



# UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S YOUTH

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## Hooked

*Kids have always been interested in sex. It's everywhere. They are growing up in a culture that glorifies sexiness and lack of restraint. Modesty is out and pushing the boundaries of decency is in. It's built into their music, magazines, media, and even their minds.*

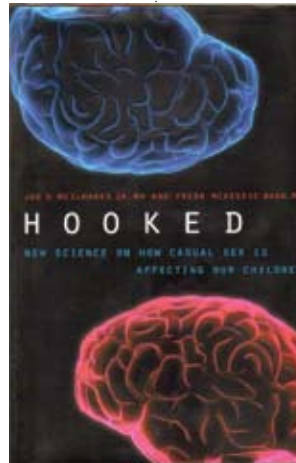
In a fascinating new book, *HOOKED: New Science on How Casual Sex is Affecting Our Children*, authors Joe McIlhane and Freda Bush reveals the latest research on brain development and sex. For prepubescent kids, sexual things really are asleep until the great "awakening" occurs and it appears to be directly tied to brain maturity. As our children go through physical changes on their way to adulthood, their minds are also undergoing tremendous modifications.

Thanks to modern science we are able to better understand the connection between sexual interest and their moldable brain. *HOOKED* begins with the basics of brain functioning. **Synapses** used to communicate between the neurons are the basis of how the brain develops. Simply put, it is the "use it or lose it" principle. Those parts of the brain which are most active (ie. thinking about sex, being bombarded with sexual messages in the media, experimenting with sex) are the parts that grow, survive and strengthen. The same principle applies with any activity or experience from playing a musical instrument to learning a new language.

**Dopamine** is the messenger chemical which makes a person feel good when he or she does something exciting or rewarding. It makes us feel the need or desire to repeat pleasurable acts such as close physical contact with another person.

**Oxytocin** is a neurochemical important to healthy sex and bonding which is primarily active in girls. It is released during meaningful and intimate touch-

ing with a partner. Oxytocin increases her desire for more touch and bonds her to this person. Research shows something as simple as a 20 second hug can trigger oxytocin in a girl making her want to trust and spend time with that person. Gazing and positive emotional interaction can do the same thing.



From this foundational base, the book goes on to show the development of the brain in the formation of lasting relationships while examining such factors as love, romance, and lust. It also examines the high social and psychological costs of getting involved too soon in sexual activities. This detailed examination gives parents and youth workers an amazing insight into adolescent sexuality.

McIlhane and Bush end with some encouraging advice. They stress the importance of high levels of parent-family connectedness. Parents who choose to spend time with the children are probably providing the best defense against sex before marriage. They also list several practical things for teenagers to do to avoid sexual entanglements – find a good friend with the same commitment about sex, write down your commitment, practice assertiveness in your relationships, don't get involved with someone who doesn't share your values, and many more.

This book is a must read for any parent or adult working with young people. Given the sexually toxic nature of today's pop culture, they will be better equipped to help children make it through this moral minefield.

## CULTURE QUOTE

“Today's youth don't know—or don't remember—a time when they weren't going online, so their adoption of online video has been seamless.”

**Michael Pond**  
Media Analyst,  
Nielsen Online

# Understanding why they do the things they do

*It is easy to spot the physical developments that come with adolescence while ignoring the importance brain growth. Believe it or not, there are even greater changes going on in the adolescent brain, and yet, instead, we tend to focus on bodily changes and not the mental.*

As young people move into their teen years, they face the challenge of dealing with an ever-changing brain. So much of their behaviour (sullenness, irritability, anger, and irrationality) is really related to what the mind is doing. It is a time when they are extremely concerned with a physical standard (set by the media) which they don't feel they measure up to, and a pre-occupation with what others think about them.

Adults need to remember that most kids are uncomfortable with this new mode of thinking. It takes time to adjust to – both for the young person and his/her parents. The change in thinking that takes place from childhood (believe whatever a parents says) to late adolescence (not sure any parent can be trusted) can be a bumpy road dotted with misunderstanding and misconceptions.

