hurt 2.0

inside the world of today's TEENAGERS

CHAP CLARK

Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Hurt 2.0 is a revised edition of *Hurt*.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Clark, Chap, 1954–
Hurt 2.0 : inside the world of today's teenagers / Chap Clark—[2nd ed.].
p. cm. — (Youth, family, and culture)
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 978-0-8010-3941-6 (pbk.)
1. Teenagers—United States—Social conditions. 2. Teenagers—United States—Attitudes. 3. Adolescent psychology—United States. I. Title.
HQ796.C553 2011
305.2350973—dc22 2011000494

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

contents

preface to *hurt 2.0*

It is hard to know when a second edition of a book is needed. On the one hand, the issues and cultural changes detailed in the original *Hurt* led many people to such a new way of thinking about teens and the world we have handed them that the first edition's basic conclusions should have a relatively long shelf life. Yet at the same time, one thing that has become clear to me since I first embarked on the *Hurt Project* (as it is now sometimes called) is that *Hurt* was only the beginning. The world is changing so quickly, and the way our young must adapt to those changes far outpaces adults' assumptions and axioms about who teenagers are, how they feel, and what growing up is like from their perspective. Moreover, there have been sweeping changes in the systems and structures that adults have carefully crafted over the decades to guide our dealings with youth. From education to youth sports to media to parenting, just about every institution has become more complex, more demanding, and more relationally disengaged than when *Hurt* first came out. Adults themselves are scrambling to survive, and whenever a child or adolescent happens to throw a wrench in our plans or agenda, the child becomes the problem, or as therapists put it, the "identified patient."

When *Hurt* was first published, I encountered a fairly significant amount of pushback from just about every side (except from the youth themselves, for in every case where a teenager has heard me speak or read *Hurt* or its more popular cousin, *When Kids Hurt*, they have nearly universally exclaimed, "Finally, somebody gets us! Listen to him!"). The two statements I heard during the first year or two the book was out were, "Not *my/our* kids; you're talking about those kids in LA," and "You're just focusing on the extreme or fringe kids, not the _____ (fill in the blank: smart, stable, gifted, etc.) kids." Today, whenever I speak or interact with those who deal directly with teens on the field,

including parents—and I get to speak to thousands every year on this topic around the world—the response is almost always overwhelming: "We *get* it, already! Now, what do we *do* about it?"

So why would we need a second edition if the case has been made and we are collectively ready to do what it takes to bring substantive change to the way we care for and guide children and adolescents into productive adulthood? If society is ready to reengage our young by altering, sometimes radically, the systems and structures that serve them, why do we need to do more research, look at new and fresh data, ask deeper and more penetrating questions, challenge long-held assumptions, and be dragged into a more profound sense of fear for our kids? It is for one simple reason, and in the first edition I barely realized the implications of what *Hurt* had discovered and presented. The reason for *Hurt 2.0* is that those who control and define the systems and structures charged with nurturing and training up our young (and especially those who have the power associated with them) are either ignorant of how destructive life is for today's adolescents or unwilling to take the wide array of indicators seriously.

To me, both of these options are beyond regrettable: they are reprehensible.

For those who think I speak in hyperbole or who have encountered *Hurt* along the way (maybe even read it) but who somehow were able to discount the findings or ignore the implications, this edition is for you, as well as any newcomers who have never been exposed to these results and conclusions. *Hurt 2.0* uses the basic framework of the first edition, keeping in what has remained the same over the last few years. At the same time this edition takes on a whole series of new insights and data that have become relevant since the first edition was published. This edition goes point by point, paragraph by paragraph, and study by study in order to carefully assess what is going on with and inside today's kids.

Examples of some of the new materials and ideas examined for this edition include the following (and there are many, many more throughout *Hurt 2.0*):

- A CDC study states that 25 percent of fourteen- to nineteen-year-old adolescent girls have "at least one" of the more common sexually transmitted diseases (and this study was limited to those *reported* through CDC channels, so there is no knowing how widespread the danger is, and what the rates are when sexual activity ramps up in their twenties).
- In a Princeton and Cornell study on self-injury, one in five college freshmen girls and one in seven boys reported "self-injury" (a finding

based on self-reported data, which could mean it is much more serious than even these numbers—and this at our elite universities).

- MILF[1] was the sexually charged "word" of the day in the early 2000s; today those words are "cougar" and "sexting."[2]
- A campaign by developmental psychologist Jeffrey J. Arnett and others to remove the term *adolescent* from post-high school "emerging adults" so as not to "offend" those in their twenties and even thirties who are having a hard time settling into adult roles has created a ripple effect of recasting what term we use for the fourteen- to twenty-year-old former "midadolescent." Yet we see now three distinct stages of adolescence, given the classic understanding of the term, where early (eleven to fourteen years old) is marked by *concrete* cognition and psychosocial dynamism, late (twenty to as late as early thirties) employs *abstract* cognition and psychosocial dynamism, and the midadolescent is so engrossed in personal survival that his or her life and perspective can be described as *egocentric abstraction*.
- Yesterday's "helicopter parents," whose perceived overinvestment in their child's world and performance can result in overprotecting their children from consequences, have become "stealth bomber parents" who actually do more harm than good because their children learn how to adapt at the expense of their own developmental needs.
- In attempting to understand how midadolescents make sense of their daily lives, the first edition described them living in "layers." Based on new research theory and data, as well as our research team's observations and conclusions, *Hurt 2.0* uses the far more accurate image of multiple identities to describe the way midadolescents move from setting to setting, and even sometimes person to person. They live out of "multiple selves" (versus layers), and each of these selves has an interactive and causal relationship with the others.

These are but a sample of the new insights and perspectives offered in *Hurt 2.0*. This edition does not highlight specific changes from the first edition, but rather integrates new observations and studies from the last decade with the previous material. The response to the first edition has varied among different readers. For those "field workers" who serve and work with teenagers regularly—educators, adolescent counselors, social workers, urban youth and family specialists, youth ministry workers—*Hurt* has been almost universally embraced as giving a name and an explanation to what so many have experienced for a decade or more. In academic circles, regardless of the discipline, the reception to both

the research and conclusions has ranged from lukewarm to negative by researchers and theorists, to the point of being dismissed by many academics. Some claim that the study and findings do not meet the criteria that rigorous scholarly study demands, and therefore, at times these results have generally not been invited to the conceptual table of adolescent health and well-being. Colleagues in various academic and pragmatic disciplines should realize that the research methods we have used provide the most academically credible and sound way of getting under the surface of what is actually happening inside the hearts and minds of this emerging population.

From our team's perspective, the traditional ways of studying young people—self-reports, wide-ranging general survey data sets, and focused interviews—obviously add to our understanding, which is why we have included much of this research in our citations and references. Even these methods of studying youth, however, fail to adequately describe and explain the complexities of the front edge of societal and developmental change, and, as a result, leaders often fail to recognize the significance of these changes for a young person growing up today. Few marriage and family therapists, clinical psychologists, educational administrators, and policy makers and influencers—to name just a few of those gatekeepers who hold the power to change our systemic response to the needs of the young—are even aware of these data and conclusions. In our opinion, it is vital that the way our adolescents view and experience reality be brought to the forefront of the national conversation, especially in light of the vast chasm between their perspective and our cultural power systems. Our hope is that *Hurt 2.0* will present such an overwhelming case that dismissal on academic or technical grounds will be untenable.

