

The Violent Generation. The E-Generation. The Scapegoat Generation. The Hollywood Generation. The Ambitious Generation. From sociologists and journalists to parents and educators, adults categorize today's teenagers with a slew of conflicting labels. But what do we really know about this group of 12- to 18-year-olds, a population of more than 30 million people? Can we adequately generalize about today's youth culture in a way that makes sense not just to those who label teens, but also to teens themselves?

Part of the difficulty involves the ambivalent images of today's youth. Some see that teenagers are outperforming their teachers and parents in technology. But others worry that they are "secretive," unsupervised—just a Web site or a video game away from becoming dangerous and violent. Some argue that the media exploit teens through advertising

and television, whereas others feel that today's teens, the savvy children of baby boomers, actually control an increasingly teen-driven market.

Generation X, that nebulous population characterized by shopping malls, cynicism, and 1970s television reruns, has finally given way to the next generation, raised more on the Internet and video games than on *The Brady Bunch* and *Schoolhouse Rock*. Who are they? How are they represented? And what, if any, common experiences do they share and bring into the classroom?

Conflicting Reports

We don't need to revisit press coverage of recent school shootings to hear how teens are in trouble. Although generation gaps have always existed, and older generations have always disparaged the activities and interests of the young, the way we talk about teens has shifted. No longer symptomatic