Here are six signs that your teenager is in fact thinking in a new key. They are also “normal” indicators of a maturing brain on its way to adulthood. Dr. David Elkind in his book *“All Grown Up and No Place to Go”* outlines the following:

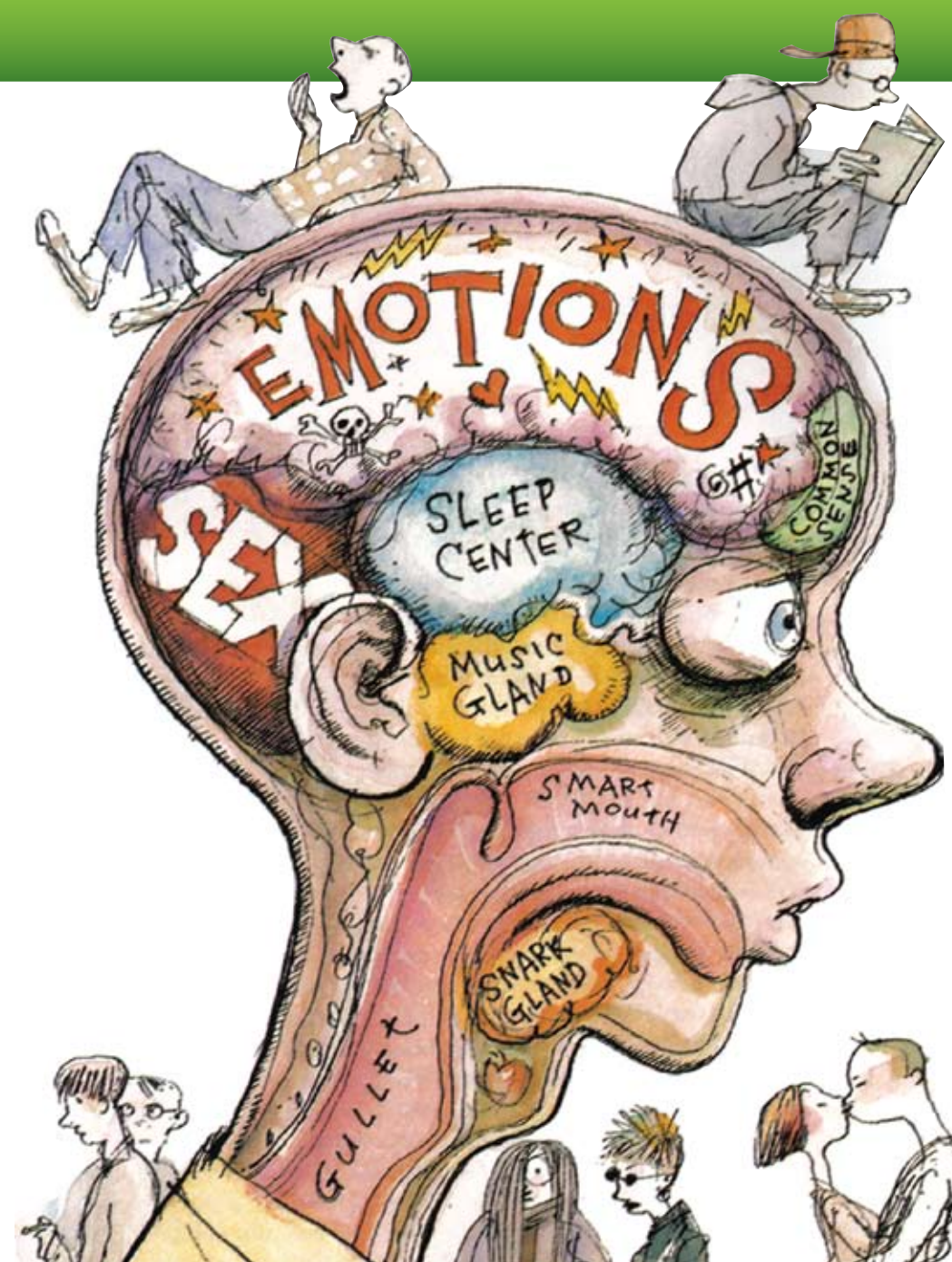
**First, they enjoy pointing out your flaws and shortcomings.** As their brain grows, teens are able to go beyond the real world to envision a world of possibilities. A planet filled with perfection. They develop a very discerning eye for the problems of the world including the imperfections of parents. Adults are generally blamed for the mess the world is in. Television reinforces this image via teen shows such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. In an effort to prove they are adults, teens express their disappointment in how they are being parented. Parents never listen, always love another sibling more, and never understand. This begins to explain why someone else's parents are always nicer and kinder than their own.

