

Josh McDowell's Project 911

The Disconnected Generation

© Copyright Josh McDowell Ministry 2000

Do not reproduce

*Saving Our Youth From
Self-Destruction*

The Disconnected Path of Self-Destruction

I cannot remember feeling more sad or heartsick than when I heard each of the following news stories for the first time. Perhaps they hit you the same way:

- In the quiet town of West Paducah, Kentucky, fourteen-year-old Michael Carneal opens fire on a group of teenagers circled in prayer, leaving three of them dead.
- In Pearl, Mississippi, sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham shoots his mother to death, then goes to his high school and starts firing, killing three and wounding seven.
- Mitchell Johnson, thirteen, and Andrew Golden, eleven, trip a fire alarm in their Jonesboro, Arkansas, junior-high school. Once their classmates are outside, the boys start shooting at them, killing four students and a teacher.
- Gunpowder, crude bombs, and computer disks with bomb-making information are found in the homes of three fourteen-year-old Wimberly, Texas boys accused of plotting an assault at their junior-high school.
- After murdering his parents at home, fifteen-year-old Springfield, Oregon, student Kip Kinkel sprays his school cafeteria with gunfire. Twenty-four students are hit; two die.
- Eric Harris, eighteen, and Dylan Klebold, seventeen, go on a killing rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. After twelve students and a teacher are dead and twenty-three students are wounded, the boys conclude the terror with their own suicides.

Since writing these chilling lines, I suspect that even more communities like West Paducah, Springfield, and Littleton have experienced similar carnage and tragedy. Youth rage and murder are escalating at a shocking rate, leading to more shootings, bombings, and killings by young people in school hallways and on quiet suburban streets.

Alarming surveys of teenagers show:

- 80 percent of students at a Midwestern middle school had bullied their peers to some degree in the past thirty days.

- 19 percent of students say they have been hit, slapped, or kicked while at school.
- 25 percent of students indicate they are afraid another student will harm them.¹
- More than half of American teens believe a murderous rampage could erupt at their schools.²

Romans 3:16–17 aptly summarizes these news stories and statistics: “Destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace have they not known” (NASB). Stunned by such bloodshed and fear in our youth culture, it is only natural for us to ask why. What causes our teenagers to lash out at their parents, teachers, and peers with lethal violence? What has happened in our culture to allow mere children to become so callous and violent? An even more alarming question is, will our own young people get caught up in this juvenile mayhem?

On the surface, the proliferation of violence in the media—particularly interactive media in the form of killing-based video games—appears to contribute to the violent acting out of some of our youth. U.S. military leaders during World War II validated this theory. When they realized that fewer than 20 percent of American combat troops fired their weapons, they concluded that soldiers needed to increase their firing rate to enhance their killing rate. The U.S. Army learned, according to Lt. Col. David Grossman, author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, that shooting at simple paper targets during practice did not encourage soldiers to fire their weapons in battle. But firing at man-shaped targets during practice seemed to numb the soldiers’ consciences and make killing a reflex action.

According to Grossman, a psychologist who formerly taught the psychology of war at West Point, today’s modern video games are even more effective in causing a person to overcome the aversion to shooting other people. He states:

The more realistic touches in video games help blur the boundary between fantasy and reality—i.e., guns carefully molded after real ones, accurate-looking wounds, screams, and other sound effects, even the recoil of a heavy rifle.³

Grossman goes on to contend that the traits of killing games are evident in some of the recent shootings:

Michael Carneal, the schoolboy shooter in Paducah, Ky., showed the effects of video-game lessons in killing. Carneal coolly shot nine times, hitting eight people, five of them in the head or neck. Head shots pay a bonus in many video games. ... We have to start worrying about what we are putting into the minds of our young. Pilots train on flight simulators, drivers on driving simulators, and now we have our children on murder simulators.⁴

But there is something more behind youth rage, murder, and mayhem than bloody video games and movies. I posed questions about our violent youth culture back in 1994 in my book *Right from Wrong*.⁵ A response from journalist Rowland Nethaway bears repeating:

Adults have always complained about their youth, but this is different. There have always been wild and rebellious kids who would go off the track and do something wrong. Many of today's youth don't seem to know right from wrong. Children are robbing, maiming and killing on whims, and with no pity and no remorse.⁶

I agree with Nethaway. A significant part of the problem is the disappearance of moral absolutes from our culture. Youth violence thrives in a moral vacuum. When kids don't have a personal value system that distinguishes between right and wrong, there is nothing to prevent them from venting their anger and frustration through violence and cold disregard for human life. Restoring moral absolutes to the fabric of our families and society is key to curbing the destructive trends among our youth.

Yet I believe there is a deeper crying need among our youth that must be addressed as we restore moral absolutes and counter a godless culture. If I were asked to identify the core reason that our young people are succumbing to the pressures of this age and lashing out with such violence, I would say it is that they feel alone, disconnected, and unsure of who they really are. Many young people, even those from good Christian homes, feel disconnected and alienated from their parents, from adults in general, and from society as a whole. Recent scientific studies, my personal research, and interaction with thousands of young people confirm that our kids today

are disconnected from most adults and lack a sense of personal identity and purpose. This alienation from adults and fuzzy sense of identity causes them to feel adrift in a hostile world. That's why I call them the disconnected generation.

The relational disconnection that young people feel today is both frightening and emotionally painful to them, and much of the antisocial behaviors they exhibit—including extremes like West Paducah, Jonesboro, and Columbine—are the result. In order to reach the disconnected generation, we must first understand their makeup and why they feel so painfully disconnected and alone.

On-Line but Disconnected

The disconnected generation is in a population group some have referred to as the “echo boomers,” born between 1977 and 1994. Others call this group the “millennials.” Those born after 1983 are sometimes called the “mosaics.” Today's adolescents are primarily the offspring of the baby boomers. The teenage population is more than twenty-two million strong. They are perhaps the richest, most populous, best educated, and most physically fit generation in history.⁷ Our young people are growing up in a prosperous society with unprecedented career opportunities and access to a virtually limitless amount of information. More than one-third of today's teenagers are connected to the Internet, and it is projected that 70 percent will be cruising along the information superhighway by 2003.⁸

Today's youth are logging onto the Internet for more than just information and entertainment. Increasing numbers of young people are using e-mail and chat rooms in an attempt to connect socially with others. Yet people who are seeking emotional and relational connections on-line are finding electronic relationships unfulfilling, a cheap substitute for in-person friendships and interaction. A study out of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh reveals that the more hours a person spends on the Internet, the more depressed, stressed, and lonely he or she feels.⁹ Hill Walker, codirector of the Institute on Violence and Destructive Behavior, calls the results of the new communication technologies “almost a virtual reality without adults.”¹⁰

Every major sociological study during the last fifteen years that cross-tabulates human relationships—or the lack of them—with human behavior reveals that the more disconnected a

person is relationally, the more prone he or she is to engage in antisocial behavior. Two major studies of church youth I commissioned, first in 1987 and again in 1994, revealed that the closer youth are to their parents relationally, the less at risk they are to unacceptable behavior. And yet the sobering statistics underscore the mounting disconnection and loneliness in this generation:

- Almost half of today's young people have lived through their parents' divorce.
- 63 percent of youth live in households where both parents work outside the home.
- Only 25 percent of teenagers say their mothers are always home when they return from school.
- 98 percent of teenagers spend eleven hours per week watching TV.
- Teenagers spend an average of three and one-half hours alone every day.¹¹

We should not be surprised to find that the generation that suffers through parental divorce, comes home to an empty house, spends an inordinate amount of time alone, and sits for hours in front of a TV or computer monitor is also the generation that feels disconnected from adults and exhibits at-risk behavior. When a young person's painful sense of aloneness is not adequately dealt with, his or her anger and fear may escalate into violence and tragedy.

