



Jeffrey Leiken, MA Newsletter

January 2009

How 21st Century Advances Create 21st Century Troubles For Youth

- What you should know and what you can do about it -



"Thinking that IMing, Email and Text messaging is having a real conversation is the same as thinking that "XO" at the end of a letter is a real hug and kiss."

-Kathryn Blythe

Dear Clients, Colleagues and Friends,

This newsletter is meant to offer you insights on the lives of modern youth, and specific things you can be doing to ensure they thrive in spite of the challenges they face. The particular focus is on how the unavoidable necessity for technology has changed the nature of the way they connect with one another, and the resulting instability and stress they suffer because of it. While what you read here is not descriptive of every modern teen, variations of this will effect all kids' lives... and it will get worse before it gets better.

In the coming months, in addition to more newsletters like this one, look for a revamped website from me with updated content, including some of the products people have been asking for from me for years.

Lastly, let me say that while advisors tell me I should keep these newsletters brief, I continue to stubbornly believe people still want the substance and provocative viewpoints. Thus I appreciate that you take the time and effort to read through this. I always appreciate the thoughts and comments you share in return, and find the exchange of ideas and questions, extremely valuable. I hope you find my input as useful as I find yours.

Best regards,
Jeffrey Leiken

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UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Maine Camp Association -
Portland, ME January 15

EMPOWERED Life For Teens,
London, UK
January 23-25

NACCHO Annual Conference,
Pheonix, AZ, February 6-7

ACA National Conference, Orlando,
February 17-19

After-School Professional Training,
Lincoln City, OR, February 28

Tri-State Camp Conference,
Atlantic City, March 18-19

Mid-States Camp Conference,
Chicago, March 26-27

Transitioning Teens To High School
and Beyond, MVMS, Mill Valley, CA
March 31st

National After School Conference,
New Orleans, April 1-2

Rotary Youth Leadership Association,
Chicago, Apri 11

From Human Relationships To Digital Relationships...



This article is not meant to be a political commentary, but rather to offer a perspective... Growing up in today's chaotic world means our kids face unique challenges that differ significantly, and often dramatically, from the ones most of us faced when we were their age.

That said, here are some thoughts about the state of the world... of youth, families and us.

First of all let me say that I hope this first newsletter of 2009 reaches you in good health and spirits, in spite of everything else going on. This is only "the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression" if you think of it from the 20th Century mindset that most of us have been trained to think from.

From a more future oriented mindset, this is the clash between the desperate clings-on of an old paradigm and the emergence of a new one, and as is always the case, the quicker we let go of the old, the quicker and more readily 'new' can emerge. 'The new' of course centers around the 21st century technological, globalized economy where the little person can compete with the biggest of the big for a fraction of the money, using an entirely different skill set that most of the old establishment hardly even know exists, and by maximizing the technology that continues to make quantum leaps each week.

The key to all of this is technology and its emergence as a primary necessity in our lives.

"Don't leave home without it"



I was commenting to one of my teen clients the other day how prior to a decade ago the only thing in my life besides my bed that I used every day was my car. Thus investing in keeping it running or buying a good one made sense and was essentially, well, essential.

Now the things I use every day are my car, my laptop and my cell phone - and my economic and personal life success hinges on all of them working, all the time. Can you remember the last time you left home without your phone or that your Internet went down or hard drive crashed, leaving you disconnected for some time?

Today's youth have never known a time when they didn't need the internet or their cell phone, and all that comes with this - both the good and the bad.

It also used to be that there were worries and concerns that belonged to grown-ups, while children were given a grace period of about 16 to 18 years to have the room and time to wake up, explore, create and connect, then another 4 or so years to learn to live independently and make decisions about what to be doing as they finally emerged on their own.

Friendships were formed through long countless days and nights of being together, doing things and doing nothing... but being together (most of us used to call it "hanging out"). The phone was a tool that until teen years was simply used to get permission from parents to go to a friend's house and even as teens, it was used as a way of talking and getting to know one another better.

My guess is every one reading this can recall the real and tangible experience of that first phone call after getting that someone special's phone number, or of the long talks on the phone late at night with friends who helped sort through problems and make us feel so not alone.



Many of today's youth do not know this experience. In fact, they don't know much at all about what it is or how it is to connect with others simply through just BEING together - and they are suffering immeasurably because of it.

