

SEXUAL INTEGRITY INITIATIVE

A resource of CPYU and Project Six19



HOOK-UP CULTURE: WHY TODAY'S CHILDREN AND TEENS ARE INCREASINGLY SEXUALLY ACTIVE

| By Dr. Walt Mueller

Brady and Katie were high school sophomores when they met at a party.

Before the night was over, they “hooked up,” finding an empty bedroom, closing the door, and engaging in sexual intercourse. These two teens, who hadn’t even known each other four hours before, shared themselves with each other on the most physically and emotionally intimate level humanly possible. And if their situation played itself out like thousands of others would that same night, they might never see each other again.

Brady and Katie, along with the rest of our society’s sexually active teens, made the decision to engage in casual, spontaneous premarital sex for a variety of reasons. When these reasons combine, they create a powerful and convincing mix, making it expected and even “normal” for our kids to “hook up” more easily, and with greater frequency and variety, than ever before.

REASON #1: Our hypersexual culture says, “The choice is yours!”

Sex is everywhere – we can’t seem to get away from it. It’s been that way for a long, long, time. Overtwenty years ago, an editorial in *Spin* magazine described sex this way: “Sex is. . . an instinct – timeless, immortal, indiminishable, and apolitical. It is the most powerful force known in the universe. . . . It is also the very source of all human life, the reason we’re here, hurling ourselves vainly against its infinite power.”¹ That way of thinking has now become normalized, with sex being reduced to a bodily desire that can and should be satisfied without borders or boundaries.

The Creator and Gifter of sex and sexuality made sex to be a good thing to be experienced and indulged between one man and one woman within the context of a committed, covenantal, monogamous marriage. In addition, He made us for sex. In other words, the good desire for sexual intimacy is woven in and through the fabric of our being. Now, however, rather than sex being a good gift *from* God to be indulged in God’s way to the glory of God, Sex



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has become *a* god – perhaps *the* god for many people – and this reality is evidenced in the beliefs and behaviors of people, young and old alike. Increasingly, the collective message coming from every corner of culture (media, marketing, family, peer group, etc.) is this, “When it comes to sex and sexuality, go ahead and do *whatever* you want, with *whomever* you want, *wherever* you want, *however* you want, *whenever* you want. The choice is yours.”

This “the choice is yours” message is being shouted at our kids by a variety of different voices that are loud, consistent, and convincing. Back in 2006 – long before the presence and widespread use of smartphones by children and teens - Researchers Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson recognized that there was an rapidly unfolding “cultural challenge.” They wrote, “Teenagers today grow up in a world that bears little resemblance to the world their parents grew up in. Almost from the cradle, today’s young people are bombarded with sexual come-ons and appeals. By the time they reach their teens, they have absorbed messages about sex from the streets, the Internet and the entertainment media. . . . Because of the early exposure to a hypersexualized culture, teens are likely to get their first lessons about sex from the streets, the Internet and their peers long before they get information about sex and related topics from their teachers or even their parents.”² Now just nine years later, imagine what 24/7 access to a ramped-up hypersexualized culture is doing to our kids.

The collective voice of our culture is educating and calling our kids to participate in sexual behavior of all types. Consequently, the pervasive belief about sexuality is this: “I’m a kid. Sex, hooking up, friends with benefits, sexting, oral sex, anal sex. . . that’s what kids do.”

REASON #2: Kids are craving intimacy and love.

I’ve never conducted any research studies on teens who are promiscuous. But I have made an effort to spend a little extra time with them in order to figure out why they choose to become sexually active. While I have learned that there are multiple reasons for their

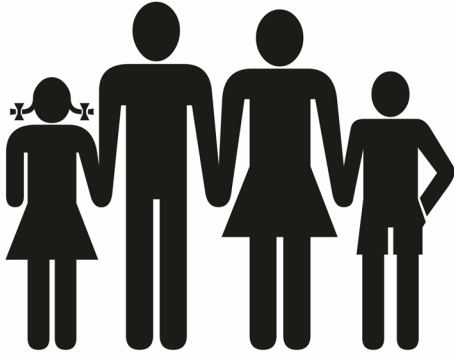
behavior, one thing I hear repeated over and over again, particularly from the girls, is the phrase “I just want to be loved.”