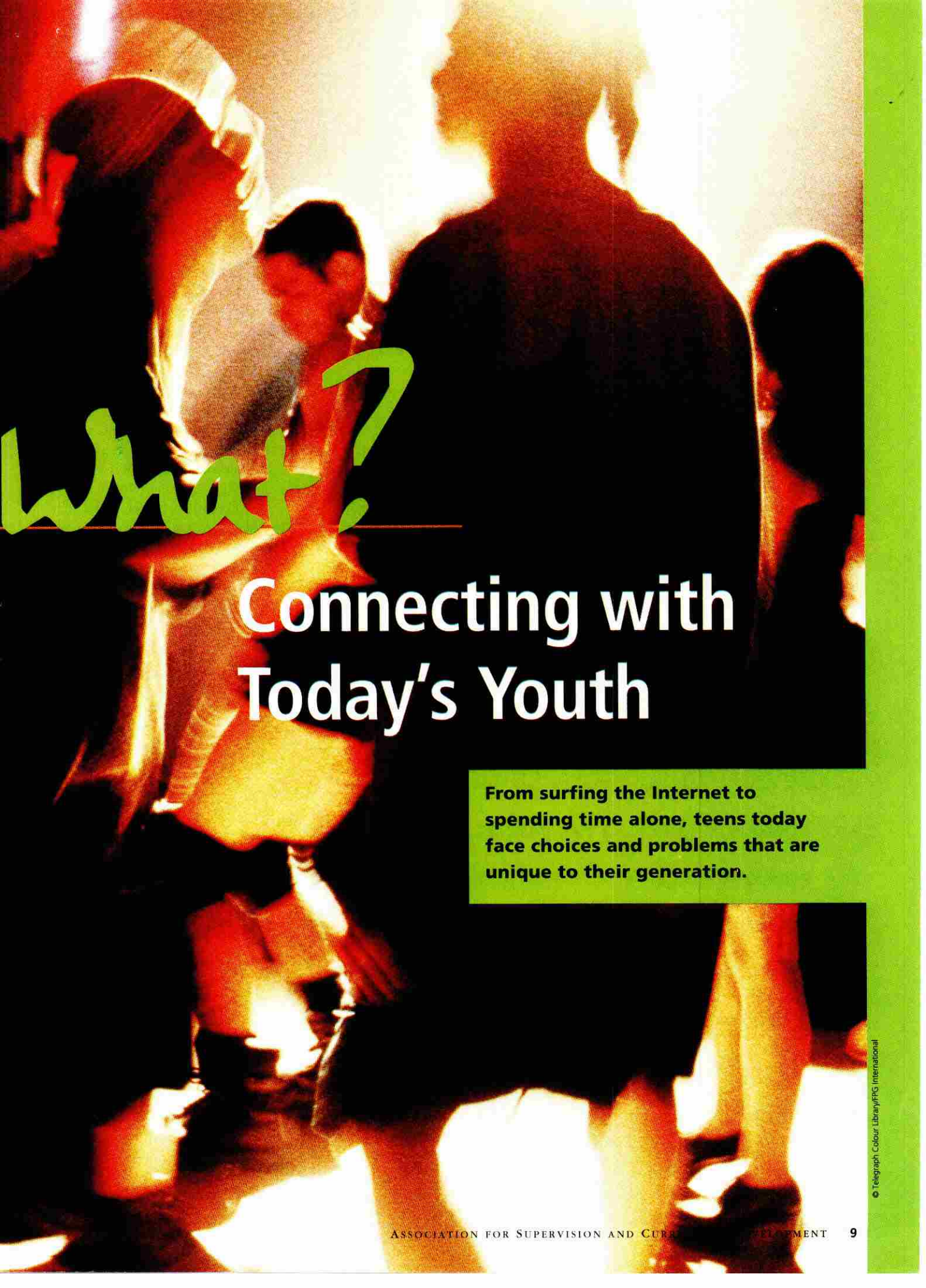
Generation

of society's ills, youth are seen as the root cause—at least in the minds of adults who fear and misunderstand them. As Henry Giroux, author of *Channel Surfing*, says, "Youth are no longer seen as *at-risk* anymore; they *are* the risk."

The Public Agenda's most recent report, *Kids These Days '99: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation*, underscores that fear. According to the report, more than seven in 10 adults think that teens are "rude," "irresponsible," or "wild" (1999, p. 3). Moreover, adults say that teens lack values, character, and basic civility. This, despite the fact that the majority of teens surveyed feel that they have good relationships with their parents, strong religious beliefs, and good friends.

The education media also portray a new deterioration of teen values. For example, a recent issue of *The American School Board Journal* is titled *Generation of Cheaters*. The lead article, which gives results from a 1998 survey of 356 high school teachers, states that nine out of 10 teachers say that cheating is a problem, and half say that they encounter students cheating in most of their classes (Bushweller, 1999). According to teachers, this is because of an "erosion of ethics in a self-centered culture" (p. 25).

But others argue that these negative assertions simply do not measure up. Statistics show that juvenile crime has fallen, teen pregnancy has dropped, and teen drug use has declined (Seibold, 1999). Mike Males (1998), author of *The Scapegoat Generation*, attacks these myths head on: Youth are less violent, they take better care of themselves, they are less self-destructive, and they take fewer drugs than in past decades. Unfortunately, we focus on the sensational aspects of teens' lives, such as abnormal occurrences of violence. Males tells us, "School killings receive enormous attention not because they are routine, but because they are rare." In fact, Males



What?

Connecting with Today's Youth

From surfing the Internet to spending time alone, teens today face choices and problems that are unique to their generation.

argues, of the 52 million students, about 24 are murdered in school each year. He compares this with figures from the National Commission on Child Abuse and Neglect: Every year, as many as 3,000 kids are murdered by parents.

Henry Giroux also comments on this paradox:

What is missing in this perceived threat to childhood innocence is the contradiction between adult concern for the safety of children and the reality of how children are treated by adults on a daily basis. (In press)

"We tend to demonize youth," says Giroux. And because young people not only symbolize our future, but they also *are* our future, this demonization is peculiarly sad and pointedly destructive.

Media Representations

What may add to this disturbing representation of youth are the negative media portrayals, which show teens as uninterested in the world around them,

materialistic, and anti-intellectual. Particularly offensive are stereotypes of young African American males, who are often depicted as hostile, criminal, violent, or valued only for their athletic ability.

