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How Well Do You Know Your Kid?

Before You Read

Focus Question

What problems do today's teenagers face?

Background

"How Well Do You Know Your Kid?" first appeared in the May 10, 1999, issue of *Newsweek*. The popular newsmagazine contains articles on current events, trends, and issues.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to the article, what is the most troubling issue that teenagers face? What are some of the causes of the problem?

2. In your opinion, is it a contradiction for teenagers to say that they want privacy yet crave their parents' attention at the same time? Explain.

3. Do you think that cliques and other peer groups fill a useful role in a teenager's life? Why or why not?

4. According to the article, why do parents find it so difficult to get along with their teenagers? What does the article advise parents to do? What do you think teenagers might do to improve their relationship with their parents?

5. **Making Connections** In your opinion, which character or characters in *The Pigman* would most benefit from reading "How Well Do You Know Your Kid?" Why?

Learning for Life

With a small group of students, take an informal survey of teenagers at your school. Ask at least ten other students in your grade or class what issue most troubles teenagers today. Jot down the students' responses. Then tabulate the responses and report your findings to your class.

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BYLINE: By Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert; With Anne Underwood

HIGHLIGHT:

The new teen wave is bigger, richer, better educated and healthier than any other in history. But there's a dark side, and too many parents aren't doing their job.

BODY:

Jocks, preps, punks, Goths, geeks. They may sit at separate tables in the cafeteria, but they all belong to the same generation. There are now 31 million kids in the 12-to-19 age group, and demographers predict that there will be 35 million teens by 2010, a population bulge bigger than even the baby boom at its peak. In many ways, these teens are uniquely privileged. They've grown up in a period of sustained prosperity and haven't had to worry about the draft (as their fathers did) or cataclysmic global conflicts (as their grandparents did). Cable and the Internet have given them access to an almost infinite amount of information. Most expect to go to college, and girls, in particular, have unprecedented opportunities; they can dream of careers in everything from professional sports to politics, with plenty of female role models to follow. But this positive image of American adolescence in 1999 is a little like yearbook photos that depict every kid as happy and blemish-free. After the Littleton, Colo., tragedy, it's clear there's another dimension to this picture, and it's far more troubled. In survey after survey, many kids--even those on the honor roll--say they feel increasingly alone and alienated, unable to connect with their parents, teachers and sometimes even classmates. They're desperate for guidance, and when they don't get what they need at home or in school, they cling to cliques or immerse themselves in a universe out of their parents' reach, a world defined by computer games, TV and movies, where brutality is so common it has become mundane. The parents of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold have told friends they never dreamed their sons could kill. It's an extreme case, but it has made a lot of parents wonder: do we really know our kids?

Many teens say they feel overwhelmed by pressure and responsibilities. They are juggling part-time jobs and hours of homework every night; sometimes they're so exhausted that they're nearly asleep in early-morning classes. Half have lived through their parents' divorce. Sixty-three percent are in households where both parents work outside the home, and many look after younger siblings in the afternoon. Still others are home by themselves after school. That unwelcome solitude can extend well into the evening; mealtime for this generation too often begins with a forlorn touch of the microwave.

In fact, of all the issues that trouble adolescents, loneliness ranks at the top of the list. University of Chicago sociologist Barbara Schneider has been studying 7,000 teenagers for five years and has found they spend an average of 3 1/2 hours alone *every day*. Teenagers may claim they want privacy, but they also crave and need attention--and they're not getting it. Author Patricia Hersch profiled eight teens who live in an affluent area of northern Virginia for her 1998 book, *A Tribe Apart*. Every kid I talked to at length eventually came around to saying without my asking that they wished they had more adults in their lives, especially their parents, she says.

Loneliness creates an emotional vacuum that is filled by an intense peer culture, a critical buffer against kids' fear of isolation. Some of this bonding is normal and appropriate; in fact, studies have shown that the human need for acceptance is almost a biological drive, like hunger. It's especially intense in early adolescence, from about 12 to 14, a time of hyper self-consciousness, says David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University and author of *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*. They become very self-centered and spend a lot of time thinking about what others think of them, Elkind says. And when they think about what others are thinking, they make the error of thinking that everyone is thinking about *them*. Dressing alike is a refuge, a way of hiding in the group. When they're 3 and scared, they cling to a security blanket; at 16, they want body piercings or Abercrombie shirts.

If parents and other adults abdicate power, teenagers come up with their own rules. It's *Lord of the Flies* on a vast scale. Bullying has become so extreme and so common that many teens just accept it as part of high-school life in the '90s. Emory University psychologist Marshall Duke, an expert on children's friendships, recently asked 110 students in one of his classes if any of them had ever been threatened in high school. To his surprise, they all raised their hand. In the past, parents and teachers served as mediating forces in the classroom jungle. William Damon, director of the Stanford University Center for Adolescence, recalls writing a satirical essay when he was in high school about how he and his friends tormented a kid

they knew. Damon got an A for style and grammar, but the teacher took him aside and told him he should be ashamed of his behavior. That's what is supposed to happen, Damon says. People are supposed to say, 'Hey, kid, you've gone too far here'. Contrast that with reports from Littleton, where Columbine students described a film class nonchalantly viewing a murderous video created by Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. In 1999 this apparently was not remarkable behavior.

