



The Cultural Landscape: What Parents and Leaders Should Know About Purity Culture, Hook Up Culture, and Adolescence

In this article I want to discuss 3 cultural phenomena that are shaping the life of high school students. My hope is that no matter what boundaries you set for your student(s), you will be better equipped to have important conversations and develop deeper understanding and empathy for what it's like to be a high school student in this particular cultural landscape.

Rejection of Purity Culture

Many church leaders are re-thinking the approach to the formation of Christian sexual ethics. The 90's and early 2000's saw a boom in purity conferences, teaching youth group students about the risk of pregnancy and STDs, the promise of a great sex-life in marriage for people who remained abstinent, and virginity-pledge programs (though 80% of True Love Waits pledge-makers had broken that pledge by the end of college). Common in the experience of young people being formed in that church culture was a message of shame used as a motivational tool. The impetus for abstinence was often not rooted in God's good desires and the flourishing it brings, but in the guilt a person would feel later in marriage, or the lack of wholeness to offer their spouse down the road. Purity was portrayed by many as a thing to be lost that was not recoverable, sort of like tearing off the packaging of a valuable collectible and playing with it—forever diminishing it's worth. Purity was not based on the victory of Jesus, but on the success or failures of people. This environment in many evangelical churches came to be known as “purity culture”.

The kids in those youth groups have grown up now, and many have embraced theologically liberal sexual ethics or left the church entirely. But even those that have remained in orthodox churches have criticized the “purity culture” movement for the harmful ways it depicted victims of sexual abuse, the shame it placed on people who ‘went too far’ or fell into pornography use, and its lack of a theology of grace, healing, and restoration. Because of the fallout from that culture, many church leaders, myself included, prefer the language of sexual *integrity* rather than sexual *purity*, due to the negative connotations associated with purity language. But more than a shift in language, teaching about sexual ethics today requires a renewal of a good theology of the body, sexuality, and gender.

This means the way we communicate is really important! Leaders need to pay close attention to our motivational toolkit, our response to failure, and our vision for flourishing. The improvements in our understanding and de-stigmatizing of mental health mean that students are increasingly resistant to shame as a motivational tool (though simultaneously suffering from shame more than ever). Rather than using guilt and fear as the reasoning for buy-in to Christian sexual ethics, parents and leaders can adopt the gospel way of forming virtue in adolescents. The body isn't gross, sex isn't god, there is healing from porn and abuse and failure, and worthiness isn't rooted in our actions but God's. That's the message we carry.

Hook Up Culture 2.0

People have been “hooking up” forever, but hook up culture 1.0 began with the sexual revolution of the 1960’s. People were de-stigmatizing sex out of wedlock and normalizing the casual nature of sexual encounters. However, the movement morphed during the Millennial generation, and Gen Z is continuing the evolution. Hooking up is supposedly an act of courage, embodying the ideals of female empowerment, individual autonomy, and a renunciation of the body-shaming purportedly inherent in abstinence. I’m calling this hook up culture 2.0 because the movement has sort of ‘won’ the cultural momentum, while also taking a surprising turn.

The primary difference between Gen Z and their parents’ hook up culture: young people aren’t actually hooking up as much. Stats on ‘fornication’ (to use the old English) and teen pregnancy are down. While that may seem like a good thing, it doesn’t indicate a renewal of any Christian values. It’s far more indicative of the insecurity and mental health challenges of this generation, the increasing fantasy life associated with secular culture, and the depersonalized way adolescents communicate and connect. In short, while the values of hook up culture are more established, in practice it’s slightly in decline. Teenagers lack the social skills and the confidence to hook up and have far more fantasy outlets to explore and express sexual desire that mitigates the need for human interaction.

What this means is that parents need to talk to their kid not just about their kid’s romantic life, but about their fantasy life. 60% of students who view porn say they do it to learn about sex and fill in gaps in their sex education. If parents won’t talk with students about porn and won’t engage in honest and practical enough conversations about sex, students will educate themselves the same way they educate themselves on everything from baseball stats to calculus: the internet. And yes, parents need to initiate. When you do, don’t take your student’s ambivalence as a sign they aren’t interested in talking about sex or porn or dating with you. Remember, they have a deep fear of all things awkward, and they are obligated to think their parents are awkward too—it’s written in the young person’s code somewhere. Pay attention to timing, but be persistent, vulnerable, and remember that shame is an enemy, not a tool of formation.

Extended Adolescence

Adolescence hasn’t always been around. The term was coined in 1904 when G. Stanley Hall observed that there seemed to be developing in culture a time period of delay, where young people were not quite kids anymore, but neither were they adults. Adolescence used to be a short window of time—maybe 13-18. But since we’ve started observing it, it’s been changing. Now, it is starting earlier and ending much later, something more like 11-26, perhaps. It’s easier to identify when adolescence begins than when it ends. Adolescence begins biologically with puberty, psychologically with conscious identity formation, and socially with increasing independence from family. Adolescence ends when the brain reaches developmental maturity, identity stabilizes, and certain societal markers of economic and social independence are met. Because people are getting married later, having kids later, making career choices later, extending education, and being supported by parents longer, adolescence is stalling. Part of the problem this creates is that society is structured in such a way that primary support structures end at 18, even though young people still have a lot more growing up to do. As a result, we get the era of wandering that often characterizes young adulthood.

However, it's not just that priorities of adulthood are changing and being delayed, but that on account of technological access, the exposure to cultural conversations and influences about sexuality and gender is reaching adolescents sooner. So, Fuller Youth Institute says of this generation, "18 is the new 28; 28 is the new 18." Here's how parents and leaders can help students during this shift in adolescent culture.

First, the sooner you can have conversations about sexuality, porn, dating, and gender—the better. By the time a kid is in middle school, many of their friends will already have been exposed to pornography, and many will be awkwardly navigating their first crushes. Beat them to the punch.

Secondly, immaturity lingers. Use the high school years to focus on basics of communication and connection. We can no longer assume that students are developing that during high school. They won't 'grow up' until after college unless they receive intentional help from parents. Students expect parents and older people to look down on them, critique them, and complain about them, particularly for their phone addictions. Patiently and without the stereotypical roll-of-the-eyes help your students practice values like eye-contact, being present in a conversation, listening and asking questions rather than interrupting into conversation, and having the courage to have difficult conversations in person rather than safely behind a screen. You may find that your child's relationships are not as physically serious (this is a trend, not a universal truth), but that they are talking more than ever, and thus feel a greater emotional seriousness, and with added boldness to be romantic over text and apps. Relationships have the potential for added seriousness in high school.

Lastly, give space for stress. Your kids aren't just being dramatic (though no doubt there is certainly some melodrama). The mental health crisis is upon us, and kids are facing depression, anxiety, and stress more than ever. The perceptions through Instagram influencers and YouTubers can make students feel the standards of beauty and achievement are impossibly high. Kids aren't just comparing themselves to the prettiest girl in school or the captain of the football team anymore; they're comparing themselves to the 100 different teenage icons living their dream life (it seems) for the world to see and follow along online. We need more people who embody a non-anxious presence. Let's be a refuge, not a pressure-cooker.

More Resources

- fightthenewdrug.org
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>
- *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs, and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (a Barna report)
- DriveTime, a podcast on talking with kids about sexuality by Project Six19
- Theology in the Raw episode #754 on Sex, Youth Culture, and Purity Culture
- *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age* (a Barna report)
- *The Gospel and Pornography*, from the Gospel for Life series edited by Russell Moore and Andrew T. Walker
- *Growing With: Every Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers and Young Adults Thrive in Their Faith, Family, and Future* by Kara Powell and Steven Argue