I realized how important our collective dialogue about these issues is when on a panel with Dr. Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame discussing his research from the National Study of Youth and Religion and book and film *Soul Searching* about the religious lives of contemporary adolescents.[3] We had watched the film prior to our discussion, and on stage he told the audience,

> One observation about the film, and this has struck me increasingly, but especially sitting right next to Chap today, is one theme that was not in the book (*Soul Searching*) hardly at all but was really in the movie, but it just came in through the process, was how teens are hurting. There was a lot of hurt in the movie, and that was not in the book. We did not write it into the movie, it just was there. There was actually more suicide talk in the movie that we edited out. I mean, we very carefully cut pieces out because we thought, this is just going to be a movie about suicide, so we cut it out.[4]

In developing a documentary that tries to get at the religious life of teenagers, something "struck" the filmmakers: today's kids are hurting. This is also what we saw in *Hurt*, and since the first edition, we believe the situation has gotten worse. More and more people are noticing, and perhaps it is time for all of us who study, serve, and make policy affecting the young to come together and address the issue of systemic abandonment, isolation, and most of all, hurt. For those who have read the first edition, the changes in *Hurt 2.0* should bring a depth and freshness to their understanding of the plight of today's teenagers. Our dream is that this edition will create the kind of stir among scholars, practitioners, parents, and, most of all, those in power over the systems and structures that guide how we work with and nurture the young that will lead us as a society to take the necessary steps to collectively reengage our young as they so desperately need and deserve.

preface to the first edition

Why would anyone want to study us?"

This cynical sentiment from a seventeen-year-old high school junior struck me as a bit odd.

"I mean, what's the big deal about kids? Why would you get paid to write a book about us?"

Sharon had been in a class I had substitute taught, and the only thing I knew about her was that she seemed to have a cold cloud of gloom constantly hanging about her, like Seattle in November. She had been bugging me for some time about my motive for hanging around the school. My explanation of a sabbatical leave from my teaching job failed to satisfy her, as did my lighthearted quips about liking kids, and even my more detailed, serious explanation that I believed most adults had little understanding of where adolescents were coming from. Sharon simply thought there had to be an ulterior motive, an angle that would somehow serve me at the expense of her community of peers.

"Is this going to make you famous?"

I laughed out loud. "After writing some books that few actually read, I gave up on that kind of thing a long time ago."

"Then, why? Why are you doing this? Will it really matter to anyone?"

Her last question caught me off guard. What began as an idea for a sabbatical evolved into this book. I started with a desire to get to know students. I have spent my entire adult life attempting to care for what most adults refer to as "kids." But as the research objectives, methods, hypotheses, and scope of my interest took shape, and when a publisher became intrigued with the idea of a series devoted to the study of youth, family, and culture, I realized that this book had become far more than just several hundred hours of personal reflection on the state of contemporary middle adolescence. It had become a vital story that needed

to be told. But the question has haunted me ever since: will this book matter to anyone?

Whether it will has ceased to be my concern, because I cannot force people to care about something; they must ultimately choose. I wrote this book for those who are willing to consider how life is different for today's high school students compared with past generations. This book will matter to anyone who chooses to take my findings seriously. Not every adult, or perhaps not even most, will agree with the discoveries I share and the conclusions I make. I offer, however, a detailed attempt to bring to light what the vast majority of adults have either ignored or missed. My goal is to raise the level of dialogue and ultimately the level of individual, corporate, and systemic commitment to the young of our communities.

As you read, I hope you will not lightly dismiss or easily disregard the observations contained here. I may not be right about everything. As with most ethnographic reports, this study is bound to be filled with theoretical holes and at times even missteps. But I have attempted an honest look at American teenagers from the inside perspective of their world. I have tested my conclusions with a wide variety of young people across the United States. They have affirmed that this is the most accurate and compassionate observation of their world they have ever received from an adult. Obviously, many others have gone before me, but I do not know of a single trained social scientist who has entered the adolescent world to gain a deeper understanding of today's postmodern teenagers.

For me, this project was more an exploration of a new world than an academic enterprise. The deeper I ventured into their world, the more I realized how much I had to learn. For me, this was Hillary's Everest, Cousteau's oceans, and Lewis and Clark's adventures. Like the handful of Europeans who headed over the western horizon to find an easier, more direct route to the East but found themselves in foreign and at times unrecognizable territory, I too had an unexpected adventure. I experienced a myriad of emotions over the course of the last two years, as I could not step away from the passions, the arrogance, and the groanings of the youth I came to love. May this book become an adventure of intrigue, concern, and compassion for you as well.

I started this project as an attempt to add to the research literature and scholarly understanding of what is happening in the developmental stage known as midadolescence (which spans roughly ages fourteen to twenty). As a result of spending hundreds of hours observing and interacting with students, I came away with far more. I realized that if I were going to speak and write about breaking the cycle of abandonment that our young experience so that they can somehow experience the kind of life we as adults so earnestly strive for, I had to be changed.

I could no longer live as I had. I had to find a way to care for the young people in my community. I was reminded that I am a steward of the most precious resource any society can ever have: its young. I am still in my late forties, a typical husband and father with a job, a mortgage, and a hidden need to figure out life for myself. But I have found a way to flesh out my desire to make a difference by having dinner with three high school boys every week.

May this book challenge you, disturb you, and cause you to be a champion for those who are desperate for the advocacy of an adult community who cares.

My High School Adventure

I had just started substitute teaching as a central part of my research project on the state of contemporary adolescence. Soon after telling a few high school students that I was there to listen to them, to try to understand them, and to write a book for adults about what life is like for teenagers today, one vocal junior became the spokesman for about a dozen others.

"Tell them our story," he remarked. "Tell them the truth—that nobody cares, that nobody listens, that teachers and coaches and cops and parents don't even know who we are. Tell them that and see if anybody listens. Ha! Not a chance!"

Although most were enamored by the idea of "being in a book," this remark was typical of a deeper skepticism I sensed in many students as I began a study of high school life. For more than six months I spent nearly every day with high school students as a participant-observer in their world. I wanted to get close and to listen to them, to develop enough trust for them to let me in to places that few adults are allowed. I wanted to discern their complex, contradictory worldview and watch how they navigate the multilayered expectations and relationships that control their landscape.

As a practitioner who works directly with adolescents, as well as an academically trained professor of youth, family, and culture, I had found that the literature about young people (from both religious and secular sources) provided conflicting data at best and was usually too generic and stereotypical to offer caring adults the level of information that could help them to connect authentically and deeply with students in a rapidly changing world. I sensed a vital need for an academically based research project that studied the world of contemporary adolescents. After years of hanging around the fringes of the adolescent world and reading books such as Patricia Hersch's *A Tribe Apart,* I knew that the only way to be

invited in was to log the time and to build trusting relationships with students on their turf.

