



## Mixed Messages

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Andrew is a tech-savvy sixth-grader. His bedroom has satellite TV and a computer. He listens to MP3s, and he blogs and emails daily. For Christmas, Andrew's parents bought him a video iPod. He text-messages his friends on his cell phone. He even taught his dad to program TiVo. And last week he visited his first pornographic Web site (on a dare). Andrew feels at home in front of screens, but he finds church irrelevant. "I love Jesus," he says, "but church doesn't help me much."

Hannah enjoys video games, especially *The Legend of Zelda* and *The Sims*. She has a digital camera and keeps a photo journal. In her fourth-grade class, she learned PowerPoint and digital art. She's created dozens of visual masterpieces, including several with religious themes. Hannah reads *Cosmogirl* (a girl at church gave it to her) and is fashion-conscious. Hannah struggles with church and especially with modesty. "I don't see the big deal," she says, "about wearing my low-rider jeans."

Bryan quotes lines from movies including *Bruce Almighty* and *The School of Rock*. To his delight, his class attended the Narnia movie. He admits he's learned most swear words from movies, but says he won't watch anything steamier than a kiss on screen. Bryan has overheard schoolyard conversations about oral sex but confesses he's clueless. Bryan is also struggling in his faith. "I hope God is like the guy in *Bruce Almighty*," he says, "but my Sunday school teacher didn't like that movie."

Today's kids are a different breed. Sure they face similar pressures to the ones we did, but let's face it: Kids' cultural influences are vastly different than ours were. It isn't "family hour" anymore. Beaver has truly left the building. It's not exactly 7th Heaven on network television, and *Sex in the City* rules cable. Everybody seems to love Raymond more than righteousness. Home Improvement sounds so 1990s -- and virtues seem like they've vanished without a trace.

I heard my first movie cuss word at 10 (*The Cowboys* with John Wayne). At 17, I regrettably snuck into *10*, starring Bo Derek, and witnessed my first nude sex scene.

Today, though, there's not much need for sneaking. TV's family-friendly *Extreme Makeover: Home*

Edition morphs into the sexually-charged *Desperate Housewives* without warning. The recent family edition of *The Amazing Race* featured "mooning," lewd comments, and crass jokes (while the most insensitive, mean-spirited, and aloof family was a Scripture- quoting Christian family). FOXSports' most popular sports show is *The Best Damn Sports Show Period*. Afternoon television features Jerry Springer, saucy soaps, and explicit discussions. Popular music is riddled with profanity, sexuality, substance abuse, and violence. Mean girls and bad boys are Hollywood icons. Nudity sells seats. Senseless violence and graphic language are unremarkable. Salacious adult themes even pervade animated kids' flicks such as *Shrek*. Even if you censor television and movies, you're caught unaware by commercials for inappropriate programming, sexual enhancement products, and adult entertainment. Even our local football games are interrupted by advertisements by the downtown strip clubs. Our kids live in a minefield of moral corruption.

Perhaps an even greater issue for Christian parents and leaders is knowing what to do when kids' cultural icons send confusing -- even contradictory -- messages. Red-hot rapper Kanye West professes Christianity and then delivers profanity-laced lyrics, including the award-winning gospel song "Jesus Walks." Country superstar Toby Keith sings the spiritually insightful "If I Was Jesus" -- as well as tunes glorifying adultery, alcohol, and revenge. Jessica Simpson says she advocates virginity and Christian values, but dresses provocatively and makes millions selling her sexuality. "Jesus is my homeboy" T-shirts are fashion accessories on stars such as Paris Hilton and Ashton Kutcher. Professional athletes, actors, and musicians credit Christ with their success, yet publicly worship sex, drugs, alcohol, and money.

It's no wonder children get mixed messages about God, Jesus, and Christianity. In our culture, discerning truth is downright difficult. Our kids struggle to differentiate between piety and parade. Children rely on their parents and other adults to help them navigate life and learn which messages matter. The question is, how do we respond to cultural influences, especially the negative and profane?

