

Parenting/Popular Culture: Is This the Future of American Values?

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In researching my next parenting book, I came across several recent studies that I found truly disturbing. As you will see shortly, the results don't paint a pretty picture for the future of our children or our society as a whole. Even more damning is what it tells us about how parents are raising their children these days. Let's take a look at the findings.

One study analyzed the values expressed on the most popular television shows among so-called tweens (children ages 9-11) every decade from 1967 to 2007. Just so you can get a sense of how TV viewing has changed, here are the shows that were selected: 1967: Andy Griffith, The Lucy Show; 1977: Laverne and Shirley, Happy Days; 1986: Growing Pains, Alf; 1997: Sabrina the Teenage Witch, Boy Meets World; 2007: American Idol, Hannah Montana.

The results revealed little change in values presented on the shows between 1967 and 1997, during which time, the five most expressed values were Community Feeling, Benevolence, Image, Tradition, and Popularity (three out of the five would generally be considered healthy). The five least expressed values were Fame, Physical Fitness, Hedonism, Spiritualism, and Financial Success (three out of five would generally be considered unhealthy).

Only during the most recent decade did a dramatic shift in values occur. The new top-five values were Fame, Achievement, Popularity, Image, and Financial Success (with Self-Centered and Power close behind). Related values that also became more prominent included Ambition, Comparison to Others, Attention Seeking, Conceitedness, Glamour, and Materialism. The latest bottom-five values were Spiritualism, Tradition, Security, Conformity, and Benevolence (with Community Feeling to follow). I don't think the so-called values voters of today (or anyone else, for that matter) would have a hard time judging which would be considered healthy values and which wouldn't be.

An additional analysis of the data revealed a significant increase from 1997 to 2007 in the importance of fame to the main characters in the television shows. If you look at the popular tween shows today, for example, iCarly, they largely revolve around a young person pursuing fame and fortune, specifically through television, music, or fashion. I don't know about you, but just reading these findings makes me want to pack my wife and two young daughters in our car and live off the grid in northern Idaho.

Given that the values did not gradually shift during the decades studied, but rather changed abruptly in the last decade, the results can't be readily attributed to demographic patterns related to increased wealth or education. Instead, the most dramatic change, and the likely cause of these results in my view, is the rapid and all-

encompassing emergence of new technology, which has given popular culture new and startling reach and influence on children.

Programming that expresses these value messages to your children are growing by the year. Since the data from this study were collected, more television shows aimed at the tween audience are being produced, including *Glee*, *Big Time Rush*, *Victorious*, and *True Jackson*. In fact, seven out of the top ten shows aimed at tweens are about teenagers who have achieved fame with careers in entertainment. Additionally, video games, such as *Guitar Hero* (in which everyone can be a rock star), and web sites, including *Stardoll.com* (the motto of which is “fame, fashion and friends”), help create media “supersystems” that envelop children in unhealthy values.

Of course, you could argue, as the creator of several of these tween TV shows does, that all children want to be stars and that the producers of these media are just giving tweens what they want. But that would be like saying that America was clamoring for *American Idol* or iPods before they were introduced (not true, of course). Admittedly, America is screaming for them now, but the causal direction of this relationship is clear.

You might also contend that your children aren't paying attention to popular culture's value messages, much less internalizing them. Unfortunately, preliminary research indicates that children are getting the messages from popular culture. According to a new focus-group study by the same researchers, fame is now the number-one aspirational value among children nine to eleven years old. [Another survey](#) of children under ten years of age found that, among their ten favorite things, being famous, attractive, and rich topped the list and being fat topped the list of worst things.

So, what does this say about the values our children are learning? Well, nothing good, that's for sure. These distorted values are definitely not going to prepare them for life in adulthood where, for most of us, narcissism and aspirations of wealth and fame don't usually play well with reality.

And who's to blame? We can't blame children because they're the victims here. It would be easy to point the finger at the “entertainment-industrial complex,” but that would be like blaming sharks for killing their prey; it's simply what their DNA tells them to do. How about our government? Though some reasonable regulations of, for example, marketing to children on television, wouldn't seem unreasonable, even as someone with a decidedly left-leaning bent, I just don't believe it's the government's job to raise children. So, who's left? The parents, of course, who should be offering their children healthy values and perspectives that counterbalance the twisted values of popular culture.

Am I optimistic about future generations of our children (and for American society)? It all depends on whether parents are ready to step up and do what's best for their children. In other words, no, I'm not very optimistic.