We are speaking of more than simply a relational disconnect. The loneliness many of our young people experience is an emotional isolation as well. A great number of our kids today feel lost, not knowing who they really are. A bright Christian student named Danny said something to me some time ago that represents far too many of our youth: "Sometimes I feel so alone, like no one cares. My folks live in their own world, and I live in mine. It didn't always seem to be this way. I know it sounds crazy, but I want them to leave me alone, and yet I want to be a part of their lives. Most of the time they do leave me alone, and it gets pretty lonely." When you hear the desperation of kids like Danny, you can better understand why young people reach out for each other. You can see why gangs are attractive—they help close the isolation gap that exists between kids and the adult world.

Traveling tens of thousands of miles across the country and around the world each year, I hear countless young people share a sense of isolation with me. Our kids need strong relational connections today in order to find their way in the world and to escape the riptide of loneliness pulling them toward self-destruction.

Sadly, however, hundreds of parents and youth leaders have told me that they themselves struggle to know their kids and often fail to connect with them at a deep, personal level. I hear caring yet frightened adults say, “Josh, I’m afraid the culture is going to capture my kids” or “Josh, I fear I won’t pass on my values and faith to my kids.” These are good parents and youth workers who love their kids and desperately want to enter their world, to connect with them, and teach them what they ought to know. Yet they struggle to do so.

Obviously, we want to protect our kids from the negative influences of a godless culture. We want to pass on our values and faith to them. And we are alarmed that a postmodern culture threatens to undermine our kids’ faith and moral character. Yet we really can’t pass on our faith or our values or even protect our kids from the culture unless we make that relational connection, that loving bond, that intimate attachment our children so desperately want and need.

The Relational Connection

Yes, you want your kids to live in right relationship with God and others and make the right moral choices in life. But they will continue to struggle with loneliness and emptiness until we convince them that they are loved for the unique people they are. This may be an old cliché, but it’s true: Your kids won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Parents, I know you love your children. Youth workers, I know you care about the kids in your youth group. Pastors, Sunday-school teachers, and Christian educators, I know you are concerned about the disconnected generation, and your hearts ache with mine over the senseless savagery that has erupted in places like Pearl, Mississippi; Springfield, Oregon; and Littleton, Colorado. If you did not care, you would not be doing what you are doing to find answers. But in order to save our kids from self-destruction, we must move beyond caring to connecting.

I believe an entire generation is at stake here. And I believe the real challenge before us is learning how to enter the sometimes complex and confusing world of today’s youth and make relational connections at a deep, emotional level no cultural influence will be able to destroy. That’s what I want for my own four kids and for the tens of thousands of kids around the world I minister to each year. I’m sure that’s what you want too. And that’s what my book, *The Disconnected Generation*, is all about.

We must connect with our kids relationally and emotionally if we are going to salvage this generation. Yet many adults today are focusing in another area. They are trying to protect their children from the godless culture and teach them the truth by providing tougher rules and firmer guidance. But rules, regulations, and instruction alone will not produce the desired result. We must instruct and counsel our kids within the context of a relational connection, an emotional attachment, and a loving bond in our daily interaction with them. Only then will the rules and instruction we provide be meaningful and fruitful in their lives.

I don't believe God ever intended that we deliver rules or truth to our young people outside a loving, intimate connection with them. We may be able to get our kids to behave well for a while by laying down the law and pressuring them to comply. But unless we also demonstrate our love for them, our youth may not only rebel against our rules, but also disconnect from us relationally. Why? Because God didn't wire kids to respond to rules and regulations. Rather, He wired them to respond to loving relationships in which parents and other caring adults give rules "for their own good." (See Deut. 10:12–13.)

So, if we are going to pass on our values and our faith to our kids, we must do it in an "up-close and personal" manner. We can't instruct from a distance; we must enter their world and relate to them. I'm not talking about trying to live like teenagers—dressing like them, talking like them, listening to their music, etc. By entering their world, I mean being aware of what is happening in their lives and being there to make the appropriate relational connection.

Exploring Their World

What does the world of the today's youth look like? I see four distinct characteristics of their world, and we must connect with them relationally at each level.