At the same time, youth culture is everywhere in the media. And teens seem to be running the show, or at least running Hollywood, as the *New York Times Magazine* suggests in a cover story, "Teenseltown" (Hirschberg, 1999). Teenagers are big business in today's entertainment industry—thus, the overwhelming number of teen movies and television shows, from *Drive Me Crazy* to *Dawson's Creek*. The Fox and WB networks have typically catered to a teen audience, but now the faces and themes on the other networks are getting younger and younger. According to the *New York Times*, young actors can't even get a job if they look over 22. Some ask: Doesn't this represent a proliferation of exuberant youth culture into the mainstream?

Giroux argues that for youth culture to thrive, it must find a medium that allows self-representation and an authentic exploration of youth values and concerns. Instead of offering teens self-expression, the media (and ultimately those who own the media) control what is aired. In addition, they create shows that are generally not about real teenage lives, but are adult fantasies of what teens' lives might be like. As one Virginia 12th grader commented, "The shows focus on the social lives of teens. The typical teenager is portrayed as someone who just likes to have fun." Our current obsession with teenage culture is not a result of the younger generation's influence, Giroux says, but of the older generation's inability to grow up.

The networks also recognize that teenagers are a desirable market. Even music, often seen as the one mode of resistance left for teens to define themselves, rebel, and communicate freely, is an industry. Author Jonathan Epstein points out that

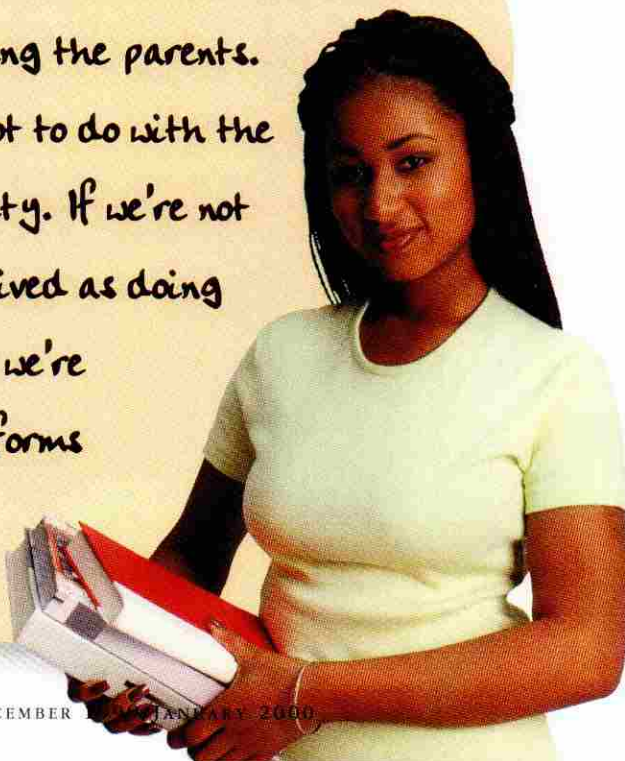
[teen] resistance is expressed through means made available to them through consumerism and the mass media. While pockets of actual resistance do occasionally appear . . . they are quickly swallowed up into the corporate music machine and as such can no longer be viewed as genuine resistance. (1998, pp. 16-17)

Of course, for decades, popular music—and certainly popular musicians—have succumbed to the consumerism of the "corporate music machine."

But one facet of popular culture that teens *do* seem to control is the medium on which they were raised: Computer technology.

It seems that often the adults in our society are quick to blame the teenagers and tell us to take responsibility for our individual actions. Now, in Littleton, the authorities are thinking of charging the parents. Our problems have a lot to do with the role models in our society. If we're not being praised or perceived as doing the right things, then we're going to turn to other forms of attention.

—12th grade girl



Technology Culture

How has technology influenced youth culture? "Technology *is* youth culture," says author and media critic Jon Katz. "These kids are building a revolution. Technology is part of their ideology, their language, everything they do."

Often, educators think of technology as an instrument with which they teach a traditional curriculum—math, science, writing—in an effective, even more interesting way. Most schools and districts are doing their best to keep up with technology trends. For example, the North Carolina State Board of Education has mandated that starting in 2001, students must pass a computer literacy exam to earn a diploma. In addition, more and more schools are learning to produce online newspapers.