**Second, they like a good argument.** As the brain changes, teens acquire a growing abil-

ity to organize facts and ideas to make a case on whatever issue is of importance to them. It could be curfew, house rules, political views, or choosing friends. In a lot of ways, this new found “skill” is like the thrill of learning how to throw a baseball. They just want to practice every time they get a chance. They expect parents to give logical reasons why they are not allowed to do or say certain things. Teens are happy to defend their positions, usually from an emotional rather than logical perspective. The problem starts when teens take arguing to the point of persuasion or wearing the adults down until they give in. Although sometimes a painful process for parents, arguing is a sign of normal brain development.

**Third, they spend a lot of time thinking about themselves.** Teens spend hours thinking about the physical and emotional changes they are going through and can become very self-centered in the process. This is especially true in an image and media based culture and explains why they spend hours in front of the mirror. They assume everyone is also preoccupied with their appearance and become very aware of what Elkind calls the “imaginary audience.” They believe everyone is watching them and therefore they need to look good, wear designer clothes, and have the latest MP3 player. The marketers are happy to reinforce this belief through advertising which says “you are the centre of the universe and you better play the part.”

**Fourth, they can develop an inflated opinion of themselves.** Believing that everyone in the world is watching them, young people can develop a bit of an ego. They see themselves as special and invulnerable; nothing bad will ever happen to them. David Elkind reminds us that this “personal fable,” the story we tell ourselves but know it isn't true, is a valuable part of mental development. A boy might tell his



friends the prettiest girl at the party watched him all night or the grade 10 girl who opines that her history teacher thinks she is smartest kid in the class.

**Fifth, they can have trouble making even simple decisions.** Life for young people is made up of a series of decisions – what to wear, what to eat, what CD to buy. Making the right choice isn't always easy. Teens can be so overwhelmed with possibilities that it renders them incapable of making a decision, or at least complicates it. When forced to make their own decisions they will sometimes make bizarre choices and often make stupid decisions. We need to remember that the part of the brain responsible for sound decision-making isn't fully developed until they are about 25.

**Finally, they can begin to have questions about their faith.** Just as teens are beginning to develop their own individual identity, they realize that their parent's faith isn't necessarily theirs. Teens are filled with questions about everything in life and this also applies to religious beliefs. They might wonder if God even exists, why church is so boring, or why there are so many other religions. It might begin with a simple “I'm not going to church” to serious questions about what they have been “brought up” to believe. Again, this is simple indication of normal brain development. Teenagers realize there is a difference between institutionalized religion and a personal faith in a personal God. It is all about taking ownership for your life and worldview.

# Responding to a teen's new way of thinking

*Once parents (and anyone dealing with teens) understand that so much of their behaviour and words are a result of normal brain development, the next challenge is responding to them in a healthy way. The following suggestions will help kids cope with the many changes their minds are going through.*

So how should parents respond to all this “normal” behaviour? What does it mean for youth workers and others working closely with young people?

**First, parents shouldn't take their criticism too seriously but also shouldn't let it go unanswered.** Remembering this part of normal change, adults need to bring balance to their concerns. You might want to let them know you appreciate their input but are they also open to getting some feedback? They need to learn they are not perfect in a gentle but constructive way. Pointing out flaws begins when young people start to see themselves as individuals in contrast to others around them. It is part of normal identity formation. Parents need to raise kids with a critical and discerning eye. It will serve them well in the future.

**Second, parents need to help teens distinguish between arguments as logic and arguments as a persuasion.** Presenting a logical rationale for your position is a wonderful skill we want our kids to acquire. Their tendency is to argue from emotional places. Parents are wise to avoid arguing about matters of taste, preference, or interest such as hair styles and musical tastes. Adults need to focus on issues of character and integrity since the ultimate goal is to produce a young adult who can make it on their own.

**Third, parents need to bring balance to issues of self-centeredness.** There is a lot of media pressure on our kids to look their best when they walk out the door. Marketers have done a good job of convincing them that life is simply embarrassing without designer labels. Parents need to take the middle ground on these issues by bringing a healthy perspective to the pressures they face. The goal is to help them distinguish between the imaginary audience and the real world.

**Fourth, parents need to find ways to counter inflated egos and pride.** There is a fine line between self-confidence and arrogance. Parents need to help teens see that everyone is special. Everyone in the family has unique gifts which are to be appreciated. Parents also need to help teens see that there are ways in which we are the same and ways in which we are different but that's OK.