It’s easy for us parents to give time and attention to our children when they are little. After all, they start out totally dependent on us for everything they need. But as they grow older and enter the awkward and independent years of adolescence, we sometimes falsely assume that they don’t

want or need our time, attention, and expressions of love. But if they don’t get it from us, they will look for it somewhere else.

What does parental love and attention have to do with teen’s sexual choices and activities? Research has shown that teens will often use sex as a means to express and satisfy emotional and interpersonal needs that have little or nothing to do with sex. Sexual intercourse becomes a coping mechanism to deal with the absence of love and affection at home.³ One study of ninth graders sought to discover why young teens want or would want to engage in male-female sexual intercourse. Intimacy was the number one reason given, with respondents understanding intimacy as something that would make them “feel close” or “feel loved.”⁴ Chap Clark discovered in his conversations with teens that sexual activity oftentimes serves as “a temporary salve for the pain and loneliness resulting from abandonment.”⁵

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The weakening of the family unit over the last few decades has contributed to the sexuality crisis among children and teens. Studies show that “children with a stable family background had lower levels of premarital sexual intercourse and older age at first intercourse.”⁶ As might be expected, teens from single-parent families, particularly girls, are more likely to become involved in premarital sex at a young age.⁷

This growing obsession with sexual intimacy and longing for love can be seen in the changing content of girls’ diaries. Social historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg has extensively studied teenage girls’ diaries that have been written over the last 150 years. She found that girls used to write about their rich inner spiritual and intellectual lives. But in recent years, the pages have been overtaken by the quest for boys’ attention and by beauty and grooming. She says that adolescent girls today are “overwhelmed with insidious feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem as they obsess about boys and body.”⁸ In today’s world of online “diaries” that are open for the world to see, these issues and feelings sit front and center on many girls’ social media sites. I believe it is a longing for parental love and the weakening of the

family that has led many of our kids to feel bad about themselves, engage in sexual activity at a young age in the search for intimacy, and keep on engaging in multiple sexual encounters as the years go by. An alarming trend directly related to this adolescent hunger for love is the growing number of adolescent girls expressing the desire to get pregnant and have children, some as young as twelve years old. In addition, many teenage boys are deliberately trying to father children out of wedlock. One explanation for this trend is that these kids see a baby as someone who will give them the unconditional love they have been longing for.

REASON #3: Permissive parents

It doesn’t take a parent long to realize that in a “do anything” environment, children will choose to do anything. The most sexually active teenagers tend to be those who come from homes where parental rules and discipline are lacking or absent. In addition, these teens are considered to be at the greatest risk for pregnancy.

Parents who allow their daughters to date at a young age are contributing to the sexuality crisis.⁹ As the age of first dating experience increases, the percentage

having sex decreases in proportion. In addition, girls who had an early dating experience are more likely to go through the teen years having had older sexual partners, a greater number of sexual partners, and sexual intercourse on a more regular basis.¹⁰ A child who comes home to an empty house and is left unsupervised is more likely to participate in premarital sexual behavior.

All the evidence points to the fact that when parents exercise good judgment through providing clearly defined boundaries, supervision, and consistent discipline, their teens will be less likely to participate in irresponsible and inappropriate sexual behavior.

Sadly, there are also an increasing number of parents who believe that their kids are going to have sex no matter what they do or say, so in an effort to protect their kids from “harmful” or “dirty” sex, they encourage and allow them to have sex at home where it’s “safe,” “clean,” and where the necessary birth control is provided.

Permissive parents do harm to their children. Because our kids are not yet independent and fully-developed adults, a good portion of our parenting time must be spent providing boundaries that in effect, protect kids from themselves.

REASON #4: Peer influence

Teens overwhelmingly say that peer influence is the reason that they give in and have sex. Who wants to be left out when it seems like everyone else is doing it? While not *everyone* is doing it, sexual activity among teenagers is so commonplace that it has become “usual,” and “normal” in such a way as to leave the impression that most are.