But for today's teens, technology is more than a set of skills or a tool for learning. Sally Beisser, assistant professor in the Effective Teaching Program of Drake University, Iowa, says that technology is about communication. Teens talk in chat rooms to students whom they have never met and e-mail their school friends, relatives, friends who have moved away, even siblings. Although e-mail may not have replaced malls, school hallways, or movie houses, it has certainly become another "place" for students to gossip, exchange homework, flirt, and connect with their peers. Not surprisingly, when teens misbehave, parents still ground their kids—not from going outside, but from going online.

On the Internet, teens can communicate, learn, and come together around issues that interest them. They have even developed their own language. Part of the appeal may have to do with the fact that they do not have to communicate face-to-face. Adolescence can be an awkward time, when the body changes in ways that are sometimes uncomfortable. Personalities and identities are also in constant flux. At a time when teens need to explore a range of interests for themselves, the Internet offers a relatively safe avenue for exploration.

But many adults do not see it that way. They worry about the easy accessi-

bility of pornographic, violent, or other potentially dangerous material on the Web. Shouldn't teenagers be outside getting exercise and talking to their friends? And what about these chat rooms? Many parents and educators fear what teens are doing online, with their doors shut, in secret.

Technology and Secret Lives?

Both *Life* (Adato, 1999) and *Newsweek* (Leland, 1999) published cover stories with almost the exact same titles: "The Secret Lives/Life of Teens." Both magazines suggested that using technology—an activity that teens appear to do by themselves—is one cause of a growing alienation and isolation that characterize today's youth. As J. Leland says in *Newsweek*, "A parent who might eventually notice a stockpile of *Guns & Ammo* or pornographic magazines has fewer clues to a child's online activities" (1999, p. 46).

Are computers making teens more alienated and dangerous? Or is the Internet just another way for kids to communicate? Jon Katz believes the

latter. Instead of providing an isolating and mind-numbing experience, technology is a creative and exciting tool that gives teens freedom—to express themselves, to get information, and to learn. And if teens do have "secret lives," it is only because adults refuse to enter into them. The responsibility is on parents and educators to know what their youth are doing, not the other way around. Instead, Katz argues, too many adults have been either "hostile or oblivious" to teen cyberculture.

This hostility extends into the classroom, Katz says, which creates a greater disconnect between how kids learn and communicate in their free time and how they are taught in school. On the Internet, young people are allowed to say what they want, when they want, and to whom they want. Because their identities are often anonymous, their ideas are taken seriously. But in many cases, when students get to school, they feel that they have fewer rights, fewer freedoms, and less respect.

"Techie students" in particular sense the hostility that their teachers feel



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toward computers, which leads to a greater sense of alienation and frustration. For example, most schools still value what happens on the football field more than what happens on the home computer. Katz believes that these attitudes need to change. "Why is it healthy to throw a ball at other people on a field and unhealthy to play a game on the Internet?" Katz asks. "Culture is also a Web page."

The fear of the Internet and the possibility of what teens will stumble upon lead to issues of censorship—trying to block out pornography sites, for example, or to restrict chat room access. Katz argues that rather than focus solely on censorship, educators would do better to teach students how to use the Internet, how to read and evaluate Web sites, and how to surf safely. But because too many adults are reluctant to understand technology and its appeal for young people, kids are being "orphaned by the system," says Katz. That abandonment is both irresponsible and dangerous.

Henry Giroux takes it one step

further. He is hesitant to praise cyberspace as the ideal sphere where teens can engage and unite in a meaningful way. Although teens do have freedom to explore and communicate, that freedom is still limited. The Internet is not really *theirs*. "Who owns the Internet?" asks Giroux. "It is still about corporate culture, about making money. . . . The Internet is limiting because it frames the range of possible responses" that students can have.

Pedagogically and politically, young people need to be given the opportunity to narrate themselves, to speak from the actual places where their experiences are shaped and mediated. (1998, p. 48)

Thomas Jefferson High School

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, Virginia, is a competitive magnet school of about 1,600 students. The school offers a comprehensive college preparatory program that emphasizes the sciences, mathematics, and technology. The students are bright, motivated, serious about their

futures, and technologically adept.