When they're isolated from parents, teens are also more vulnerable to serious emotional problems. Surveys of high-school students have indicated that one in four considers suicide each year, says Dr. David Fassler, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Burlington, Vt., and author of *Help Me, I'm Sad: Recognizing, Treating and Preventing Childhood and Adolescent Depression*. By the end of high school, many have actually tried to kill themselves. Often the parents or teachers don't realize it was a suicide attempt, he says. It can be something ambiguous like an overdose of nonprescription pills from the medicine cabinet or getting drunk and crashing the car with suicidal thoughts.

Even the best, most caring parents can't protect their teenagers from all these problems, but involved parents can make an enormous difference. Kids do listen. Teenage drug use (although still high) is slowly declining, and even teen pregnancy and birthrates are down slightly--largely because of improved education efforts, experts say. More teens are delaying sex, and those who are sexually active are more likely to use contraceptives than their counterparts a few years ago.

In the teenage years, the relationship between parents and children is constantly evolving as the kids edge toward independence. Early adolescence is a period of transition, when middle-school kids move from one teacher and one classroom to a different teacher for each subject. In puberty, they're moody and irritable. This is a time when parents and kids bicker a lot, says Laurence Steinberg, a psychology professor at Temple University and author of *You and Your Adolescent: A Parents' Guide to Ages 10 to 20*. Parents are caught by surprise, he says. They discover that the tricks they've used in raising their kids effectively during childhood stop working. He advises parents to try to understand what their kids are going through; things do get better. I have a 14-year-old son, Steinberg says, and when he moved out of the transition phase into middle adolescence, we saw a dramatic change. All of a sudden, he's our best friend again.

In middle adolescence, roughly the first three years of high school, teens are increasingly on their own. To a large degree, their lives revolve around school and their friends. They have a healthy sense of self, says Steinberg.

They begin to develop a unique sense of identity, as well as their own values and beliefs. The danger in this time would be to try to force them to be something you want them to be, rather than help them be who they are. Their relationships may change dramatically as their interests change; in Schneider's study, almost three quarters of the closest friends named by seniors weren't even mentioned during sophomore year.

Late adolescence is another transition, this time to leaving home altogether. Parents have to be able to let go, says Steinberg, and have faith and trust that they've done a good enough job as parents that their child can handle this stuff. Contrary to stereotypes, it isn't mothers who are most likely to mourn in the empty nest. They're often relieved to be free of some chores. But Steinberg says that fathers suffer from thoughts of missed chances.

That should be the ultimate lesson of tragedies like Littleton. Parents need to share what they really believe in, what they really think is important, says Stanford's Damon. These basic moral values are more important than math skills or SATs. Seize any opportunity to talk--in the car, over the breakfast table, watching TV. Parents have to work harder to get their points across. Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute, has studied teenagers' views of parents. One 16-year-old told us, 'I am proud of the fact that [my mother] deals with me even though I try to push her away. She's still there'. So pay attention now. The kids can't wait.

GRAPHIC: GRAPHIC: (charts/graphs/map) Peril and Promise: Teens by the Numbers (graphic omitted); PHOTO: Mixed bag: These Santa Monica teens form close friendships but adopt a hard demeanor. Says one: 'No one messes with you if they think you're tough.'; PHOTO: Images: 'Because I have long hair, everyone assumes I'm a drugged-out hippie,' says Illinois sophomore Brett Goldberg (with his parents). He says he's never done drugs.; PHOTO: More than 90 percent of 12th graders said it is 'easy' to get marijuana if they want it; PHOTO: Less than half of teens regularly date; PHOTO: Only 2 percent of teens said they don't watch TV in the course of a week

X. J. Kennedy

What We Might Be, What We Are

Before You Read

Focus Question

What qualities do you look for in a friend?

Background

X. J. Kennedy is as well known for his textbooks as he is for his poetry. The prize-winning poet taught college-level English classes for many years, and he has written a number of books about writing and literature. In his books and poems, Kennedy often uses humor to get his points across.

Responding to the Reading

1. Which lines of the poem describe what the two people might be? what they are?

2. List the comparisons that are made in lines 1–7. What do the comparisons have in common? What do they suggest about the speaker's relationship with the "you" in the poem?

3. In lines 13–15, to what does the speaker compare himself? To what does he compare the person to whom he is talking? What does the comparison suggest about the future of their relationship?

4. How do you think the speaker in the poem might answer the **Focus Question**? Why do you say so?

5. **Making Connections** Which characters overcome the greatest differences to make friends in *The Pigman*? Explain your answer.

Geography Connection

The poem refers to a Balinese goat. Use a globe or an atlas to locate the island of Bali. Then calculate the distance between Bali and New Jersey. How does this knowledge add to your understanding of the poem?