**Fifth, parents need to teach their kids how to make healthy decisions.** Teaching your teens how to make a correct choice is crucial. Parents will do well to play out scenarios (what if someone brings drugs to the party?), debrief bad choices (if you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?), and help them to think through consequences (what are the pros and cons of each possible decision?). Teens also need to learn to identify their emotions when making decisions (you don't always have to go shopping when you feel down).

**Finally, parents need to encourage their teens to continue on their faith journey.** When kids begin to ask the tough questions of their faith, they are looking for someone to give them solid answers. Family needs to be a place where a young person can question their faith while still being loved and respected. Parents need to encourage them to stay involved in the youth group. They might even want to let the youth pastor or volunteers know what is going on so they too can come alongside their son or daughter.

Being a parent or working with teenagers can be a daunting task. It can also be rewarding when we really understand why they do the things they do. Our response, based on a longer life experience, will make all the difference.

NOTE: This is a summary of a seminar by the same title from Paul Robertson. To host the seminar contact Paul at 905-453-7991.

# How technology is changing our kids

*Canadian kids are some of the most “wired” in the world. The stats show that 94% go online from home with 61% of them having high-speed access. Thirty-seven per cent have their own Internet-connected computer. An amazing 24% of Grade 4 students and 51% of Grade 11 students have access to the Net via their own personal computers. Fifty-six per cent of student’s phones have text messaging and 17% have cameras. In Grade 11, 31% of teens have their own Webcam.*



So what is the impact of all this technology on our kids? How does it shape who they are and what they will become? Walt Mueller, author of *Youth Culture 101*, and good friend of Youth Unlimited, gives us some great insights. He outlines seven trends shaping their lives and all are not necessarily for the good.

**One, the increased use of digital technologies is changing the way kids relate to others.** For many families, gone is the dinner time ritual of eating together. Many kitchens now have flat screen TVs that pre-empt any chance for family building time. Instead, kids are spending endless hours relating to unseen friends via digital technology. They spend less time face-to-face with siblings preferring to send text messages instead.

**Two, this alone time and tendency toward flying solo in the digital world leads to more autonomy and less accountability.** Younger and younger kids are accessing a wider range of information without adult guidance, rules, or answerability. Parents don’t let their kids wonder the neighbourhood but they are free to travel the world online?

**Three, instant and text messaging along with twittering have become huge and it is more than just words on the screen.** (The latest rage of “sexting” has become a real problem as well – tweens and teens taking cell phone shots of each other in various states of undress.) One young girl in the States reportedly sent out 14,000 text messages in one month without her parent’s knowledge. Texting seems so superficial compared to a telephone call, and especially when compared with the potential intimacy inherent in face-to-contact.

**Four, social networking and blogging are changing the way kids communicate.** Gone are the days of keeping your diary or journal under lock and key for fear someone might read them. Today kids post the most incredible details of their lives online for all to see – including

predators. Kids are starving for real relationships and connections. Do they even understand what a real live relationship is all about?

**Five, kids now have pornography at their finger tips.** Fifteen years ago a child’s first exposure to pornography was age 11; today it is age 5. Porn websites have now incorporated the 10,000 most common words used by children. In total, 10% of all web pages contain graphic sex. Porn is quickly becoming “normal” thanks to the overexposure it receives.

**Six, the digital revolution will fuel an already growing problem with cheating.** Given the pressures our kids are under to perform academically, it only seems natural that the rise in cheating will worsen with modern technology whether it’s plagiarism, buying papers online, text messaging for answers, or cell phone pics of tests quickly sent to eager recipients. Seventy per cent of students admit to cheating on a test.

**Seven, Internet addiction is a growing concern among those who track the health and welfare of teenagers.** The brain of a growing teenager already has a propensity toward addictive behaviours. We can now add the Internet to the list of drugs, alcohol, and smoking. Thousands of kids now believe the virtual world is more important than the real world.

There is no doubt that technology is changing the landscape our kids find themselves in. Certainly many of these trends are still unfolding. Parents and adults need to be diligent. Our kids need to know the dangers and the benefits of digital technology. Parents need to know where their kids have been and who they have been spending time with online. Privacy is not a right. It is a privilege to be earned and preserved.

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**Paul Robertson is the Youth Culture Specialist and Director of Church and Family Resources for Youth Unlimited.**

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