### **It's a Sick, Sick World**

Bird flu is spreading through Europe. AIDS is decimating Africa. Countless viruses pollute the air. Salmonella, E. coli, and other toxins threaten our food supplies. If we truly knew the dangers, we wouldn't dare breathe or swallow. Similarly, our cultural air harbors pollutants -- sexual innuendo, graphic violence, profanity, explicit sex, and nudity -- most of which are cleverly repackaged and marketed to our children in movies, television, books, magazines, and Web sites.

Historically, we Christians have responded to negative cultural messages through isolation. Monasteries are a notable example, but so is the Christian "subculture" -- Christian music, art, bookstores, colleges, radio, films, and television. The wall separating church and state has been built by both sides. But quarantines are never permanent solutions for disease -- either cultural or biological.

The other extreme we use to approach cultural messages is through immersion. This reaction encourages a no-holds-barred baptism into cultural waters where children are introduced to various values without censorship or instruction. Parents escort kids to R-rated movies and purchase raunchy CDs or explicit video games despite warnings and clear statistical evidence against such parenting practices.

Yet another approach to cultural messages is through inoculation. Inoculation occurs when we recognize that many cultural messages are offensive, repugnant, and dangerous -- and above all that they do exist. But rather than isolating from or immersing in this cultural soup, we deliberately introduce the harmful or offensive agent into our systems. This "cultural vaccination" will gradually help kids grow immunity -- or decisive righteousness -- against the behaviors propagated in cultural media.

This doesn't mean "anything goes." Some things, such as graphic violence and sexual activity involving nudity, should never be introduced to children. Jesus actually calls Christians to a fourth option: incarnation. He says we are to live in the world but not of it. Jesus stepped out of heaven and incarnated into human existence, but remained sinless.

Incarnational Christianity encourages believers to live in a culture with offensive messages and activities without falling prey to their seductions by relying on God. Incarnation is possible if we adopt "3-D" cultural vision.

Your children's ministry can grow G-rated kids in an R-rated culture to love truth, purity, and righteousness if you'll incorporate and wear 3-D glasses for your ministry. Your ministry will impact the heart (or values), the mind (or choices), and the behavior of every child you reach. What does 3-D vision of children's ministry look like?

### **Dialogue**

Conversation about cultural messages is crucial. Equip parents to engage kids in dialogue about what they're seeing and hearing. Too many schoolyard discussions never make it home. Most Christian parents struggle to talk with their children about the explicit nature of television, movies, books, or music. So kids converse with each other. Instead, spend time listening to the artists your kids like. Watch their TV shows. Do you know why Fear Factor is a fifth-grade boy's favorite program? Have you read Harry Potter? Or taken a look at Nelly's lyrics? And now the real test. Can you build an incarnational bridge from your world to kids'?

Could you use a clip from Star Wars to teach a biblical truth? Or a U2 lyric? Or a scene from Survivor? You can't dialogue until you understand and empathize. For ways to teach using kids' entertainment, go to Web Extras at [www.cmmag.com](http://www.cmmag.com).

Remember, Jesus stepped into our world through incarnation because we couldn't climb to his.

### **Discernment**

Engaging cultural messages without teaching discernment is dangerous. Media messages aren't neutral. Consequently, kids must learn context. For example, profanity and bloody violence is expected in a war movie, but it's edgy and unnecessary in many comedies or dramas. Nudity is natural in the historical Schindler's List, but gratuitous in Titanic. The magic in Narnia is different from that in Potter. Drug references in Walk the Line are acceptable, but often pointless in other films.

A slow immunization to these messages is key. Parents and leaders have to exercise discernment and discrimination themselves. Preschoolers require wholesale protection from even mildly offensive content, while older children must learn context. Most children learn inappropriate language inappropriately. They've heard it so they repeat it.

A couple years ago my son discovered his middle finger. He didn't understand the power of this fleshly digit. First he and I discussed the gesture's meaning. I taught him the context of where he'd likely see it used, and then suggested its appropriateness, or why he should avoid it. I modeled personal discernment.

