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Raising Us: Books with Insight into Teens

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ur society feeds teenagers contradictory messages about what we ought to feel, do, look like and be. As a group of teenagers, we have chosen seven books that can help readers understand our situation better.

Some of these books help more than others. And they all tend to identify society as the culprit more than we think necessary. As far as we know, none of these books is written by a Christian. But we think all of them deserve the attention of parents, pastors and teachers.

Many of these authors identify pressures that teens face. We believe that the adults in our homes, churches and schools can help us respond to these pressures in ways that give us greater peace of mind and confidence in ourselves. Good responses to these pressures can increase our ability to be all we can be in the Church and in society. At the end of these book reviews, we try to start a conversation by suggesting 10 ways to help us.

“Kids don’t think the way others think they think,” someone says in the book A Tribe Apart. That person is right, and so we’re trying to set the record straight. We also want more parents and other adults who work with us to know about these invaluable books.

Books about teen girls
Several of the books we review were inspired by Mary Pipher’s 1994 book, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (Ballantine, 1994; ISBN 0345392825), so we begin there. This book details some of the struggles adolescent girls
Into Teens

face in today's society. In it Mary Pipher asks if young women in our culture can enjoy happy, healthy teenage years while facing the pressures society puts on them. She discusses issues such as drugs, alcohol, violence, sex, self-mutilation and anorexia.

As a psychiatrist specializing in adolescent girls, Pipher often meets girls who are finding it hard to cope. In her book she draws on many of her clients' experiences and recounts the course of action she recommended in each case. She offers helpful advice on how to deal with teenage girls, when to help, and when to leave well enough alone.

Pipher also outlines realistic approaches for any adolescent girl searching for a way to live based in her "true self." Pipher argues that if a girl can find and nurture that self, she can emerge healthy from her adolescence, having stared down the pressures of society. Pipher blames our culture for such conflicting messages as "Be sexy but don't be a slut" and "Be smart but don't be too smart."

With its critique of culture, revealing stories and many clinical insights, Reviving Ophelia helps adults understand how culture is affecting young women today.

From a dramatically different direction, and from an author barely finished university, comes A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue (by Wendy Shalit. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999; ISBN 000255741). For Shalit, modesty is not about snubbing men, but it is about postponing sexual pleasure until the right time. Shalit's book offers a refreshing view of the potential for women in today's culture to return to modesty and stop sending men mixed messages.

From her research, much of it anecdotal, Shalit concludes that street harassment, pornography, disease, rape, eating disorders, depression, and dysfunctional relationships would all decline if we took some cues from previous, more romantic generations.

Shalit urges us to return to a standard of modest dress that embodies beauty as well as mystique. In response to our culture's direction, parents are to train their daughters in proper etiquette and dress, a viewpoint that some may find reactionary but which Shalit presents very persuasively. With the help of adult mentors, girls can discover a kind of modest womanhood largely unknown in our own time.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg's The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls (Random House, 1997; ISBN 0679402977) completes this trio of books focused on the pressures society places on girls. The Body Project offers a riveting history of girls that traces a culture's successive ideal images of the body from the era of repression in the 1800s to today's culture of obsession.

This book makes for an interesting journey through recent cultural history, explaining how teenage girls have dealt with life during distinct eras. Brumberg takes an intimate plunge into the world of adolescent girls, dealing with such matters as menstruation, brassieres, acne, dieting and sex, always against the backdrop of changing cultural ideals of the female body.

By citing diary entries from as far back as the 1800s, Brumberg offers glimpses into the lives of teenage girls. At times she underuses these personal glimpses, moving to her own interpretation too quickly when the entries might have been more powerful on their own. However, the entries that she chooses are smart, interesting and at times humorous.

Brumberg argues that each generation has brought with it the burden of meeting specified beauty requirements or body projects. For example, in the 1950s girls would stop at nothing to gain full breasts. Then the 1970s required tight pants and toned legs, bottoms and stomachs. Each body project focuses on different features of the female anatomy, leaving obsessions in its wake and causing girls' lives to become more difficult.

What Reviving Ophelia, A Return to Modesty and The Body Project try to do for teenage girls, several books are now trying to do for boys. The three mentioned below are particularly insightful.

Books about teen boys

William Pollack, in Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood (Random House, 1998; ISBN 0375501312), explicitly wants to offer a Reviving Ophelia for boys. He argues a now familiar point: society confuses boys by sending them...
double messages. For example, women and girls tell boys that they should be sensitive, they should express their feelings and they should let people know when they hurt. However, boys hear from coaches, peers and possibly their fathers that they should be tough and keep the pain hidden, what Pollack calls the boy code.

Add to the code the cultural myth of the toxicity of boys—the stereotype that they, all of them, are the bad ones—and you have the potential to damage boys for life. At one point in Real Boys Pollack remarks that the typical name for a group of five boys standing together is “a gang.” That stereotype catches his point succinctly; society views boys as bad.

In striving to revise the image, he argues that boys have as many feelings as girls; they simply need permission to express how they feel. Without that permission, boys become frustrated and express that frustration anti-socially.

Pollack perhaps goes too easy on boys, and his views on sexuality will no doubt leave some Christians wondering. But overall the book is well worth the time it takes to read.