Teenage girls say the pressure mostly comes from their sexual partners. This pressure kids feel to have sex is increased by phrases used during the vulnerable heat of the moment when a couple is alone: “Let me show you how much I love you” or “If you loved me you would do this.” Or, a guy will encourage sexting by saying, “Hey, how about sending me a naked picture of yourself?!” Teenage boys say that they feel the pressure from their male friends.

The pressure for both boys and girls is “elevated among youth who believed that they would gain their friends’ respect by having sex.”¹¹ That pressure is



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also increased by the perceptions a teen has regarding how many of his or her friends are sexually active, whether that perception is accurate or not.¹²

REASON #5: Hormones

"See that girl over there?" my youth worker friend asked. "She's only twelve." The girl looked like she was in her early twenties. As I looked around the room, I realized that dozens of young male adolescent eyes were filled with hormonally active wonder and awe as they stood staring at her. Could I blame them? After all, their emerging sexual identity and God-given sexual awareness was being put to the test.

When the beautiful God-given gift of sexual maturity begins to blossom, teens go through an exciting and confusing time. Many eleven, twelve, and thirteen-year-olds are physiologically capable of having intercourse. Some eleven and twelve-year-old girls can bear children, and active sperm cells are present in some boys of the same age. Both experience strong sexual urges and desires that they are tempted to satisfy. Couple that with a "the choice is yours" hypersexualized culture and you've got emotionally immature kids making some very impulsive and unwise choices. Many kids allow themselves to be controlled by their sexual thoughts and desires instead of responsibly understanding and managing their sexuality in a God-honoring manner.

REASON #6: Lack of information about sex

Some kids initiate premarital sex because they know all the facts about how to do it, but have had little or no parental guidance on what constitutes appropriate, God-glorifying sexual behaviors. Most teens want their parents to share sexual knowledge, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes with them. Yet only 15 percent say that their parents are a major source of this information.¹³ Parents

who take the time to teach their kids about sexuality and continue to talk about it guide their children into making good choices.

But the sad fact remains that most kids go elsewhere for their sexual know-how. Or, in today's world, their nonstop 24/7 engagement with media means that their sexual education comes right to them without ever having to look for it. Who knows how many kids become sexually active because they were never taught right and wrong regarding sexuality. Our parental silence gives them permission to do it.

REASON #7: Feelings of invulnerability

There are those teens who get all the correct information and biblical instruction and still choose to have sex. They've been told that guilt and heartache may follow. They know that God does not desire that they ruin sex by having it before marriage. They know all about the dangers of STDs, STIs, and pregnancy. But why do they go ahead and take the risk? Simply put, teens have a strong sense of idealistic and unrealistic invulnerability that leads them to reason, "Those things only happen to other people. They will never happen to me."

REASON #8: Feelings of vulnerability

Seth, fifteen, is honest about why he is sexually active. "There isn't a week that goes by that someone in my neighborhood doesn't get shot. I sometimes wonder if I'll live to see my twentieth birthday." With violence and death becoming more and more a part of life for America's teens, some of them have become preoccupied with two pursuits: survival and pleasure. They recklessly pursue pleasure during their teen years so that they don't die before experiencing all the good things that life has to offer.

REASON #9: I can't wait that long

For some teens, it's just too difficult to wait until marriage. Even those who early on commit to remain chaste until after they say "I do," are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain the commitment required to endure. It's a fact that over the past few decades, the median age for marriage has risen markedly. Back in 1970, the median age for marriage was 20.8 years-old for women, and 23.3 years-old for men. Forty-four years later in 2014, the median age had risen to 27 years-old for women and 29 years-old for men.¹⁴ "For young people who complete the four-year college degree, first marriage is likely to occur at even older ages. Therefore, those teens who are committed to waiting to have sex until marriage now have a much longer wait."¹⁵

REASON #10: Curiosity

Children and teenagers are very curious by nature. When they hear about something new and exciting, their curiosity often leads them to experiment so that they can experience that new and exciting thing for themselves. When 15 to 17-year-old teenagers who have had sex were asked to list what factors influenced their decision to have sex, the number one reason cited over and above all others was "curiosity."¹⁶ The pervasiveness of sexual messages and discussion in our hypersexual culture has turned up and fed the intensity level of our children and teens' curiosity.