When students talk about the Internet, they are, not surprisingly, at ease, articulate, and almost nonchalant. Even a bit predictable. They recognize that computers shape their lives and their education and that they are more comfortable on the Web than many adults. "We're the first generation to have the Internet," 12th grader Ray Hohenstein says. "We have a family computer at home, but I taught my mom how to use it."

But because the school emphasizes technology and the teachers appreciate and encourage its use, students dismiss the notion of having "secret lives" on the Internet. "Technology is just something we do. We don't think about it," says Geeta Kulkarni, 11th grade. Even communication is no big deal. She feels that e-mail is "OK," but for "serious conversations" she prefers the telephone or face-to-face contact. However, her 7th grade sister uses it all the time.

In science class, a group of boisterous 9th graders consider what most represents their generation. The Internet? Computers? They shout out an answer almost in unison: "Abercrombie and Fitch!" This pricey clothing store chain is the trend at their school. But as soon as they say it, they smile mischievously. Many roll their eyes. One girl says proudly that she doesn't own any clothing from the store, and the boy sitting next to her examines her shirt label, just to be sure.

Interestingly, students of all grades were most sincere not when they talked about clothing or technology, but when they talked about their teachers. More than what or how they teach, the students valued their teachers for treating them as individuals. As 12th grader Martina Castro puts it, "Education has nothing to do with numbers. Teachers need to connect with us as human beings." Geeta Kulkarni echoes, "Teachers are best when they treat you like a person, when they become a friend."

In the age of the Internet, at a school that focuses on technology, what do students want most from their teachers? Human connection.



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Reconnecting with Youth

This desire confirms the findings of author Patricia Hersch, whose book *A Tribe Apart* focused not on "fringe" youth but on ordinary teenagers from a variety of backgrounds. The distinguishing feature of today's youth is not technology, she says: "It is 'aloneness.'" Because of the social changes of the past 25 years, teens today have spent more time alone than any other generation. They are missing a coherent sense of community.

"If people want to understand youth culture, they need to look at adult culture," Hersch insists. And many parents of teenagers are still trying to figure out who they are. In addition, "parents" no longer represent a homogeneous group: They are different ages, they have different family structures, and they embody differing belief systems. Morality varies from one house to the next. "Other generations have marched through time together," says Hersch. "Teens today are getting conflicting messages of how to model behavior." Henry Giroux agrees:

What is largely missed in current commentaries on the condition of contemporary youth is that what is changing, if not disappearing, is the productive social bonds between adults and children. (In press)

If alienation is the defining characteristic of this generation, then technology may be more a response to alienation than its result. What can educators do to reconnect with today's youth? Jon Katz suggests that rather than look down on students for adopting computers as their newest mode of communication, educators need to get over their fear and skepticism—for the sake of their students. Katz suggests closing the gap between what the school curriculum offers and what students do at home. Offer courses in computer gaming, for example, or teach students how to approach violent or sexual imagery on the Web. More than anything else, teachers need to guide the process. Kids are educating themselves in many cases, and they feel disconnected because school is no longer central in their lives.

More than anything, our youth culture responds to positive feedback from the media and adults. Often the only feedback we're getting is negative. I have many friends who feel like they're taken for granted, because the troublemakers get all the attention. The people who are doing what they should be doing are just overlooked.

— 12th grade girl



Most of all, everyone agrees that we must stop looking at youth as the problem. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (1999), Thomas Hine points out that many issues burdening teens today are the result of their disassociation from the adult world. Rather than try to understand "youth culture" as something distinct from "adult" or "mainstream culture," perhaps we should see the two as interdependent and, in many ways, inseparable. What teens say that they want is to be taken seriously and to feel connected to the larger community.

"Our generation is hopeful," student Ray Hohenstein says. "We have lots of ideas about how to improve our world." If we feel compelled to label the next generation, maybe that label should include the word *hope*. ■

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