Michael Gurian makes a statement in praise of boys in The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors and Educators Can Do to Shape Boys Into Exceptional Men (Tarcher/Putnam, 1996; ISBN 087477831X). His book aims to help readers realize the overwhelming importance of being the parent or mentor of boys—and to act on that realization. Gurian’s approach works well.

In the first of the book’s three sections, he addresses the nearly universal question: Why do boys act the way they do? Here, Gurian focuses especially on boys’ aggression levels and their tendency to socialize in large groups.

He addresses parts two and three of The Wonder of Boys directly to the book’s intended audience of parents, mentors and educators. In these two sections, he includes the principles that he believes should guide the development of every boy if he is to experience a healthy life.

Gurian ends his book on this hopeful note: despite all the condemnation heaped on young males, we can still find suitable ways to reach our boys what they need to know for life.

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys (by Dan Kindlon, Michael Thompson and Teresa Barker; Ballantine, 1999; ISBN 0345424573) offers a third sympathetic look at boys. The authors explore boys’ secret lives and try to break some of the boy stereotypes—or at least to explain them. These psychologists offer excellent insights to help people

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Teen Advice for Adults

1. Face the truth: we live in this culture.
2. Let us make our mistakes; we won’t get it all right the first time. If we mess up, don’t condemn us, but help us go through it.
3. Let’s please have more open conversation so that we can all find out what each other thinks. You can hear what we think you think, and we can hear what you think we think . . . and not get in trouble with each other.
4. Spend more time with us, even if it means you won’t bring home as much pay—and start when we’re young.
5. Teens need to be connected to the eternal; we need to be grounded to withstand the cultural pressures. Especially when people let us down, we need be connected to something greater than ourselves or this culture so that we are not crushed. Don’t shelter us from the world but explain to us why things are wrong.
6. Adults need to fight stereotypes about what boys should do and what girls should do. Also, please think against the stereotypes about what we are like; not all teens are into sex, drugs and alcohol.
7. Please model for us what you want us to become. Show us what decency, etiquette, modesty, civility and appropriate behavior look like. Help us acquire appropriate habits when we are still young.
8. Because teens need to change our views about perfection—especially about our own bodies—adults should encourage self-confidence that focuses less on our physical appearance and more on who we are as people. Remind us not to compare ourselves to supermodels and superathletes.
9. Adults need to instil in children enough self-confidence that when we become teens we are more grounded and can make the right decisions. Help us be aware of and keep away from things that make us feel bad about ourselves. Help us find things that we can excel in. Tell us when we do something well. And tell us when we do something good. Encourage our dreams, not yours.
10. Schools should assign teachers a small group of students that they will keep in touch with.
who deal with young males respond better to the problems they face.

The three authors range across issues such as sex, alcoholism and drugs, all potential menaces to boys' healthy development in today's society. They offer excellent advice about how to act toward boys who, whether we want to admit it or not, must face these pressures regularly.

Echoing the emphases of Real Boys, they suggest some reasons why boys act as they do. For example, why do boys often put up an emotional brick wall in front of themselves? Why do they give in so easily to the desire to be tough?

We recommend this book as an excellent resource for anyone who has worked or is working with boys.

A tour through high school
A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence takes a markedly different approach from all the titles we have reviewed so far (by Patricia Hersch; Fawcett-Columbine, 1998; ISBN 0449907678). It comes not from a counseling practice but from an ethnographic study of both genders in a high school, carried out by a mother. Patricia Hersch attended a large secondary school for four years to gather material for her book. Many depictions of teens never get past the stereotypes, but A Tribe Apart is a story of the lives of eight specific teenagers from Reston, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C.

In recounting their stories, Hersch provides us with a refreshingly unprejudiced and uncensored look at teenage life in general. She reveals the contradictions teens live with every day and shows how in 24 hours we can experience both ends of the emotional spectrum.

The book divides into three parts. In the first, "Stepping Inside," Hersch writes about her observations as a visitor. The second, "Making Contact," recounts the beginnings of the process in which her subjects begin to tell their stories. In "Making Sense," the last section, Hersch quotes extensively from her interviews, leaving us with the unmistakable sense that we have seen and heard what she saw and heard.

Teenagers understand that their parents' hearts could break if they ever grasped all the issues their teenagers face in their lives. Hersch's sources are not proud of all that they allow into their lives, yet they have confided in her, many of them sharing intimate secrets. Readers of A Tribe Apart will wonder what her subjects thought as they poured out their lives to her. She is never judgmental but lets the teens tell their own stories.

In our view, the only negative point in A Tribe Apart is Hersch's failure to try to tackle religion, a characteristic failure among the titles we have reviewed here. She mentions some teens' attendance at church and their dislike for it because they see hypocrisy. However, she fails to go beyond that in her discussion of religion. Considering the part religion plays in many lives, including our own, we find this omission disappointing.

Nevertheless, we recommend A Tribe Apart for anyone who wants to understand how teenagers live and think, or who wants to know the inside story on a large contemporary high school. Hersch will give a guided tour you will remember for some time to come.

Christians may not be comfortable with everything the authors say in the books we have reviewed here. At some points, our authors are more open to pre-marital sex and to drug experimentation than we are. Sometimes we think these authors blame everyone but the people responsible for the situations they get into, and we want to be prepared to take at least some responsibility ourselves. However, we still believe that for anyone who works with and wants to understand young people, these books will prove indispensable.