REASON #11: Age aspiration

As a result of their research, marketers know that children and teens want to look, feel, and be seen as older than they really are. This tendency of kids to aspire to be older makes them susceptible to advertising pitches that promise to fulfill this desire. This is why advertisements always utilize models and actors who are actually a few years older than the audience being targeted with the product. This same phenomenon of age-aspiration

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feeds a culture of kids who begin to engage in sexual activity because they perceive that this activity is what older people do, and as a result, it will make them look and feel older themselves.

REASON #12: To strengthen relationships

Today's children and teens are painfully aware of the fallout from relational and family breakdown. After all, many of them are casualties of it themselves. In an effort to find some way to avoid experiencing any more brokenness, many kids believe the route of sexual intimacy will make their relationship stronger and less-prone to falling apart. Some girls go so far as to believe that if they would become pregnant, their male sexual partner would become more committed to them as a result of becoming a father. Seventy percent of 15-17 year-olds who have had sex say that one of their reasons for deciding to become sexually active is that they "hoped it would make the relationship closer."¹⁷

Our culture's growing bent towards violence and boundary-free sexual experience has combined with a variety of other factors to create a growing sense of SEXUAL ENTITLEMENT that encourages sexual aggressors to do whatever is necessary to satisfy their sexual wants and desires.

REASON #13: Coercion

Our culture's growing bent towards violence and boundary-free sexual experience has combined with a variety of other factors to create a growing sense of sexual entitlement that encourages sexual aggressors to do whatever is necessary to satisfy their sexual wants and desires. Over 7 percent of all high school students have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to.¹⁸ The prevalence is higher among female teenagers (10.5 percent) than among male teenagers (4.2%).¹⁹ Assuming that some coerced or forced sex goes unreported, it's reasonable to assume

that these numbers are low. The coercion can be physical and/or verbal, as kids work hard to convince each other that this is the thing to do. This explains why younger teens are the ones most frequently reporting that their first experience of sexual intercourse was nonvoluntary or unwanted. It comes as no surprise that teenagers who report their first sexual experience was unwanted "are more likely than others to report that their first partner had been three or more years their senior."²⁰

REASON #14: It feels good

When God gifted humanity with sexuality, He intended for it to be pleasurable. Our "feel good at all costs" and "avoid pain" culture allows sexual pleasure to be pursued outside of marriage without any limitations or boundaries. Our kids are just like the rest of us. They desire to engage in experiences that are pleasurable. The reality of the pleasure of sex has combined with our cultural values in a mix that encourages kids to selfishly pursue sexual pleasure.

Take all these voices and reasons together and think about them for a minute. Imagine what it must be like to hear and feel all of these things while growing and developing through adolescence. This is why it's so easy for our children and teens to choose to become sexually active.

**This article is adapted from Walt Mueller's book, Youth Culture 101.*

See endnotes on next page.

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³Sharon D. White and Richard R. DeBlassie, "Adolescent Sexual Behavior," *Adolescence* 27, no. 105 (spring 1992): 189.

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⁶Guy L. Dorius, Tim B. Heaton, and Patrick Steffen, "Adolescent Life Events and Their Association with the Onset of Sexual Intercourse," *Youth & Society* 25, no. 1, (September 1993): 3ff.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸"Dear Diary," *Psychology Today*, May/June 1992, 18.

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¹³D. White and Richard R. DeBlassie, "Adolescent Sexual Behavior," 184.

¹⁴U.S. Census Bureau table MS-2. (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/marital.html>).

¹⁵Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and Marline Pearson, "Making A Love Connection," 14.

¹⁶"Virginity and the First Time: A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex," 2003, *The Kaiser Family Foundation Page*, www.kff.org, (26 June 2006).

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸"Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 2013."

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Barbara VanOss Marin, Douglas B. Kirby, Esther S. Hudes, Karin K. Coyle, and Cynthia A. Gomez, "Boyfriends, Girlfriends and Teenagers Risk of Sexual Involvement," *Perspectives on Reproductive and Sexual Health*, Vol. 1, No. 2, June 2006, 77.



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