This study applies accepted social science research methodology to the reality of life for the middle adolescent in contemporary American society. The goal is to follow in the footsteps of some of the courageous pioneers, such as Hersch, who have reported on the world of today's young by applying a standard and quality of research methodology that scholars, academics, and even practitioners who care about and interface with adolescents have to engage.[1]

The Method

I decided to function as a participant-observer at a public high school in north Los Angeles County.[2] I chose Crescenta Valley High School because it is a nationally recognized Blue Ribbon School for excellence in academic achievement; has a widely diverse ethnic population (including many newly arrived immigrant students); has historically strong and diverse sports, music, and drama programs; and has a mean population that is socioeconomically middle class with an extremely wide economic divergence. In addition, the coprincipals were supportive of my noninvasive research methods and were even interested in interacting with and learning from the study in order to improve the academic experience for each student in the school.

In attempting to understand more fully what life is like for middle adolescents, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study (which basically meant becoming a part of their world) instead of relying on either objectified quantitative instruments such as written questionnaires, which would greatly limit the scope of the inquiry, or less personal qualitative methodologies such as phone surveys, which depend heavily on small sample interviews and controlled environment settings. Participant-observation research methodology allows for and even encourages new and fresh insights and avoids a priori conceptual or theoretical limitations in a changing sociocultural environment. A tenet of qualitative research methodology is the conviction that "social research is an interactive rather than controlling process."[3] Therefore, ethnography, a form of more deeply involved qualitative research, is a useful tool in attempting to grasp the world of a specific population in a changing environment. Although this type of research has some obvious limitations, such as the researcher's own historical, socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic biases,[4] a social scientist can gain a great deal of insight when he or she is welcomed as a participant in a relatively closed system and is allowed to record his or her experiences as an observer.[5]

Even though I sought to have an open mind and to learn from the world of the students instead of from my experience, training, and literature exposure, I had to concede that I carried into the study a powerful set of preconceptions. It was impossible for me to be completely value- and theory-free. I acknowledge this limitation in both the methodology and the research conclusions.

There is a helpful aspect, however, to a highly informed and dedicated investigator applying knowledge and experience to a qualitative sociological methodology. I am, and was when I began, intimately acquainted with the diverse and sometimes contradictory views of both the academic and popular literature on adolescence and adolescent development. I was also aware of the emergence of midadolescence as an accepted substage of the adolescent process. If I had not known that in the last ten to fifteen years scholars had accepted the existence of three stages of adolescence (early, middle, and late) instead of the historically understood two (early and late), I might have inadvertently ascribed attributes to the high school students in this study in a way that could have skewed my results and therefore affected my conclusions. My prior experience in the field of adolescent studies prepared me to enter this population.

Why Not the Different and the Fringe

Even a cursory glance at the table of contents reveals that this book spends little time on specific issues that divide, segment, or separate students. Certainly an argument can be made that economic, ethnic, or personal history can significantly impact an adolescent's view and experience of life. After months of consideration, I chose to focus on the more clearly observable, broad-stroke issues facing the vast majority of American high school students, even those who have been oppressed and marginalized by class distinctions and racial inequities. In focusing on sexuality, busyness, athletics, school, family, and the like, I hope to give readers the opportunity to enter the halls, locker rooms, and classrooms of the campus. What I intentionally left out were the sociological differences among races, between the poor and the wealthy, and even between genders. I did this to look at the larger whole, of which all midadolescents are a part, to discover a baseline from which to spawn further discussion and investigation. What I record here is an accurate portrayal of high school life for most students.

In addition to these intentional omissions, I also chose to leave out significant detail regarding some of the deeper, more complex issues that many midadolescents from all walks of life face. Issues such as drug use, eating disorders, physical and other kinds of abuse, date rape, sexual

addiction, and cutting (a form of self-mutilation that is becoming more and more common), to name a few, are only alluded to in this book. By not highlighting them I am not saying they are unimportant compared to the more global issues I offer, nor am I asserting that students who face such issues do not warrant a close look. I did not discuss these issues (or in some cases only lightly touched on them) for two reasons. First, I believe these situations and behaviors make sense only when studied and discussed in light of the more sweeping issues presented in this book. Wrestling with "fringe" issues (and students) without an elementary grasp of the overall midadolescent social and cultural landscape could produce superficial and incomplete assumptions and conclusions regarding these issues.

Second, I did not focus on these destructive and painful behaviors and issues because most students between fourteen and twenty years of age touch at least the edges of them at some point in their journey. By its very nature adolescence is a time of great change. Students who enter high school as Goths[6] may become Punks,[7] then druggies, and finally all-league varsity soccer players. This constantly shifting identity formation and experimentation involves various aspects of fringe elements or behaviors, making identifying and categorizing each behavior an extremely difficult, thorny, and even academically suspect enterprise. As soon as you think you understand what is going on with a specific population, group, or even individual student, that population, group, or student takes off in a different direction.[8] Therefore, I chose to leave the discussion of these fringe elements, behaviors, and issues to others.

A Conclusion and a Beginning

Adolescence is a hard thing to describe. It is even harder to define. For the vast majority of adults, it is hard to understand. Most of us want to take the easy route of claiming that it hasn't changed since we were in high school. Others say it really doesn't matter if adults understand kids, as long as the young live up to adult values of respect, commitment, and hard work. Still others fall into the category of "If you can't understand them, join them!"[9] After years of study and conversations with countless adults, there is a gnawing, nagging reality that even though we may want to be committed to being a light to our young, we have no idea who or what we are dealing with.

This book is an attempt to peer into the foreign and seemingly hostile world of midadolescents. My intent is to try to understand them in order to care about them more effectively. This book may disturb you, make you mad (at me as well as the culture), frustrate you, or even cause you

to disagree vehemently. As the researcher and author of this study, I find any and all of these reactions welcome. For too many years, even decades, adult society has pushed aside and blamed the young for their "rebellious" bent and for their seeming indifference to societal rules, norms, and values. As you embark on this journey, I ask you to consider who or what has created the catalyst for the rebellious and cavalier arrogance of the younger generation over the last fifty years. Could it be that the source has finally been identified? Is it possible that what we as adults see as a rebellious generation is really a uniquely vulnerable population living out the necessary reaction to being set to sea rudderless, adrift without a compass? Welcome to *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers.*

introduction to the youth, family, and culture series

While this book is written as a general academic book for readers from a wide variety of life experiences and perspectives, this is the first book in a series dedicated to the preparation and vocational strengthening of those who are committed to the spiritual development of adolescents from a faith perspective. The series title—Youth, Family, and Culture—frames the broad categories for studying and caring for the needs of the young. The hope is that those who care about the specific needs of adolescents will be encouraged to examine the environment of those they are seeking to understand and serve. For those in the faith community, the label "youth ministry" has historically been used to describe a Christian response to the particular needs of adolescents. This series, however, is more committed to helping readers think deeply about issues such as family relationships, changes in development, social setting, and the nature and influence of the culture in which young people live and think than it is to providing programmatic, highly contextual, or event-centered pragmatic models or guidelines. The series seeks to cause readers to think differently about the complex and multifaceted challenges faced in ministry to postmodern adolescents.

Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers is the first book in this series. For the college or graduate student, parent, counselor, or educator who does not share the religious worldview of the author or the series, this book provides a qualitative analysis of the state of contemporary adolescence. For those who come to this book with a commitment to serving the young from a faith conviction, *Hurt 2.0* offers in broad strokes insight into their hidden social setting.

part 1

the changing adolescent world

The smiles are genuine, and the flashes of joy are real. There is no doubt that much of life on the surface of the adolescent landscape is light, carefree, and straightforward. This is a time when life can feel like it is full of possibilities and when no barrier seems insurmountable. This is the place where students happily run at the lunch bell, where cheerleaders giggle in packs, and where athletes saunter without a care in the world. On the surface of their world, high school students seem no different from their parents or even their grandparents. The games bring excitement. There are dances and parties to attend, plays to put on, and homework to get done. In the majority of high schools, college is on the mind of many students, and the future seems basically bright and welcoming.

But there is another side to this idyllic picture. The surface of the adolescent landscape is where internal fears, loneliness, and insecurities must be held in check, where friendships are generally shallow, and where performance and image are the name of the game. Beneath the superficial and all-too-often cosmetic layer of high school life, there are dark, lonely corners where the neon light of sanitized conformity seldom penetrates. Just below the sheen of coerced normality are the stress and strain of personal survival in a hostile world.

There are two different perspectives on the nature of the adolescent landscape, depending on one's viewpoint and on the angle from which

one looks at the evidence. Adults believe either that contemporary adolescents are highly nurtured, motivated, and functioning or that they are in dire straits. In this discussion, there is rarely a middle ground.

How is it that we are so divided concerning the state of our young? Asking a vocal advocate of either perspective to answer this question can invite scorn to the point of ridicule.[1] Perhaps the solution lies not in trying to seek compromise between the perspectives but in attempting to reconcile the apparently contradictory data. While recognizing the complexities of the debate, affirming the evidence of well-done empirical research, and intuitively sensing that all is not well with contemporary midadolescents, I sought to find a way to hold these perspectives in tension. Somewhere in the middle of the study an explanation for the conflicting views began to dawn on me: both perspectives are valid and real, yet on different levels. In most settings, for example, adolescents appear genuinely happy, carefree, and seemingly healthy. What the vast majority of high school students confided, however, was a far different story. After months of reflection on and study of the perspectives concerning the adolescent landscape, I concluded that midadolescence is a new, understudied element of the adolescent process and journey. Unlike at any other stage of life, midadolescence is a world of multiple selves.[2] Midadolescents are not able to compartmentalize their lives while operating out of a personal sense of self. Society has let go of personal and individual commitment to the young. Therefore, during midadolescence, they find themselves forced to function out of multiple selves. To survive, a young person must learn how to be a child, a student, an athlete, and a friend, while also continuing the ever-lengthening process of determining who he or she is. In other words, we have allowed a new stage of life known as midadolescence to emerge, and this new stage carries with it new and at times very difficult challenges.

Adolescents have the ability to apply abstract thought and reflective action within a given realm, or "self," of life. But once a midadolescent has moved on from a self—be it a relationship, a role, an expectation, or an activity—he or she creates a different, almost totally unique conceptualization process in the new self and then applies abstract thought and processing in that context as well. This has always been true of adolescents who have the ability to actualize abstract and nuanced thought processes. But what is new is the lack of ability to construct bridges between one self and another. The inability to see contradictions as contradictions and the ability to easily rationalize seemingly irreconcilable beliefs, attitudes, or values are but two of many markers that may be pointing to an emerging phase of adolescent development and may provide a key indicator of the essence of midadolescence.

In some ways, I am diving into waters that go beyond the scope of my academic training and expertise, yet I am also aware that few have allowed themselves to ask whether changes in culture may have an effect on the cognitive (and therefore moral and even spiritual) development of an adolescent. This is for others to discuss, debate, and research, but I am certain that something is going on, something that has changed the very nature of adolescence.

Part 1 lays the foundation for the premise of this book: adolescents have been cut off for far too long from the adults who have the power and experience to escort them into the greater society. Adolescents have been abandoned. They have, therefore, created their own world, a world that is designed to protect them from the destructive forces and wiles of the adult community. May this section open your eyes to the world beneath.

1

the changing face of adolescence

> These kids are no different from when I was a kid. They are just more indulged today. And they have more options—from sports to money to the internet. Kids today are just a more spoiled breed of us when we were young.
>
> high school teacher

This assessment was volunteered by a veteran teacher I had gotten to know over the course of my time on the high school campus. Occasionally, he would ask me how my research was going. On one occasion, he made this definitive declaration. Once he said it, and because of the way he said it, I knew it would not be easy to convince him that, indeed, things had changed—and changed a great deal.

Through numerous conversations since, and by immersing myself in literature related to the study of adolescence from a variety of disciplines, I have become aware that many adults have a similar view of adolescents. The tune of accepted folk wisdom goes something like this: "Kids (i.e., adolescents) have always been kids and have always been a part of the social landscape. Things may change on the surface, but teenagers have always been with us and have always pushed the extremes of adult society. They are basically the same now as they were thousands of years ago. Only the styles have changed." This perception is regularly supported in articles, stories, media reports, and books about the young. Even the term *kids* can mean many things.[1] It can refer to any age group from

pre-elementary school children to those in their mid to late twenties (such as when a new teacher confided in me, "I'm as much a kid as the guys in my class!"). When referring to the young, adults rarely attempt to distinguish between those who are just leaving the psychosocial and relational confines of childhood and entering that strange and wholly different experience known as early adolescence, and those who are in graduate school living off their parents and "trying to figure out what to do with my life." It is all too easy in our culture not to ask the question, what is the difference between adolescents today and teenagers of the past? Instead, we fall back on the caricature that kids are kids, and they have always been kids. But is this true?

