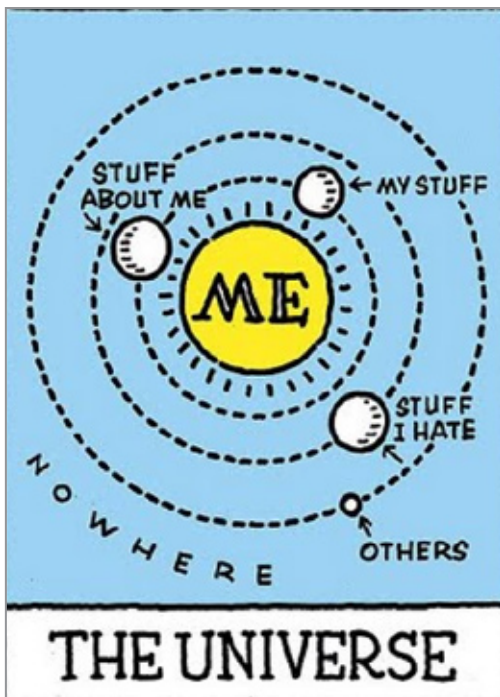
In this issue of *Understanding Today's Youth*, Youth Unlimited will take you into today's youth culture to show how such narcissistic messages are affecting our young people. Even the youngest are not spared. From print media to radio to television to Twitter, the message is always the same, “It's all about ME.”



A Generation Who Adore Themselves

International speaker and apologist Ravi Zacharias recently told Youth Unlimited that young people and media can no longer be separated from each other. In essence, they and the media have become one. Screen time has become the new past time. Every young person in Canada will be touched in some way by media today. Some are addicted to Facebook, Twitter, and TV. Teenagers in Canada spend almost 49 hours per week using various forms of media.

There is no doubt that the variety of messages emanating from their technology shapes their values, beliefs, and worldviews. The most dangerous and disturbing message of all can be summed up in four words – **It's All About Me**. Walt Mueller, President of the Center for Parent Youth Understanding in Pennsylvania says, "The most alarming cultural trend affecting today's teenagers in negative ways is the growing love affair they have with the 'holy trinity' of Me, Myself, and I." The heart of the problem is a self-absorption which makes them and them alone, the center of the cosmos.



A lot of this is being fuelled by what Dr. Pinsky calls "celebrity narcissism." It is the basic message that anyone can become famous and that includes you. Pinsky defines it as the process by which provocative, shocking, and otherwise troubling behaviour, which has become normalized, expected, and tolerated in our media culture, is increasingly reflected in our own behaviour, and especially in the lives of our young

people. Perhaps even more disturbing is the assumption that to be narcissistic, vain, egotistic, selfish, conceited, and self-important is perfectly normal in today's culture.

Knowing how kids think, marketers cash in on their deep need to be noticed and catered to. A current television ad for a website called www.myeducation.me features students talking only about themselves and how they deserve the very best in higher education because after all, it's all about them. This attitude is reflected in the answer given by 19 year old Melissa from Brampton, Ontario when asked what the main difference is between her generation and her parents: "We're spoiled."

Let's take a closer look at how this process works itself out in today's youth culture. For the tween crowd, you need look no further than Hannah Montana. The show attracts nearly seven million viewers per episode and is the top rated cable show for the 6-14 age group. It nurtures the idea that every little girl (and perhaps some little boys as well) can become instant pop stars and be the centre of everyone's attention. What little girl wouldn't want that? Some girls when interviewed about their love for the show even talk in the first person as if they are Hannah Montana. The life style portrayed in the show, although squeaky clean, is one of narcissism.

For millions of teenagers, their narcissistic fix comes through scripted reality shows such as The Hills and The OC. The lives of these on-screen teens reflect the kind of sex and alcohol excitement that many young viewers long for. Life today is meant to be stimulating and risqué. Everyone wants to be admired and sought after regardless of the personal cost involved. Teens strive to live a life that makes them the most important and noticed person in the world.

What used to be called "men's" magazines is now the common fodder for many a teen lad. Whether its GQ, Details, FHM, or Maxim, the message to our boys is simply this – it's all

about sex so you better look good. If you want to be noticed (which means sexually), you need the right combination of sexy moves, vitamin supplements, and knowledge of the opposite sex. Eating disorders which used to be the sole domain of girls is now a growing problem for young boys who seek to look and be the kind of men they see in these magazines. No one wants to be a loser. Everyone wants to be a winner as defined by current culture norms – someone that others seek and admire.