Beginning with the scheduling of "play dates" when they are toddlers, modern youth live lives based on going places and doing activity. "Play dates" never existed when I was young, or at least certainly not where I grew up. What we had then, was going to each other's houses and playing in each other's yards and having each other's parents watching out for all of us - mostly unplanned, make it up as we go and it seemed at least, all of the time.

Now children plan activities and socialize around activities, and even the planning is in and of itself, an activity. Beyond the overly discussed phenomena of the over-scheduled youth and their soccer moms, is a reality that even their personal social lives are based on activity.

They, in essence, must be doing something to ensure they have anyone to be doing anything with.

Rare is the experience of friends just coming over and hanging-out with no plans.

Much more common is the scenario that plans that were made last week get changed the moment a text message comes in with news of an even more exciting thing they could be doing right now, where even more people are gathering and where more activity will be happening.

Nearly every teen I work with tells me stories of having been stood up, even overtly lied to, by so called "friends" who got a better opportunity at the last minute, and then chose that one over hanging out with them. I encourage you to show this email to your kids and ask them if what I say is valid. You may be surprised by how pervasive this phenomina has become.

Today's youth are essentially left with no option. It is either get in the game and play it too, or risk being left out and alone.

Playing the game requires - you guessed it - technology.

Text messaging, IMing and Facebook become critical possessions to ensure they have the tools to stay in the game. Not having them ensures they'll be at least one step behind, and often that step is the difference between being at a party with every one

else or spending a weekend alone.

They - like us in our professional lives - become tied to their phones and computers... these are the new "Don't leave home without it."

To make it even worse, even being somewhere requires having it with and on because news comes in so fast of somewhere even better to be that they can be left out if they don't answer the call.

Think: How many times have you been with one of the kids you work with and had them answer the phone while they are in the midst of a talk with you, or go against policy like at summer camp, and bring it so they can stay up to date with the kids at home - even kids they won't be seeing for a month? (I don't need to ask how many adults do it too.)

Thus connecting with others requires both being in possession of the essential tools that allow them to be informed, and being in constant contact with them. The thought of long periods of time without them terrifies them.

Also, rarely can their attention ever be fully on who they are with because one hand is always on the phone and/or wondering what they might be missing.

**It makes socializing exhausting. It makes relationships unstable.
It makes people unreliable.**

Welcome to your kids, 2009.

The internet of course allows them the ability to make or break other's social status, giving the otherwise "weakest link" access to the power that once belonged to the most popular.

The huge news stories of the harassing emails and youtube videos that destroyed reputations and in some cases, destroyed lives, are only the grand examples of the much more common, much more subtle stress and strain it places especially on teens.

"Refreshing the Facebook page" is something many of them do as often as we check email. It's the only way to keep up with "who's with who" and all the essential drama and gossip. It becomes an obsession and for some - perhaps a lot more than we yet realize - an addiction.

The reason you don't see the kids 'hanging out' over at your house anymore is because they don't 'hang out' anymore.

When your son or daughter complains about how hard it is to find real friends, it is because it is that hard to find real friends.

When they complain about how hard it is to find a girlfriend or boyfriend, it is because they don't approach relationships in the way they need to be approached for real feelings and real, full attractions and connections to form.

They live fast paced, thrill a minute lives that are unlimited in quantity, but limited implicitly in quality - and technology not only helps them do this, it conditions them to. I even go so far as to suggest the more they have of this, the further they get from truly finding the kind of true connection that will ultimately fulfill them and bring them

to a sense of contentment. That kind of connection requires time, patience, energy and most importantly BEING together... fully.

Even those kids who do not play the game at this pace, suffer because of how many do play at that pace.

It becomes harder and harder for these more 'old fashioned' kids to find kids they can connect with in ways that fulfill them. They wind up feeling lonesome and often become self-doubting, wondering what is wrong with them that they are not included when once they were. "I feel like I was born in the wrong generation, like I just don't belong here", one such 15 year old said to me last year.

The answer sadly is that nothing is wrong with him or all the others like him. It isn't something they are doing, it is what they are not doing. Thus this absurd pace of what has become youth socializing, becomes a Catch 22. It sucks for those who are playing it, and it sucks for those who don't.

I work with kids who are extremely socially active and popular, as well as with kids who are anything but... I hear it from all of them - including many of the ones whom others would never imagine feel this way because on the surface they "have it all".

But few people, not even you or I, are readily willing to turn their phones and email off long enough to really connect with others...a connection that comes through being together regardless of what we are doing.

So what do we do as parents and caregivers?

I can tell you what I have been doing in my practice with them and make comments on what I see working.



