

The Secret Wish of Many Teenagers—and How You Can Grant It

Several months ago, I was experiencing something I love about fall: high school football. There's a lot of excitement under the Friday-night lights; however, equally intriguing to me is observing teenage culture. After working with adolescents for 15 years, I naturally become a social scientist when I am back in their environment. My eyes go back and forth from the game to the student section. I look at the way they are dressed, observe their facial expressions and even listen to their conversations as they congregate around me in the line at the snack bar.

Over the years, I have literally spent thousands of hours talking to teens and stepping into their culture. They are loud, insecure, obnoxious, funny, most of the time vulgar and desperate for one thing. Teens these days have a deep longing to communicate—if you are observant. This is the secret wish of every teenager.

To Be Noticed

They are in competition with each other to get noticed. When you see teens in groups being loud, it's not that they are just being obnoxious. They are desperate for attention. The more positive attention they receive, the more it makes them feel valuable as a person. So they work hard at standing out. Every event, activity or gathering is an opportunity to say something, wear something or do something that attracts eyes and affirmation.

Bad Attention

Kids will go after any attention they can get. Their brains

haven't developed fully in the area that gives them the ability to weigh consequences, so they act on their impulses without a filter. Their main impulse is to receive attention to prove their worth. When they can't receive good attention, they try to get bad attention, because there is only one thing worse than that.

The only thing worse than bad attention is no attention. No attention means they are invisible and living in isolation. It means they have no value. A long time ago, I was talking to a group of teenagers. In the middle of nowhere, a freshman guy said something awkward that he thought would be interesting. No one said anything. I've often thought of the look of pain on his face and lamented the fact that I didn't respond to what he said in some way.

Your Attention and Affirmation Are Taken for Granted but Are Essential

During the teenage years, kids tend to separate from their parents. A parent may feel as though the attention they give teens is rebuffed because the attention they seek the most is from their peers. Attracting the attention of peers is their true litmus test for feeling significant, but parental attention is a given. Although your attention may be taken for granted, it is a vital baseline that gives them a sense of security. No matter how difficult or dismissive they become, be sure they receive your attention and affirmation. {eoa}

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