It's a world of emotional ups and downs. Someone has said that the teenage world is full of hot and cold, nice and nasty. You find them on top of the world one day and struggling under its weight the next. We all experience highs and lows, but they are more frequent and more intense in the adolescent world. Many adults tend to minimize these spiking emotional responses because they are often provoked by circumstances that seem trivial to us. But they are not trivial to kids. We must learn to be sensitive to their emotional ups and downs and help them deal with both the pleasure and the pain.

It's a world of conflicts. Young people today struggle for individual identity, purpose, and meaning. They are eager to test their wings and see how far they can fly on their own. They want to find out who they are apart from their parents and family. They want a unique identity, but they also want to identify with a group. This is why many students join a club, youth group, team, or gang, even if they must sacrifice personal identity to conform in some way to the group's expectations.

These early experimental flights of independence and identity can create tension and conflict between adults and teenagers. We need to learn how to diffuse the tension and remain relationally connected as our kids seek greater freedom and independence.

It's a world of mixed signals about love and sex. We live in a culture of mixed signals that often distort the biblical concept of love. Many kids grow up mistaking the intensity of sex for the intimacy of love, and this confusion can leave kids emotionally disconnected. If ever they need to feel relationally connected with parents and a caring adult world, it is during this time, when they are learning the difference between true love and what the world often calls love.

It's a world of sexual pressure. Rapid, drastic hormonal changes during adolescence have a profound affect on kids physically, socially, and emotionally. In these early teen years our youth struggle to make sound judgments just as their sexual interest and attraction for each other intensifies. And high hormone levels and low self-control are a disastrous combination.

Most of our kids are told what they should and should not do in a relationship with the opposite sex. But knowing the “stop signals” and knowing how and when to observe them are two different things. Young people who feel relationally connected to their parents and other caring adults are substantially less likely to succumb to sexual pressure.

Discovering the Relational Connecting Points

If we attempt to enter our kids' world to provide the needed guidance and instruction without first connecting with them relationally, we will most likely find resistance. So what does relational connection look like? What must we do or become to make that connection? There are at least six biblically based relational connecting points we can make with our young people that will shape and mold them mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. And it is this God-ordained

relational shaping process that cultivates the heart of a young person and readies him or her to embrace right thinking and right behavior.

Connecting Point #1: Affirmation

One of the most often-used phrases by young people is, “They don’t understand me.” When young people don’t feel that you identify with them, they are less likely to stay connected to you emotionally. And one of the most effective ways to identify with them, even when you don’t fully understand them, is to affirm their feelings.

To *affirm* means “to validate or confirm.” **When we affirm the feelings of our young people, we give them a sense of authenticity.** Affirming their feelings tells them that they are real individuals with valid feelings. When we identify with their feelings of excitement or disappointment, we let them know they are understood for who they really are—authentic human beings.

Connecting Point #2: Acceptance

When we accept young people for who they are, we give them a sense of security. Acceptance deals more with embracing people for who they are rather than for what they do. When your young people feel accepted by you, they are more likely to be vulnerable and transparent, opening up greater trust between you. Your acceptance helps your kids believe that, no matter what happens, you will still love them. An accepting relationship creates a loving bond and an intimate relational connection between you and your students.

Connecting Point #3: Appreciation

When we express appreciation to young people, we give them a sense of significance. While acceptance is the foundation for a secure relationship, appreciation can be considered a cornerstone. Our acceptance of young people tells them that their *being* matters. Expressing our appreciation to them says that their *doing* matters too. Our appreciation conveys to young people that they are valued and that their accomplishments do make a difference to someone. It causes them to sense, “Hey, I’m worth something to someone! These adults like having me around—and they’re proud of me!”

Connecting Point #4: Affection

When we show affection to young people, we give them a sense of lovability.

Expressing affection to our kids through loving words and appropriate touch communicates that they are worth loving. Every expression of care and closeness provides emotional reinforcement, helping kids realize that they are loved.