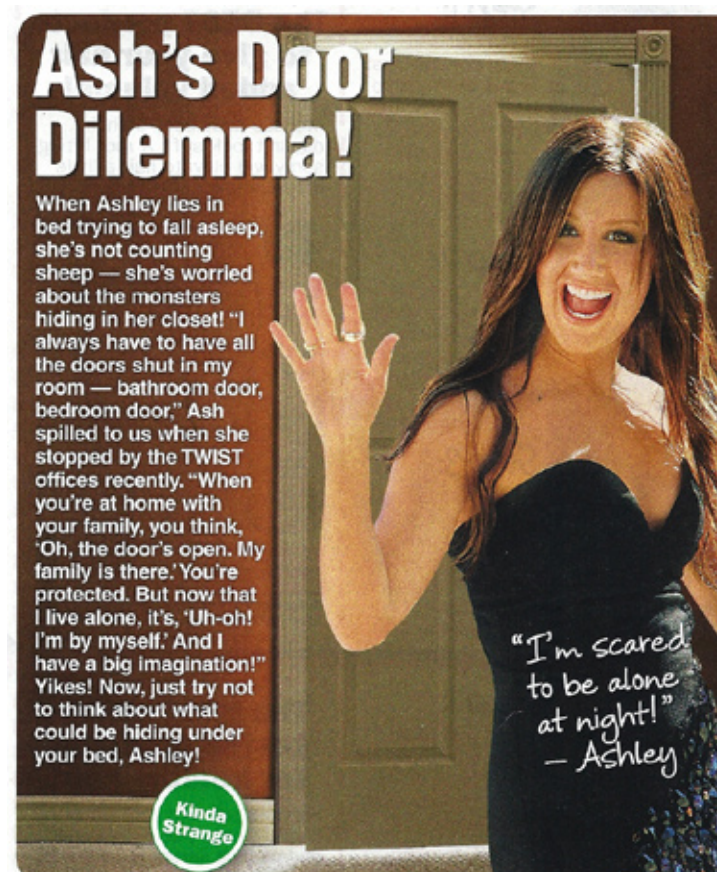
Pinsky calls this insatiable appetite to be like their celebrities "parasocial relationships". It is a voyeuristic, one-way relationship in which our kids know a lot about their favourite celebrity but the celeb has little or no knowledge of the other admiring person. Perhaps it would better be called a *parasitic* relationship where our kids feed off a constant barrage of celebrity information in an effort to become like the people they hold in such high esteem.

Parasocial relationships are really a non-relationship based on the illusion of interaction.



Their media laden world is filled with such delusion. In the accompanying article, Ashley Tisdale (Ash's Door Dilemma!) appears to personalize the story by adding a handwritten note, "I'm scared to be alone at night!" It is as if the personal touch is just for that one young reader alone. It appears the celeb really knows and cares about how the reader feels. Reality programming, talk shows, Twitter, and chat rooms that feature pop culture celebrities all nurture the fantasy that our kids are personally close with their heroes. Such is not the case.

Twist magazine targets girls 10-12 but is read by girls as young as 7. The front cover is always plastered with celebrity pictures to the point you can barely see the name of the magazine. This eye candy is hard for kids to resist. Such magazines encourage young readers to surrender themselves to their most highly narcissistic traits of materialism, fame, and imitation. Marketers rely on fans forming these strong psychological attachments to actors and not just the characters they portray on screen. The media fuels this illusion of personal intimacy with nonstop, unblinking coverage of the stars both on television and the Internet. The basic message is if you read enough, buy enough, and spend enough time with your celebs, you too can become famous.



As girls and guys move into their teen years, the magazine covers tend to focus on one celebrity per cover. Whether it's the latest hot actress for girls or top skate boarder, football player, or rock musician for the guys, it's their celebrity that brings the readers in. The same applies to television programming of all sorts for teenagers. Teen Vogue is a perfect example. Singer Selena Gomez graces the front cover along with a variety of headlines that focus on beauty and body issues. As with Twist, the teen magazines are read by a younger crowd where they are exposed to even more risqué reading and lifestyle suggestions.