At times, adults attempt to reach back into antiquity to add credence to this characterization. Socrates, for example, is often erroneously credited with this comment on how the young of his day were viewed: "Our youth love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders, and love to chatter in places of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their household. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up their food, and tyrannize their teachers."[2]

Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa (fourth century AD), is known for his philandering and "adolescent" lifestyle prior to his conversion to Christianity. Augustine himself described his teenage years in his *Confessions*: "I had a period of leisure, living at home with my parents and not doing any work at all, the brambles of lust grew up right over my head."[3]

These and a handful of other similar quotations have been cited to add credibility to the notion that young people throughout history have always been basically the same. The attempt is to show that adolescents of antiquity were essentially the same as adolescents of the 1940s and the early 2000s, and that the issues facing adolescents and their responses to them are universal. Indeed, Eddie Haskell, the prototypical deceiving and conniving adolescent of the late-1950s and early-1960s television show *Leave It to Beaver*, is but one example from the past of a teenager who would be no different today. Add to that James Dean (*Rebel without a Cause*) in the 1950s, Arthur Fonzarelli (The Fonz from *Happy Days*) in the 1970s, and even the rebellion showcased in the movie *The Breakfast Club* in the 1980s, and it is easy to see that in the minds of adults, adolescence has not changed much over the decades or even the centuries. It is for this reason that today's teenagers—particularly with all the time they spend creating and maintaining profiles on social networking websites—are often deemed to be "all about me, me, me," even though research has revealed that such activities certainly "need

not imply narcissistic self-absorption" but are more likely an extension of peer-group relationships.[4]

This book contends that adolescence is a fundamentally different thing than it was even thirty years ago. There is, in fact, nearly universal support for the idea that adolescence as we know it was a cultural invention of Western society that was first noticed around 1900.[5] Numerous anecdotal narratives across time and cultures depict characteristics of what we call adolescence. The examples often cited (such as the ones above), however, represent extremely unusual exceptions to the record of civilization. Citing these and other examples from antiquity to assert that the adolescent experience in contemporary American culture is equivalent to the experience of teenagers in ancient Greece is participation in a reductionism that is dangerous at best. For example, Socrates's argument, mentioned above, is not even true to the original text[6] and, moreover, was not concerned with the young but with the excesses of the entire society. In more recent decades, media depictions of rebellious and insolent youth have offered a clear distinction between the "good" kids and those who lived on the fringes of the youth culture rather than the mainstream, like Eddie Haskell in *Leave It to Beaver* and *Happy Days'* The Fonz. Yet society's view of teenagers has been subtly shifting over the last several decades to where many adults view teenagers in general as insolent, difficult, and arrogant. Even while this perception has gained momentum, there still is this fundamental perspective that kids have always been the way we now see them.

Throughout time and in every society, the dominant culture has seen the young as its most sacred treasure. Because of this, the human life span has historically been understood as having only two primary stages: childhood and adulthood. Children were viewed as a precious and nurtured resource and as such were guided into their place in the world by those responsible to care for them in their family and community. Once a child had completed the rituals, rites of passage, and training experiences necessary to be accepted into interdependent relationships within the adult community, he or she was fully assimilated as an adult member of that community. This process, called the *rite of passage* by Arnold van Gennep in 1908,[7] had three elements: separation from the old status; transition, usually with a specified ritual; and incorporation into the adult community. For over a century, formalized processes of incorporating the young into adulthood have been devalued, especially in the United States.[8]

First labeled and identified around the beginning of the twentieth century,[9] the span between childhood and adulthood, beginning with puberty and ending with the assuming of full adult responsibilities or even economic independence,[10] was approximately three years. The

average age of menarche, the most common measurable marker for the beginning of adolescence in a society, was, prior to 1900, fourteen years, and a person began to assume an adult role in society as young as sixteen. Many accepted developmental theories, created primarily in the mid-twentieth century, tend to view the adolescent journey as a relatively stable, predictable, and orderly, though sometimes difficult, process.[11] For the past two or three decades, however, researchers and theorists attempting to understand human development more fully have challenged many of these orderly themes and stages of development. Postmodern culture has also tossed a proverbial wrench into the gears of developmental theory. In particular, variables such as shifts in cultural values and structure; changes in the family system; new research into peer relations, gender, and ethnic uniqueness; and new ways of thinking about morality, character, and ethics have become increasingly important in describing the nature of adolescence. Some researchers believe that culture has changed so quickly that the developmental, societal, and relational needs of children have been neglected in recent decades and that by the time children reach adolescence they have been left on their own to attempt to navigate the path toward adulthood.[12]

Adolescence—What Is It?

Many adults not only struggle with the notion of changing adolescence but also have a hard time describing what an adolescent is. I have experimented with defining an adolescent in a variety of settings with adults, and with few exceptions, when a group of adults are asked to vote on whether teenagers are big, more sophisticated children or inexperienced young adults, they will invariably be split fifty-fifty, generally with parents of older adolescents voting the former and parents of young children the latter. Society has not provided much help, for the inherent ambiguity and relative imprecision of the term *adolescent* causes us to fall back on more easily measured and therefore identifiable terms such as *teenager* and *pre-teen* or even blatantly generic terms such as *youth*.[13] Adolescence has been relegated to an amorphous transitionary phase of life. Most people see those in this general age range as being "sort of adults and sort of kids."[14]

This foggy view of the period of adolescence has given rise to much adult ambivalence and even to systemic neglect. We simply have not agreed on who or what we are dealing with, and it is therefore easier to turn a blind eye to the unique needs of this population. In spite of the rhetoric and wishful thinking that adolescent life has not changed all that much, the vast majority of adults believe that there is something

different going on in the world of today's adolescents. In hundreds of casual and formal conversations I have had with adults, when it comes to nailing down what is truly happening with young people in our society, nearly everyone agreed that the rapid and in many ways severe changes in the last few decades have created new challenges, issues, and dilemmas for adolescents. But what those challenges and issues are and how they impact adolescents remain unclear. On top of this, many adults are not clear about the most fundamental question of all: Are adolescents big children (a view that brings with it a more or less clear set of assumptions) or little adults (a view that moves us into another set of assumptions and practices)? Or are they a blend of both? As Frederick Buechner puts it, "The opaque glance and the pimples. The fancy new nakedness they're all dressed up in with no place to go. The eyes full of secrets they have a strong hunch everybody is on to. The shadowed brow. Being not quite a child and not quite a grown-up either is hard work, and they look it. Living in two worlds at once is no picnic."[15]

While we may implicitly affirm that adolescence is an in-between-but-not-quite place, this view may not tell the whole story. Developmental theorists have acknowledged for decades what the general populace has yet to comprehend, much less embrace: Adolescence is not a blend of both child and adult, nor is it an expanded phase of either. Adolescence is a unique phase of life that must be understood and dealt with on its own merits.

A generally accepted definition of adolescence has been summarized by developmental psychologist John Santrock. He calls adolescence "the period of life between childhood and adulthood. . . . [The process] lasts from roughly 10–13 years of age and ends at 18–22 years of age. [However,] defining when adolescence ends is not an easy task. It has been said that adolescence begins in biology and ends in culture."[16] Santrock offers as tight a definition as the phenomenon allows, for the entire adolescent experience fluctuates constantly and deviates greatly according to such variables as culture, locale, and even familial stability and makeup. A standard academic definition of adolescence comes down to "two main components—separateness and self-assertion."[17] Other scholars add to this drive for uniqueness ("separateness") and quest for personal autonomy ("self-assertion") a desire to move toward the discovery of community, belonging, and interdependence.[18] Adolescence, then, is a psychosocial, independent search for a unique identity or separateness,[19] with the end goals being a certain knowledge of who one is in relation to others, a willingness to take responsibility for who one is becoming, and a realized commitment to live with others in community.