First though it is important to realize that the teens and young adults I work with do so because they want to work with me, because they have awakened to the fact that there must be more than what they have and they are seeking input and guidance in

getting it.

I am helping them to develop the courage, capacity and tools they need to truly thrive, even amidst the chaos and uncertainty of the modern world. Doing this effectively demands that I challenge them to look differently at the world around them, to consider different perspectives than that of the sub-culture they primarily live inside of, and by doing so, begin to learn things that aren't necessarily easy to learn or implement, or even pleasant to realize - but that are essential to freeing them to have the life they want.

To me this is about helping them mature into truly authentic, morally responsibly, passionate adults - and that growth requires experience and learning.

By teaching them to slow down and live a considered life, in many ways, I am training them to be counter-culture.

This to me is what it takes. In fact, every family I have met who has sustained a strong connection with their kids, or re-engaged one that had been lost, and in so

doing who have helped their kids to feel more settled and more connected, have done so by taking several unpopular stances:

· **Require the family to spend time together without electronic interference.** In many cases, this means setting aside time each week or month on a weekend to just be together as a family. It often includes having policies in the home that prohibit social networking and electronic entertainment until after a certain hour at night or limit it to only on weekends. While kids initially complain, they very quickly rediscover (or discover for the first time) things they can do that allow them to access aspects of themselves that are critical to nourish for their own happiness, including doing nothing!

· **Eat dinner together 5x a week minimum and when you do, require everyone to turn off their phones and TV.** Research has shown that families who do this, raise happier, healthier, more successful kids. Incidentally, doing it only 3 times per week has virtually no value.

· **Make the experience for other kids who visit your home, one where they feel comfortable being with you.** Most of today's youth do not know how to carry on a conversation with one another, let alone an adult. (Just look at their code language in IMing and the depth of their chat's). By being the rare kind of adult whom kids can really converse with, you'll not only be modeling for them how to connect with people, you'll also be making them much more likely to listen to your opinions. (** I did a program in Mexico City last year that was specifically about how to be this kind of adult for kids. It was marketed to professionals in the field but just as many parents showed up and most of the professionals admitted they were there as much to learn how to better connect with their own kids, as they were those they work with. I was amazed at how many were willing to give up a weekend if it would indeed help them reconnect with their teens. It was a remarkable few days there, validated by the teens I brought in at the end to work with them. If you are interested in bringing this program to your community, we should definitely speak.*)

· **Point out to them historical evidence that reveals how real healthy and lasting friendships and relationships are formed.** In my practice, I encourage them to then have the kinds of conversations most people tend to avoid. I give them the context to make them more readily willing to do it, even when it is scary to do so. So when a 'friend' stands them up for something better, I get them to confront the person and coach them on how to convey the message, often times the exact words they can use and how to respond to what the person says back. I know that the experience alone of doing this, matures them. Very often, it deepens their friendship too.

· **Engage them in discussions and participation in areas of their interest or passions that have nothing to do with video games or social drama.** While many parents tell me, "He only likes video games", rarely does it take me long to discover he also thinks about much more, or at least, when given the opportunity will chime in with opinions on issues the rest of us are talking about.

· **Be present, really.** Turn off your own technological devices. Most kids are so used to their peers not really being there mentally when they are there physically. It is even worse when it happens with their parents, teachers, coaches, etc too. My experience is that most people spend most of their lives thinking about themselves and in recent years, just as much time checking their

messages. To be with someone who truly listens and pays attention is a rare occurrence. Make it a common one for the kids in your life. Again, not only are you feeding a need they have, but you are modeling for them the way they can one day be with others.

Technology is here to stay. There is no use fighting it and no use trying to live without it.

As with any new paradigm that emerges, the challenge is sustaining the true value(s) of the old paradigms while making room for the new.

Relationships and connecting can happen through technology that never would have happened before. Having met my wife through an on-line dating site I will be the first to vouch for the validity of the medium!

The site though was only the means of introduction. The romance and relationship evolved in person - beginning with a date that was planned at the end of a phone conversation, a conversation that was made possible by exchanging phone numbers through email - the second and last email we ever needed to send.

Let's teach our kids to get to the point of being together with others in person like that as well, and to let the technology be a tool to find connections, not the tool that runs their lives and keeps them from ever really truly having them

I hope you find this helpful.

Best regards,
Jeff Leiken

PS Next: "Hooking-Up": The new sexual revolution or a generational illness?

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