Connecting Point #5: Availability

When we make ourselves available to young people, we give them a sense of importance. And when we're not available, we are saying, in essence, "Oh yes, I love you, but other things still come ahead of you. You are not *really* that important." Expressing affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, and affection to our kids is critical, but we can only do that if we make ourselves available to them. Being there when your young people need you will not only tell them they are important to you; it will keep you relationally connected to them.

Connecting Point #6: Accountability

To connect relationally, we need to show our young people affirmation, acceptance, appreciation, affection, and availability. Yet, if we do not balance these relational connecting points with loving limits and boundaries, young people will not learn responsibility. **When we provide loving accountability to young people, we give them a sense of responsibility.** Accountability provides the parameters within which a young person can operate safely and securely. Young people need the loving authority of parents and caring adults so they can learn to make responsible, right choices. Without parameters, there is only confusion and chaos.

Project 911: Experience the Connection

It's not hard to see that young people who sense that they are authentic, secure, significant, lovable, important, and responsible will really feel connected to you. But how do we know that these relational connecting points actually work? Who came up with the idea of connecting with our kids in this way?

God has provided us with these relational connecting points. In Scripture we learn that God has demonstrated these connections in the life and ministry of His Son. Christ in fact does **affirm** us (Heb. 2:17-18), **accept** us (Rom. 15:7), show us **appreciation** (Matt. 3:17), lavish us with **affection** (1 John 4:7), make Himself **available** to us (Ps. 145:18), and hold us lovingly **accountable** (Rom. 14:12). And as we follow His example in relationship with our youth and children, we can establish and maintain the vital relational connections God intended.

There are numerous issues and obstacles that make guiding and raising our kids in today's culture a real challenge. Simply stating that you need to establish these six connecting points is not enough. You need practical help and clear examples for making this connection with your kids and helping them connect with you. That is why I have launched Project 911, an urgent response to assist and empower adults for bridging the isolation gap and experiencing deep relational connection with their children and youth.

My ministry team and I have created a comprehensive family of biblically based resources to equip churches and families to connect with youth—and stay connected. Sixteen products in all, these resources target adults, adult groups, youth, youth groups, and youth workers with books, workbooks, handbooks, audio cassettes, video series, online interaction, devotionals—everything you need to launch a church-wide and family-wide emphasis. A brochure or product flyer accompanies this booklet.

My prayer is that Project 911 will minister powerfully to you and your young people. Our kids need us more than ever. And by God's grace, each of us will be there for them so they may live as "children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which [they] shine like stars in the universe" (Phil. 2:15, NIV).

Josh McDowell

¹ *USA Today*, 7 September 1999, 1D.

² *New York Times*/CBS News poll of 1,038 youth ages thirteen to seventeen, as quoted in "School Rampages Possible," *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, 24 October 1999, B5.

³ John Leo, "When Life Imitates Video," *U.S. News and World Report*, 3 May 1999, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁵ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right from Wrong*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994).

⁶ Rowland Nethaway, "Missing Core Values," Cox News Service, as quoted in *Hamilton (Ohio) Journal-News*, 3 November 1993.

⁷ Susan Mitchell, *The Official Guide to the Generations*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Census Bureau, 1995), 12.

⁸ Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert, "How Well Do You Know Your Kid?" *Newsweek*, 10 May 1999, 38-39.

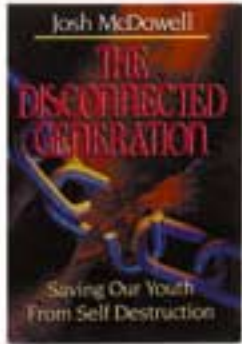
⁹ Study by Robert Kraut, professor at Carnegie Mellon University, as cited in "In Cyberspace," *Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal*, 31 August 1998, "First Words" column, 1.

¹⁰ John Leland, "The Secret Life of Teens," *Newsweek*, 10 May 1999, 45.

¹¹ Kantrowitz and Wingert, "How Well Do You Know Your Kid?", 38-39.

