



# Kids These Days

In this issue of FOCUS, we are addressing testny's youth, the problems they taxe, how they think, and what matters to them.

Concerning these issues, we spoke directly to youth themselves, and is those who work with them on a faily hasts.

Earlier this summer, we assembled a group of experts on youth for a panel discussion. A teacher, a youth minister, a jevenile law enforcement officer and a social worker share their thoughts on youth in this equaling interview section.

Are kids today different from the kids of 20 years ago?

Pierose: From my point of view they're different. School used to be their only culture and it's just not that way anymore. The parents came to the school events. You knew the parents. You look at an old year-book and you'll see huge pep clubs. There were fewer distractions, so there was more emphasis on a school culture. Kids didn't work so much — that was a factor in making them belong to a school.

Lusk: Children are much more likely to be poor than they were 20 years ago. In fact, one in five American children lives below the poverty line. They are more likely to live with a single-parent family with one in four living in a single-parent home. Children are much more likely to give birth to children themselves. In fact, one-half million children are born each year to teen-age mothers. So I think children are very different today than they were just 20 years ago.

Dickson: I think too, that teen-agers today are growing up without a clear idea of absolutes in our society. I grew up in a family that was non-religious, non-Christian, yet my parents had some very strong morals and values and I had absolutes that I dealt with day in, day out. But as a youth pastor I deal with kids who are always talking

gray issues —"Is it OK to have sex before marriage?" Because it seems that the world is condoning it. So this lack of absolutes is creating a lot of confusion for kids today.

Baranco: What I'm seeing is a result of the lack of absolutes and a clear consensus across society concerning right and wrong. I'm seeing a whole lot more juveniles as the years go on who lack a sense of moral responsibility or civic accountability. They're not really concerned for society as a whole, they're concerned for themselves, and it's really a problem. Property rights and human rights are seemingly disregarded unless it refers to them personally. And that's a great concern for me.

## Q

### Do you think that the problems of today are worse than the problems that kids of 20 years ago faced?

Dickson: I think we live in a more violent society than we did 20 to 30 years ago. I have teen-agers that tell me that on Friday or Saturday nights they've been threatened with knives or guns. We don't have the violence that big cities have yet, but we are approaching that level with shootings, stabbings, violent acts of physical aggression—boys against girls, date rapes. If those were common 20 or 30 years ago, I was sure not aware of it. There is domestic violence that occurred 30 years ago that was not publicized or was swept under the carpet, but we're seeing so much more of that today, too.

Pierose: The availability of drugs and a much more materialistic society are big problems for kids. Kids think that they have to have things — cars, shoes, clothes and disposable income that lets them be free from their parents. There are many teen-agers who do not live with their parents. They live on their own, in apartments, they live with friends, they live in cars, in all kinds of situations that I didn't ever see anybody involved in 20 years ago.

**Baranco:** Kids today are forced to grow up a lot sooner and take on responsibilities for themselves. I think they're expected to do so by some parents. So even though they might be living under that roof, they come and go as they please and there really is no supervision or direction.



#### Do you think that TV has had an impact on this generation?

Lusk: I think that television fails to challenge the imagination or the intellect of children. It occupies too much of their time and as are sult they're not achieving in school at the same levels of the children of 20 years ago. Children spend 21 percent of their time watching television. They spend almost as much time watching television as in school. Television is symptomatic of the lack of rigor and challenge in our curricula and of our lack of commitment to expose children to something other than mass culture.

Dickson: It's not only television and music, but it's also video games, computers. It's kind of a one-way communication. Kids don't know how to communicate with each other or with their parents or peers. When they get into relationships later on, whether it's dating or marriage, we see the problems developing with a lack of communication, understanding how to talk, how to work through conflict. So we end up with these kids in relationships that disintegrate because they've never been challenged to grow, to become more imaginative, to be creative. It's disheartening.



#### What do you think kids are concerned about today?

Dickson: Materialism. "What feels good to me." We've produced a generation of kids that think pain is bad, when really pain can bring

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DENNIS DICKSON is the senior high youth pastor at Cole Community Churchin Boise, He's been working with youths for more than 20 years in Young Life, a ministry for high school students, and as a youth minister.

RICHARD BARANCO, a juvenile detective for the Boise Police Department, is assigned to Capital High as a school resource officer. He is also on the Boise Schools' Task Force for Crime and Violence and is the events security director for the BSU Pavilion. He attended BSU in 1977-78.

MARK LUSK is the chairman of the BSU social work department and a coordinator of the Mayor's Task Force on Youth. He has conducted extensive studies and research on underprivileged youths, juvenile crime and related problems. about change. And we treat painful situations with every substance that we have on our shelves. So kids grow up thinking pain is bad, therefore whatever I can have that makes me feel good or brings a level of success to my life, then those are the things I want to go after.