Another important factor in understanding the nature of adolescence has to do with brain development. A recent radio report noted

a significant aspect of this: "The nerve cells that connect teenagers' frontal lobes with the rest of their brains are sluggish. Teenagers don't have as much of the fatty coating called myelin, or 'white matter' that adults have in this area."[20] Neurologist Frances Jensen contends that teenagers "often seem so maddeningly self-centered" simply because that's the particular developmental phase their brains are in: "They aren't yet at that place where they're thinking about—or capable, necessarily, of thinking about the effects of their behavior on other people. That requires insight"—which, as the report goes on to state, "requires . . . a fully connected frontal lobe."[21] Particularly because it is still in such a crucial state of development, the teenage brain is "tuned to be responsive to everything in their environment" and is "wired to form new connections" in response. This is valuable information for us to consider as we reflect on the way teens are often regarded. Joseph Allen and Claudia Worrell Allen note, "It seems we humans have a strong, persistent bias to attribute behavior to innate qualities of individuals even when the objective evidence that their environment is shaping their actions is overwhelming. . . . This bias is at its most persistent and most dangerous when applied to groups that lack the social status or verbal skill needed to articulate just how much they are affected by their environments. Groups like adolescents."[22]

Some pressing questions arise from these observations. First of all, what is the difference between the ways kids' brains are being formed today and how they were formed in previous generations? How have shifting environmental factors affected the development of our teens' brains? As we did not have MRIs forty years ago, it is impossible to answer these questions definitively. However, calling attention to research conducted by Bogdan Draganski and his colleagues in 2004 on the dramatic way the human brain is influenced by its environment—even to the point where the simple act of learning to juggle can quickly change the structure of the brain—Allen and Allen rightly wonder, "If a few weeks of juggling practice can change the brain, what can years of passivity and overprotection do?"[23]

The Timing and Duration of Adolescence

To understand adolescence, it is important to define its parameters—where it begins and ends and what it involves. Using Santrock's definition—that adolescence ends when culture affirms one's entrance into the mainstream of adulthood—we can say that adolescence is the journey from biological adulthood to societal adulthood. This is the process sometimes referred to as "second individuation."[24] The emerging adolescent,

embarking on a new journey in development, seeks to assert his or her distinctiveness and move toward an internal locus of control, while at the same time remaining relationally connected as an ongoing member of the family system and the community.[25] While there is no standardized definition of the term, *individuation* has, for many, become the central issue of the adolescent process and therefore the overall motivating task of adolescence.

As noted above, the oft-cited beginning point of adolescence is puberty. There is debate, however, over when the exact physiological changes of puberty begin, and this is even harder to determine for boys than for girls. It is relatively accepted that the age of puberty for girls has been slowly dropping, from fourteen-and-a-half years old a century ago to as early as twelve years old today. The American Medical Association, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, and the majority of social scientists report this as demonstrable fact.[26]

When culture affirms that someone has individuated in terms of identity, is willing to take responsibility for his or her life and choices, and has entered interdependently into the community and adult relationships, that person is said to be an adult. This, then, defines the end point or completion of adolescence. Interestingly, almost no social scientist or developmental theorist uses legal age as a reference point for the end of adolescence. Because the process is psychosocial, chronological factors such as readiness for marriage, driving, smoking cigarettes, voting, or drinking alcohol are not considerations when defining the end point of adolescence.

The process is about how one sees oneself and thereby relates to others. Nearly everyone today who ventures to define when adolescence ends states that it is somewhere in the middle to late twenties. According to a recent study by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, "people between 20 and 34 are taking longer to finish their educations, establish themselves in careers, marry, have children and become financially independent."[27] Allen and Allen assert that "twenty-five is becoming the new fifteen,"[28] and Robert Epstein laments that "for the first time in human history, we have artificially extended childhood well past puberty. . . . Somewhere along the line, we lost sight of—and buried—the potential of our teens."[29] While proposed responses to this issue may differ significantly,[30] the phenomenon of extended adolescence itself is widely acknowledged.

This ambiguity bumps up against everyday life when decisions have to be made regarding when a person is an adult or a still-developing adolescent. Unfortunately, at times governmental agencies and systems do not seem capable of or even interested in wading through the complex issues that emerge when someone clearly is a midadolescent, behaves

like a midadolescent, and yet participates in behaviors that have adult consequences. This is but one stark example of what we all must ultimately face as we consider the changing adolescent. There are countless other examples, many of which I experienced and are in this book, that demonstrate the need for adults to wrestle with the facts of our changing culture when it comes to caring for the young.

What about Now?

"When I was in high school . . ."

Throughout this study, I must have heard this preamble several dozen times. I did look for ways to stoke the fires of critique and dismay buried beneath the sheen of adult compassion for the young, but it rarely took much effort to get adults going on a critically laced, negative comparison between today's adolescents and themselves. Inevitably and without much prodding, the focus would turn from what I was seeing to what they were convinced of, as evidenced by the following comments:

- "That's interesting. Well, I think it's easier for kids today. They're spoiled; that's the problem!"
- "Well, if you ask me, kids today are just lazy—too much to do, too many choices."
- "There's no respect anymore, and kids don't seem to care about anybody but themselves."
- "Teenagers have never had it easier—they've got more money than we did, more freedoms, more options, and yet they are more defiant and more arrogant than we were."
- "Teenagers have always been rebellious. But when I was in high school, there were only some who lived on the edge. The rest of us were basically pretty good and normal—we did our homework, listened to our parents, and cared about our school. I think the biggest thing with this generation of kids is that most are like the fringe used to be."

Although academics argue over whether empirically verifiable statistics can help us to understand what is going on in the world of adolescents, when pressed, most adults intuitively recognize that the world is different from when most of them were in high school. I have presented my findings and observations in numerous settings, and as those in attendance reflected on the overwhelming evidence, rarely did anyone reject outright the premise that things have indeed changed, and changed

significantly. Along with this admission, however, consistently emerged an attempt to rationalize or at least explain away the severity and the impact of the changes. Almost always something or someone was to blame for the changes: the media, parents, the educational system, Vietnam, post–cold war society, a lack of religious conviction, a loss of family values, or a myriad of other demonizing forces. But there was never a doubt that change had indeed occurred and that today's adolescents are clearly a different breed.

What Has Happened in the World of Adolescents?

Within the span of a few short decades, adolescence changed from a relatively brief two-to-three-year period to a five-year process with two distinct stages: early and late adolescence. The reasons for this change are beyond the scope of this book, but somewhere in the late 1960s, a massive social upheaval occurred that altered the social landscape of all segments of American society. There are different labels for the changes that took place and several opposing theories regarding why it happened, but for the purposes of this study, I will simply affirm that this was a watershed time for our culture in how it affected adolescence as a stage of the life span.[31]

The culturewide social shift that took place during this time influenced the young both directly and indirectly, and it has significant implications for our understanding of the adolescent landscape. The evolving changes of the twentieth century directly affected how social systems, structures, organizations, and institutions nurture the young, and they indirectly influenced the developmental processes relating to the psyche and inner security of adolescents.