Too many leaders and parents might've come unglued at their fourth-grader flipping off the neighbors. The problem wasn't my son's insolence, but his ignorance. To my knowledge he's kept his fingers properly holstered ever since.

## Discipline

The most difficult, and yet most important, factor is discipline. Most people know their actions are wrong, but they just can't stop doing them. Their vices become habits. Profanity flies. Sexual conversation flows. Violence happens. Have you ever wondered where a preschooler learns to hit? or to "spoon" another child? or curse? These are learned through personal experience. They experience it at home, school, even church. They're acting upon what they've learned. Consequently, parents, teachers, and leaders must protect kids' emotional and physical safety and discourage (even remove) offending behavior. Hurt children hurt children. Too many parents think its "cute" when little Joey uses the f-word but fail to recognize that 10 years later his "cuteness" will be social suicide.

We removed our daughter once from a church classroom where another child was biting and hitting. We were criticized but our daughter's safety was too important. The teacher wouldn't deal with the offending child and so we had to take action. We aren't doing children favors when we give them free behavioral passes.

A good test of cultural discipleship is to visit your church's youth ministry. Listen to the teenagers' conversations. Ask them what movies they attend. Inquire about their musical tastes. Learn what magazines and books they read. Watch how they treat each other. These kids were once in your children's ministry. Hopefully you'll find seasoned talk, not salty language. Hopefully you'll discover they choose appropriate movies, music, and magazines. Hopefully they dress with modesty. What you see is what they got.

Ultimately, by pursuing dialogue, discernment, and discipline, we'll equip children to engage their culture incarnationally. As the children's song says, we mustn't "hide [our light] under a bush." Isolation isn't the answer. But neither should we cast our pearls before swine. Cultural immersion is dangerous. Only inoculation and incarnational living are suitable solutions -- the solutions modeled by Jesus. Jesus walks when that happens. That's where Kanye West got it right.

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## Tools for Leaders

Stay abreast of cultural trends, language, and icons with these resources.

- Children's Ministry Magazine ([www.cmmag.com](http://www.cmmag.com)) -- [Leading](#) resource for trends, ideas, and information about children's culture.
- The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding ([www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org)) -- Youth culture analysis and reflection.
- Kidscreen ([www.kidscreen.com](http://www.kidscreen.com)) -- Studies kid culture with a magnifying glass and reports on hot products, technology, and media impacting kids.
- Ministry and Media ([www.ministryandmedia.com](http://www.ministryandmedia.com)) -- The one-stop site for ideas and insights on using media (television, movies, music) within ministry.
- USA Today ([www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)) -- The "nation's newspaper" is also a goldmine for current statistics, news, and opinions.
- Relevant ([www.relevantmagazine.com](http://www.relevantmagazine.com)) -- A cultural magazine to equip Christians to better

interpret and engage their world.

- Wired (www.wired.com) -- A cutting-edge technology periodical "wired" to understanding the fringe of cultural innovations.

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## What's Your Cultural Relevance Quotient?

Answer the following questions with a 1 to 6 rating:

1 = Always true

2 = Usually true

3 = Occasionally true

4 = Occasionally false

5 = Usually false

6 = Always false

1. I read and/or subscribe to newspapers such as USA Today and magazines such as People or US Weekly.

2. I view channels, programs, and Web sites I hear my children talking about and can name several of their favorites.

3. I believe Christians should live actively within culture and never completely separate, even when cultural messages are offensive.

4. I use secular music, movies, and television when I teach children spiritual truths.

5. Though I find many messages in the media disturbing, I generally tend to be positive about what I see and hear.

### Total your score:

26-30: Survivor -- I clearly prefer isolation from culture.

21-25: Fear Factor -- I find much of worldly culture disturbing.

16-20: Temptation Island -- I struggle mixing God and culture.

11-15: Extreme Makeover: Home Edition -- I'm working to find ways to connect with children and their culture.

6-10: The Apprentice -- I'm learning to dialogue on culture.

1-5: Bob the Builder -- I love building cultural bridges into children's lives.

*Please keep in mind that phone numbers, addresses, and prices are subject to change.*

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