Pierose: The topic of the state proficiency exam this year was "what concerns you in the future." It's given to about 17,000 juniors in the state. There were a lot of people around the state, a lot of places like in northern Idaho — kids who'd watched their fathers working for timber industries or kids who said, "I'm probably not going to be able to do that." Kids whose parents were farmers were saying things like, "Idon't think I'm going to farm. I don't think that we're going to be able to hold this together." A teacher in Emmett told me once that it used to be really hard to try to talk to kids about how important it was to finish high school and maybe go on, because at that time, they could work in the plant in Emmett and earn much more than teachers did and they didn't

need to go to college. But in such a few years, that changed in that



Pat Pierose

community. Kids could see then that yes, it was important to be educated because things could change rapidly.

Lusk: I think it's important to accentuate the positive. Most children havegrown up in healthy families that are functional, that are economically onreasonably sound footing and they have conventional aspirations, goals and values. Children at high risk share the goals and aspirations that other youth and children share. They too want families, they want jobs, they want security.

Pierose: When the singer Kurt Cobain died, my students were annoyed and felt alienated. The media somehow can create this thing that all young people are despondent, angry and suicidal. If I believed that I wouldn't teach because being a teacher means you have to be an optimist. If I thought that were true, then there'd be no point in me going to work everyday.

With all of the fears and the pessimism that is real and also conjured up by the media, do you think that we have cheated our youth out of their childhood?

Dickson: Some children, yes, have been cheated out of their childhood and I think that

can happen in functional families as well as dysfunctional families. But I wonder if a bigger problem is that we have somehow prolonged adolescence, we have prolonged childhood. In ancient cultures there was a rite of passage that meant "now they are adults." But in our culture, we don't seem to have that. So we have kids growing up that may-be have been too involved in their childhood to the point where they don't grow up. I know of 25-year-old kids who are still out there trying to find themselves because they haven't discovered earlier what it means to be an adult.



Dennis Dickson

Do you think that kids are doing adult activities at an earlier age?

Lusk: Well, at least one adult activity in particular, and that is the onset of the first intercourse. In earlier history, we've regulated sexual conduct through the institution of marriage, and that institution is taking on new forms and dissolving in its significance, which is a great challenge for society. Society needs to find ways in which sexual expression can be brought within some kind of a regulatory social institution so that it involves commitment.

Baranco: Children are experimenting with tobacco and alcohol and other things in addition to sexual promiscuity, and they are more violent at a younger age. My experience as a law enforcement officer is that, through statistics, in 1983, 32 percent of juvenile violators were under the age of 15. In 1993, the percentage had risen to 40 percent under the age of 15. We're talking about criminal violations: theft, vandalism,

assault and battery. Those types of cases are occurring more among younger children than ever before in our society.

#### Do you think kids are more or less optimistic these days?

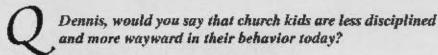
Dickson: I work with a lot of kids who are seekers in terms of some [spirituality] in their lives. Those who are seeking and have been able to place faith in Christ or in God seem to be more optimistic. Yet I've also seen students who call themselves Christians or who are involved in religious activities who in times of distress, in times of trouble and heartache, lack hope.

Baranco: When we see political pressures, environmental pressures, local concerns in crime and issues that are facing our country plus the traditional breakdowns, you can't help but think that all kids, even those of faith, are going to be challenged in the area of optimism.

#### What are some of the characteristics or activities of kids who seem to be more optimistic?

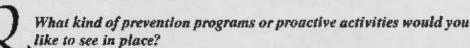
Pierose: They believe that they can make a difference. They believe that if they work hard that they will succeed, and not necessarily financially. My school has a very large conservative religious population and those kids really believe, because of their faith,

that there is hope and perfectibility for all and so they follow that kind of path. They don't get drunk every Friday and Saturday night. They don't all participate in risky behavior. I don't mean that they don't ever step over the line every once in a while, but they're not generally involved in risky behaviors.



Dickson: Youth group members today are experiencing some of the same struggles, disappointments and Waywardness of kids who aren't involved with youth groups. Kids involved in youth group are just as prone to be involved with pre-marital sex as kids who aren't in a youth group. They are being taught different values than they were 20 years ago. So I would agree that kids in

youth groups are struggling with the same problems and getting involved with those same issues. It's difficult for them.



Baranco: We are people who need relationships. We need to be accountable to somebody and know that somebody is interested in what we do, whether we succeed or fail, and can help bring us along when we do fail. And it's the lack of the relationships in the kids that I'm working with in the criminal justice system that I feel is consistent with the problem.

Lusk: I'd emphasize that Idaho's children are in much better shape than most

states. But at the same time, we face special challenges in that 17 percent of Idaho's children fall below the poverty line. And while that's lower than the national average, that's still practically one in five. So if we're going to do something on behalf of our youth, I would do something to strengthen child-support enforcement and work on programs that help families who are unemployed find work. With respect to schools, I'd emphasize that we need a rigorous and challenging curriculum that's going to prepare Americans for the global economy. Idaho youth face a more optimistic future on any social or economic indicator on the average than other states in the U.S. This is a state with very few distressed neighborhoods and it is a state with abundant human and natural resources. While our tone at times has been to talk about the problems of youth, there are very few places in the world, much less

the U.S., where a child has as many opportunities as they have here.



Richard Baranco



Mark Lusk