External Impact of a Changing Culture

During the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, adolescents enjoyed a newly affirmed status in the dominant culture. There was, at least in terms of popular rhetoric, an identifiable "subculture," sometimes referred to as the "teenage culture." Society was still orderly, especially compared to today's standards, and yet teenagers were increasingly granted a certified cultural niche that was generally embraced by the adult culture. Certain elements of this trend, of course, were not wholly endorsed: James Dean (*Rebel without a Cause*), Elvis Presley, long hair, and even the Beatles still caused a stir with many adults. But for the most part, these were relatively

minor distractions as the "teenager" became a vibrant, exciting aspect of American life and culture.

The turbulent 1960s saw a marked increase in social unrest and upheaval. The decade began with an escalation of the cold war that nearly erupted in a global nuclear exchange. In just a few years, three popular and powerful American leaders were gunned down, displaying our vulnerability and shattering our sense of social cohesion, control, and power. First, John F. Kennedy was assassinated, then Martin Luther King Jr., followed almost immediately by the likely next president, Robert Kennedy. The Vietnam War became decisively polarizing, primarily along age lines. The ugliness of personal and institutional racism and the resultant fight for civil rights showed the underbelly of an American national narrative that was painful for everyone. These were dark and frightening days for all Americans, and a tremendous sense of confusion, societal insecurity, and cultural instability spilled into nearly every institution, social structure, and relationship in the nation. The fights over hair length and music were but symptoms of a much more sweeping social movement: the idyllic American image of post–World War II days was being ripped apart, and there was little to replace it.

Out of this chaos came political scandal, a national recession, and ultimately a country trying to take a collective deep breath from all the upheaval. By the middle of the 1970s, we had settled into a rhythm marked by a societal philosophy that conveyed that it was up to each person to make sense of the social fragmentation, its mantra being "Live and let live." We had embarked on a path where the rules, norms, and values of society were left up to the individual. The 1980s came to be known as the "me" decade, in which the only thing that truly mattered was recapturing the American ideal of radical individualism and independence. The 1990s followed with the collapse of what we thought was our last identifiable enemy, the Soviet Union, thus removing the last remaining reason for a national metanarrative. We experienced a powerfully expanding economy, which created a greater number of jobs

> What is teenage life to me? That's a good question. If I said what teenage life is to me in one word, it would have to be "hard." No one really gets you, and you don't even really get yourself. You're just starting to figure yourself out, who you are and why you are here.
>
> high school student

and opportunities for a wide range of people but also threw us once again into a catatonic state of false security and independent arrogance. The media took a prominent place in our daily lives, its adolescent-oriented messages focusing on the temporary pursuits of leisure, comfort, and living for the moment.[32]

During this time, the biggest change affecting adolescents was the shift in focus for adult systems and institutions. Until the late 1960s, adult-led organizations and structures were primarily focused on caring for the individual and corporate needs of adolescents. Youth sports, activities, education, and even religious movements saw each young person as a gift to be cared for and cherished. But as society began to unravel, adults found themselves trying to find their own safe place, a haven of security and rest. No longer was there energy and health available for giving to others. Instead, adults waged a fight for emotional and relational survival, and this in turn spilled over into the developmental longings of adolescents.[33]

For youth-directed organizations, institutions, and systems, the shift in focus was not immediate; in fact, it evolved over several decades. But as society in general moved from being a relatively stable and cohesive adult community intent on caring for the needs of the young to a free-for-all of independent and fragmented adults seeking their own survival, individual adolescents found themselves in a deepening hole of systemic rejection. This rejection, or abandonment, of adolescents is the root of the fragmentation and calloused distancing that are the hallmarks of the adolescent culture. The evidence for and the eventual consequences of this trend are the basis of this book.

Internal Impact of a Changing Culture

Virtually every theory and scholar of human development recognizes the importance of a stable familial environment on the developmental health of a child and adolescent. From Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby's work on childhood attachments[34] and Margaret Mahler's work on childhood separation-individuation[35] to Peter Blos's "second" separation-individuation[36] and William Damon's youth charter,[37] a great deal of research, scholarly investigation, and resultant intervention strategies have gone into trying to understand and address the psychosocial needs of children and adolescents. Yet the cultural changes that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s also had a powerful implicit and internal impact on development that, like a social earthquake, caused so much foundational damage that historically dependable developmental theories and assumptions must be revisited.

One of the most underreported but striking aspects of these years occurred within the structure of the family itself. David Elkind, in his book *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance,* argues that during the post–World War II era of American family life, men enjoyed stable, routinized family lives; children and adolescents were nurtured and cared for; and women experienced a disproportionate burden of expectations, roles, and responsibilities. As the culture virtually dismantled previously rigid guidelines for family life, a new family imbalance occurred as men and women attempted to redefine their roles and relationships within the family system. The consequences of this imbalance began to fall to the child/adolescent, who was left to fend for himself or herself as parents sought to find their own way in life.[38]

Since the late 1960s and 70s, two powerful shifts occurred, changing the way adolescents perceive the familial reality and influencing how they see themselves. The first shift was the way in which the definition of family was radically altered from the long-held definition of "two or more persons related by birth, marriage or adoption who reside in the same household"[39] to the current definition of a free-flowing, organic "commitment" between people who love each other. This is exemplified in a Tufts University course for undergraduates titled "Family and Intimate Relationships," in which family is "defined broadly as those with whom one shares resources and values and to whom one has a long-term commitment."[40] The second shift involved how we view the institution of the family itself. We moved from a culture with a divorce rate that affected 2 percent of the married population in 1940 (264,000)[41] to a society in which 43 percent of first-time marriages end in separation or divorce within fifteen years of marriage, as of 2002.[42] Recent statistics show that in 2008, 67 percent of children ages zero to seventeen lived with two married parents, down from 77 percent in 1980.[43]

I observed this new ratio firsthand while attending a dance competition in Orlando with my daughter. Of the thirteen girls on the team, all from the high school where this study took place, more than half came from divorced families. Of the parents who attended, one forty-year-old mother brought her sixty-seven-year-old live-in boyfriend, and a fifty-six-year-old father was accompanied by his thirty-one-year-old girlfriend, while his ex-wife brought her live-in boyfriend. It is indeed a new day when it comes to what the word *family* means.

For the adolescent who is trying to hold on to something, at times anything, that is stable and safe, societal mores and parental choices concerning divorce, adult sexuality, and the trend for unmarried parents to cohabitate while children are in the home has had a noticeable impact. In the course of my study, I found that for many kids this effect has been powerfully destructive, and the pain and betrayal they experience

are real. The reshaped definition of family has been used to affirm and legitimize even the most casual of liaisons, and this change represents a monumental shift in social history. The adolescent is left to discern how to handle the conflicting messages related to home, stable relationships, and internal security—all while trying to figure out how to survive lengthened adolescence. This only adds to the aloneness most young people feel.