JOSH McDOWELL'S PROJECT 911

Family of Products

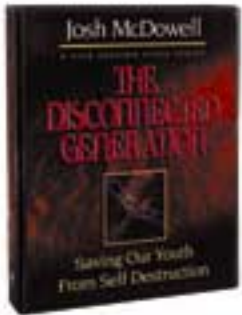


The Disconnected Generation: Saving Our Youth From Self-Destruction

Today's young people are losing hope because they feel isolated and alienated from their parents. Josh offers six "relational connecting points" parents can experience with their youth that will not only deepen a loving bond between them, but can help guard them from self-destruction.

Book

BKDGEN \$14.99



Through five dynamic video session, Josh McDowell helps adults:

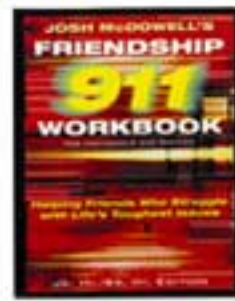
* Understand why the generation gap has turned into a relational isolation gap

* Learn how to place rules within the context of loving relationships

* Discover the key relational connecting points to help close the isolation gap

Video Series

VSDGEN \$129.99



Friendship 911 Workbook: Helping Friends Who Struggle with Life's Toughest Issues

This is an eight session youth group meeting experience designed to equip young people to respond to the toughest crises their peers may face. Addressing each issue covered in the **PROJECT 911 Collection**, students learn how to help their friends and in the process become powerful witnesses of God's love. Thirty-five daily activities will also prepare them to deal with each crises should they ever face those same problems personally.

Workbook

BK911W \$12.99

Leader's Guide

BK911L \$7.99



Friendship 911 Supplemental Video

An optional video supplement augments each youth group session with powerful visuals and

dramatic illustrations of youth struggling with each of the eight crises addressed in the **Friendship 911 Workbook**.

Video

VI911V \$29.99



PROJECT 911 Collection

Josh McDowell's research identified these eight issues as the toughest youth may ever face. Creatively written in a real-to-life fictional setting, this 8-book collection was designed with a "give to your friend" strategy in mind. Any adult or young person can offer these books to a struggling friend or family member and be assured it will provide biblical solutions to some of life's most difficult problems. You may want to purchase multiple copies to place in your youth library for kids to come and take as needed for themselves or for their friends.



Thoughts of Suicide	BKP9TS	\$3.99
Divorce of Parents	BKP9DP	\$3.99
Finding True Love	BKP9TL	\$3.99
Unplanned Pregnancy	BKP9UP	\$3.99
Conflicts with Others	BKP9CO	\$3.99
Knowing God's Will	BKP9GW	\$3.99
Past Sexual Abuse	BKP9PA	\$3.99
Death Of A Loved One	BKP9DL	\$3.99

PROJECT 911 Collection (all 8 books)	PK911C	\$25.92
		Retail \$31.92
Collection 10x (10 of each book)	PK911x	\$223.20
		Retail \$319.20

Instructions: Using your mouse, click on the cell you want and enter the appropriate information for that cell. The order form will calculate the subtotal and total amount due for you. You will need to fill in the IL residents tax (if applicable) and the shipping and handling charges.

Description	Code	Qty	Price	Total

Shipping and Handling:		Subtotal	
FOR ORDERS	ADD	IL Residents add 6.75% tax	
Up to \$10.00	\$3.00	Shipping and Handling	
\$10.01 - \$25.00	\$4.00	Total Amount Due	

\$25.01 - \$50.00 \$6.00
 \$50.01 - \$100.00 \$8.00
 \$100.01 - \$150.00 \$10.00
 \$150.01 and up add 7%

Mail to: Josh McDowell Ministry
 Box 1330, Wheaton, IL 60189
 or call: 800-222-JOSH (5674)
 Mention code:911bb
 Fax:(630) 668-0158
 or order on-line at www.josh.org

Name _____
 Address _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State/Zip _____
 Daytime Phone _____

Enclosed is my check or money order made payable to the
 Josh McDowell Ministry. (No C.O.D. Please.)

Discover Mastercard Visa

Expiration date _____ Card Number _____

Signature _____