

Zoo or Jungle? Our Teens in the Cyberworld

with Rev. Dr. Timothy Quek

Senior Pastor, Scarborough Community Alliance Church

Teens Conference

March 15, 2011

Zoo or Jungle?

From a parent's perspective:

Zoo: A fad we can control; meets a temporary need (for entertainment)

Jungle: A trend we need to understand; fulfils a deeper, resident need (for contentment)

From a teen's perspective:

Zoo: Interesting, but not completely real; I can visit, but why be a member?

Jungle: Exciting, but not without dangers; I don't want to visit unless I'm a member

Teens in the Cyberworld

3 factors that are significant to our Teens define their involvement in the Cyberworld:

1. The desire for Community – “forming a Tribe”
2. The redefinition of Privacy – “Clothes vs. Closet”
3. The boundaries of Expression – “Venting vs. Meaning”

1. Forming a Tribe: the desire for Community

What is a Tribe?

A Tribe is a generally cohesive group defined by three aspects of its culture:

1. A common language (identity/meaning)
2. A common destiny (values/goals)
3. A common ethic (social freedom)

1. Unlike parents who grew up in the Cold War era (1945-1990), our Teens (13-18 yrs) live in an emerging culture of social connectivity and social causes;
2. The era of social networking exploded into the Internet world in 2002 with Friendster, then MSN Messenger (2003), Myspace (2003), and Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006);
3. Every social networking site attracts the formation of tribes – common language, destiny, ethic – that provides our children with a sense of belonging and self expression;

4. This is the “social networking generation” – from facebookers to bloggers, texters to tweeters – that live with private thoughts in public view;
5. At the heart of the attractiveness of the Internet to the Teen culture is the inherent ability to socialize quickly.

Why do Teens Join Tribes?

1. My Tribe provides me with a sense of identity (“I am me”) beyond that which is prescribed by others;
2. My Tribe is the family I choose based on values ranging from the simplistic (“I like/I don’t like”) to the complex (“I believe/I don’t believe”);
3. Once I’m part of a Tribe, I’m free to be myself. The larger the Tribe, the greater the freedom.

How do we respond?

1. Join social networking. A parent who doesn’t understand the child’s world is an alien parent – alien to the child and alien to the tribe;
2. Understand the way your child’s tribe works by first observing and listening, and then echoing in everyday life;
3. Remember the second foundation of a tribe - destiny. Talk to your child about social values they encounter;
4. Use value-based communication, that is, state your values clearly without a lecture. Speak about your values from a Biblical point of view;
5. Try using the “face value” rule. Stop yourself from inserting your own meaning beyond what your child says;
6. If your child allows you to be part of their online tribe, don’t make yourself the obvious parent. Enjoy the fun they enjoy. Encounter the bullies they face.

2. “Clothes vs. Closet”: the redefinition of Privacy

In the Cyberworld of social networking, the concept of privacy has an altered meaning:

1. A host of personal information that parents would consider as “private” is posted as instruments of self-expression – “Clothes”. While online gaming emphasizes anonymity, social networking emphasizes presentation;
2. One concept of “clothes” is the expression of preferences: style, likes-dislikes, spontaneous, and today-oriented. This is the statement of the validity of “now”;
3. The practice of “tagging” and “commenting” exceeds non-online social relationships by reducing the awkwardness of interaction. Tagging allows interaction without justification and provides a safe place for opinion;

4. Like clothes, self-expression bears a risk. This is the basis for cyber-bullying, that is, where public posts are made of intimate detail, and repeated negative comments are made to the rest of the tribe. The primary response is shame;
5. Similar to the impact of cyber-bullying is parental commentary on the teen's online "clothes". The distinction between "clothes" and "closet" blurs, and the primary response is anger.

How do we respond?

1. Use the opportunities of your child for self-expression as a means of getting to know your child beyond your normal conversational depth;
2. The "in-the-moment" nature of "Clothes" allows you a gauge of your child's moods (* not just attitudes), and to minister to your child accordingly;
3. If something significant happens, you may first find out about it online. It provides an opportunity for preparation to respond;
4. Help your child to distinguish boundaries between "clothes" and "closet" when bullying occurs;
5. Keep Ephesians 6:4 in mind when addressing "issues" or commenting on "clothes". What others know of your child is, in the long run, less essential than what your child remembers about the relationship with you.

3. "Venting vs. Meaning": the boundaries of Expression

Basic to the Cyberworld of social networking is the instrument of expression – mostly in words, but also in pictures and videos.

1. Hence, the bulk of self expression takes place as in-the-moment texts that connect the tribe in a movement of expression seldom found in face-to-face social interaction;
2. In network spaces where the "crowd" and chatter is not as evident, self expression from the individual is usually diary-like and usually dark;
- 3 "Dark" expressions may take the form of emotional vents or philosophical ramblings mixed in with thoughts from the popular culture;
4. Most of these "dark" expressions are magnified under the lens of a silent audience (the Tribe) – they tend to be dramatized, emotionalized, and simplistic;

5. At times, these may accompany anger, talk of “ending it all”, self-harm or “not wanting to be here.” In short, they appear depressive in nature, sometimes with suicide ideation.

How do we respond?

1. Take venting as a normal part of teenage angst. With the effect of magnification, these vents may seem greater than the actual emotions;
2. The dilemma is in either over-reacting or not doing anything in time. By the former, we incur negative reactions; by the latter, we fail in timely intervention;
3. One key to distinguishing cyber-expression from real emotions is the behaviour of the tribe. How does everyone online react? If there are comfort reactions from the tribe, watch and wait; if there are negative reactions, be prepared to intervene; if there is no reaction, take action.
4. A second (often more difficult) method is the observation of actual behaviour. Are there distinct changes in mood and behaviour? This is difficult because many parents do not have a good sense of the baseline of “normal” behaviour. Asking for familiar outside observation may serve just as well.

Final Observations

How do we act as believers in the evolving culture of the Last Days?

“But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

And as you make your way through this jungle...

“The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you.” (2 Timothy 4:22)