The Emergence of Midadolescence

Beginning in 1904 with G. Stanley Hall's two-volume *Adolescence*, and throughout the last hundred years of focused attention and research on adolescence, the almost universally accepted concept of adolescence held that it involved two stages: early and late adolescence. During this time, studies and theories generally dealt with adolescence as a unit, but occasionally they would focus on or highlight one stage or the other. For most of the twentieth century, since adolescence lasted a relatively stable three to five years, this was an appropriate framework in which to study the phenomenon. As the average age of menarche began to drop, however, and as adolescents began to delay entrance into adulthood (for reasons to be discussed later), adolescence began to lengthen. Until approximately 1960 or 1970, for example, the average age of menarche was thirteen years, and most people met the test of individuation by the time they graduated from high school. Thus, adolescence was a five-year process. Junior-high-aged students were described in academic literature as early adolescents, and high school students were late adolescents.

A shift began as early as 1980 with the emergence of an entirely new stage in the adolescent process. Early adolescents were still defined as junior-high-aged students, but several studies included children as young as ten years old, considering them adolescents.[44] Late adolescents were still studied, but many of these studies focused on college-aged students or even graduate students and young adults.[45] The newly appointed stage known as *midadolescence* emerged as a distinct phase in the 1990s,[46] but little work has been done to define precisely the differences among these stages. The fact that social science has affirmed this new stage is remarkable because historical theories of development do not provide the necessary theoretical framework for studying this middle stage. An e-newsletter from the American Counseling Association defines midadolescence as follows:

> Midadolescence generally corresponds to grades 9 through 12 and ages 15 through 18. Many of the developmental changes of early adolescence are

> extended and refined during midadolescence. This period also presents new challenges and changes for high school students. . . . As students move through high school, they are progressively faced with important decisions regarding future schooling, career paths, and related options. This is both exciting and stressful for many adolescents. The exhilaration of new opportunities and freedoms is often coupled with a sense of isolation and vulnerability ("What if I make the wrong choice?"). Adolescents "face leaving the world that they have always known and stepping out on their own" (Wallbridge & Osachuk, 1995). Increased privileges, such as driving a car and scheduling one's own time, also represent increased responsibilities. Freedom and responsibility represent two sides of a developmental coin that can become a major source of conflict between high school students and their caregivers.[47]

While to those who spend time with midadolescents the information may seem obvious, the very fact that these kinds of unique characteristics are being discussed in academic circles is a new turn in adolescent literature. The authors recognize that midadolescence is a difficult time. The "exhilaration of new opportunities and freedoms . . . often coupled with a sense of isolation and vulnerability" mentioned above is but one of the paradoxical issues facing midadolescents in contemporary society. Dozens of other conflicting elements are unique to the modern midadolescent. This book is intended to cast some light on at least a few of these.

There are three major reasons why this is such a crucial new area of study. First, most of the newfound freedoms that accompany midadolescence were originally designed for late adolescence. The freedom that comes with the privilege to drive, for example, presents an opportunity to get away from the perceived confines of parental authority, to spend additional time with peers, and to find new avenues of discovery, adventure, and even risk. This freedom, however, used to be reserved for a late adolescent, one who was close to completing the adolescent journey and who, therefore, was better equipped to handle the consequences of the freedoms. A midadolescent, in contrast to a late adolescent, retains the residue of self-centered childhood and may not have the developmental acumen to make the kind of choices that make driving, to use this one example, safe. Without knowing the issues related to lengthened adolescence and the developmental reasons behind the newly apparent lack of driving responsibility, state governments across the United States have either raised the driving age or severely curtailed the initial freedoms a driver's license offers.

Second, because today adolescence lasts up to fifteen years, a midadolescent has a more difficult time than did previous high-school-aged students seeing college and career as the hope of a secure and fulfilling

> When it comes to high school life, most adults say, "I understand" or "I know, I was in high school once," but that was once and this is now. It's much harder to live life now than ever. You have one true friend, the one who is always there for you and the one who is there for you when you cry. All your other friends are just there. They listen and are fun to be around, but you can't always trust all your friends because some will betray you. Most of my friends are sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old and have had to go to their friend's funeral because they overdosed on drugs or alcohol. Three students died last year at my school because of drugs and alcohol. Two years ago there was a count of seventeen girls pregnant.
>
> high school student

future. In this study, for example, the attitude students had toward the future was "What's in it for me?" rather than "How am I going to make a difference in the world?" Thus, while appeals to the future may be motivating factors for some midadolescents, for the vast majority they can easily become one more adult mantra and therefore something to be dismissed.

Third, it has generally been assumed that high-school-aged students have the capacity for abstract thinking. What I noticed during this study, however, is that midadolescents' ability to engage in abstract thought is limited to the immediate context of a discussion. I observed a nearly universal inability to integrate the multiple selves of their lives with any sense of abstract cohesion. In other words, the most significant difference between midadolescents and late adolescents is that late adolescents can cogently discuss multifaceted concepts that cut across social and relational lines in a way that allows for the implications of that discussion to intersect with any level or relationship. Midadolescents, on the other hand, are fully capable of penetrating and insightful dialogue regarding a variety of topics and issues, but when it comes to applying the conclusions reached during these discussions to a relationship or social reality, especially in a different social context, they cannot see the connection. For example, students would go into great detail regarding the love they had for a parent and what that meant in terms of how they treated that parent. Yet a short time later, they would make arrangements with a

friend to deceive that same parent in order to do something that, if the parent found out about it, would cause great pain and heartache. When I pointed out this incompatibility to the student, almost always the response ranged from a blank stare, to rationalization, defensiveness, argumentation, and ultimately retreat so as not to have to face such a discussion.

I had glimpsed elements of these three midadolescent distinctives, and I had a hunch that this was just the tip of the iceberg of understanding this population. I chose, therefore, to attempt to get close enough to see for myself what was going on in their world. This book is concerned with one thing: to understand and describe what the adolescent world looks like through the eyes of those who live it.

Why This Book?

I wrote this book because I believe that adults understand very little of the inside life of the American teenager, especially the midadolescent. Now, after a few years of living with midadolescents and looking through the lens of their life experience, I am more convinced than ever that adults need to be more astute students of the kids we are mandated by society to nurture.

Here is a summary of the basic issues that drive this book:

- Most adults intuitively believe that things are different for today's adolescents, but they hold on to rhetoric and attitudes that support the fantasy that little has changed.
- Academics and social science researchers are divided over what is different, but little work has been done to see inside the hidden lives of midadolescents.
- As I studied students and culture, I came to believe that we as a society have allowed the institutions and systems originally designed to nurture children and adolescents to lose their missional mandate. In other words, society has systemically abandoned the young.
- Young people are desperate for an adult who cares. Certainly, some adolescents have been so wounded that rebuilding trust may appear almost insurmountable. Yet those who serve them with tenderness and respect will testify that even the hardest young soul cries out for someone who authentically cares.

This is not a how-to book but rather a wake-up call to help every adult recognize and struggle with what our choices as adults have done to the children of our society. The majority of this book will explore the issues resulting from feelings of abandonment among adolescents and reflect on what has occurred as a result. A few solutions are offered in the final chapter, but these are somewhat obvious. We as adults need to roll up our sleeves and invest in the lives of individual young people.