By the time girls are 15 and 16 years of age, they are bored with Seventeen. They most commonly move on to read Cosmopolitan and Marie Claire. Sadly, Cosmopolitan is filled with

a vast array of sexual information while Marie Claire remains mainly about fashion and beautification. However, both consistently reinforce the message that the world revolves around you and that you better be the best you can if you want the attention. Both consistently feature a current teen idol on the cover to draw the young female reader.

Although this article has focused on the impact of magazines on our youth, all media heralds the same message of narcissism helping to create a generation of young people, both male and female, who care predominantly only about themselves. They are the first generation who feel entitled to everything. Marketers and corporations have stumbled over themselves to cater to their every wish and whim. The powers that drive pop culture know that tweens, teens, and young adults are biologically, environmentally, and culturally predisposed to desire what celebrity promises – wealth, special privileges, and unlimited attention. This has serious implications for all of us.



Responding to Generation Me

All of us were born with an innate self-interest that wants to take priority over the welfare of others. Parents, teachers, youth workers, pastors, and professionals are all finding it challenging to deal with a generation preoccupied with its own existence. Previous generations have always felt important but this is the first to have its ego massaged and manipulated by the media. The sense of entitlement has reached an all-time high.



One teacher talks about a student who strongly felt he was entitled to more than 60% on a test because, after all, he studied for four hours. Another student sees the library rules as something she is above and can't figure out why the supervising teacher won't give her a break. A parent laments that they never seem to be able to satisfy their child's need for "things." Another teenager says that all of her friends who don't have and don't want jobs, have parents who provide everything they need including cell phones and computers. She also admits this isn't healthy and fails to teach her generation how to be responsible.

Youth Unlimited would like to offer the following practical suggestions for responding to our young people.

First, it's easy to look at this younger generation and find fault. As adults, we need to remember that we too are vulnerable to the mixed messages of celebrity. We should be the first to examine the importance of material things and power in our lives. Do we set an example of one who can't live without them or one who is content with the simple things of life? We need to model a life that functions perfectly well without all the trappings the world says we need to have.

Second, adults in authority over young people, whether parents, pastors, or teachers, need to set appropriate boundaries for kids. There needs to be a clear line between the role of an adult and that of the young person. Kids don't need adults to be their best friend. Adults are there to set limits and teach children that life is most rewarding and fulfilling when lived within healthy guidelines that don't cater to narcissistic tendencies.

Third, parents need to establish clear household values. Dr. Pinsky points out that we need to teach the value of relationships as well as accomplishments. Parents need to share moral, spiritual, and emotional values and how they contribute to health and happiness. Retail therapy doesn't solve every problem or challenge.

Fourth, use celebrity stories to teach lessons. Teach what positive character traits to look for and what types of behaviour will only end in an unhealthy way. Use the celebrity scandals to teach the importance of living a life of truth and integrity. Don't be afraid to explain to your kids why such behaviours are inappropriate giving special attention to future consequences – a concept most kids really struggle with.

Fifth, help young people to discover their real self and not the one celebrity narcissism says they should have. Allow your child to discover and develop their passion by exposing them to a wide variety of life experiences and people. Allow them to face their own challenges (don't always rescue them) by being supportive when they struggle. Some of the best lessons of life are learned in tough times. Too many parents do a great disservice to their kids by not letting them take responsibility for their choices.

Sixth, don't over praise your children. There is a sad tendency in our culture to offer over exuberant or inflated praise. The truth is that not everyone does well and that's OK. Encourage and uplift when applicable and necessary.

Finally, when asked how to counter this trend toward narcissism in our youth culture, Ravi Zacharias' answer was simple. "We need to teach our kids to give their lives to others. We need to teach them how to take the focus off themselves in meaningful ways." Good advice for all of us.

"When we place ourselves and our interests at the center of the universe, there's nothing wrong with selfishly pursuing and accumulating as much as we can. Hammered by a marketing machine that exploits their youthful anxieties and aspirations, today's teenagers are being socialized into narcissism, and they are eagerly embracing materialism as a lifestyle."

Walt Mueller, President
Centre for Parent/Youth
Understanding



Paul Robertson is the Youth Culture Specialist and Director of Church and Family Resources for Youth Unlimited.

www.paulrobertson.ca