

Our Globalized Kids

By Walt Mueller

NOW

CULTURE

YOUTH



It's 1998 and I'm walking through the barren streets of a tiny, middle-of-nowhere rural Polish village on a cold and cloudy January afternoon. Even though I'm thousands of miles from my suburban Pennsylvania home, the person walking towards me looks very, very familiar. As she gets closer, I realize I don't know her, but then again, I do. She's a teenage girl who's wearing a jacket and matching hat bearing the colors and logo of the NFL's Miami Dolphins. Assuming she's a fellow American visiting Poland, I say "hello" and ask her if she's a Dolphin's fan. She looks confused. She doesn't speak English, except for the words "Miami" and "Dolphins," which – I think – she's learned from her clothes. I very quickly gather that her clothing is a youthful fashion statement that has nothing at all to do with allegiance to an American football team. I doubt she even knows what American football is.


As I walked away from that brief encounter, I realized that the world of youth culture was quickly getting much, much smaller. It had been only a decade since Communism collapsed in Eastern Europe along with the fall of the ideological "wall" that had kept capitalistic culture at bay. This Polish teenager looked nothing like the Polish children dressed in native costume that were pictured on the "Children Around the World" poster I remember hanging on the wall of my third grade classroom. Instead, she was visually indistinguishable from her American peers. The marketing machine driving North American youth culture was effectively peddling its wares globally, and I was going to need to start paying attention as it wasn't just the blue, orange, and white of a south Florida football team being exported, but a host of values, attitudes, and behaviors as well.

Rapid advances in technology have combined with a host of other forces over the last three decades to create a snowballing global youth culture that has not only leveled the international youth culture playing field, but blurred the traditional lines between kids right here on North American soil who inhabit areas we differentiate with labels like "urban," "suburban," and "rural." Kids everywhere are increasingly alike in terms of how they look, think, and act. Consider three technological developments that have facilitated these changes.

First, there's telecasts and digital media distribution. The advent of cable and satellite TV made it possible for a growing number of "stations" to reach further and further around the globe. Consider the fact that soon after its launch in 1981, MTV expanded to every continent, pumping both indigenous and foreign music, marketing, and other pop culture programming to culturally diverse people in every nook and cranny of the globe. During the two decades that followed, the rapid expansion of the internet and other digital media made it possible for virtually anyone anywhere to access virtually anything at virtually anytime. Even the word "telecast" is now passé. Kids around the globe engage with a variety of world cultures from the comfort of their own home.

Second, there are the advances in telecommunications. When I was child, my parents had one option for communicating back and forth with missionaries around the globe through letters penned on light-weight blue "air mail" stationary that was expensive to send. Those letters took weeks and sometimes months to reach their international destination. Communication was incredibly slow, adding to the sense that people who lived far away were almost living on another planet. Now, digital communication technology allows us to Skype globally. . . seeing and hearing each other in real time at no cost. People who once lived on "other planets" now live next door. Kids around the globe engage instantaneously with peers from other cultures using their handheld devices.

And third, there are advances in transit. Ocean crossings that took weeks to be made by ship are now made in a matter of hours through the air. You and I can be on any other



continent in relatively no time at all. Many of our kids have already been afforded the privilege of engaging in short-term mission trips in other countries and cultures, something that was unheard of or very, very rare just thirty years ago.

The reality of this new globalized youth culture is something we must watch, monitor, and understand. Being ignorant to what's happening is not only irresponsible, but will limit our possibilities to do effective ministry with our kids. On the other hand, awareness helps us understand the negative impact globalization has on our kids, the positive influence it has on our kids, and the types of ministry responses life in this new world requires us to initiate if we hope to teach our students how to live *all* of life to the glory of God.

As with anything related to living life in a fallen and broken world, the globalization of youth culture has a downside. There are negative consequences. First, there's the marketing glut. Children and teens are already the most targeted marketing demographic. People with something to sell know kids are developmentally at an age where they are easily influenced, and economically at an age where they have few if any regular financial commitments. . . thereby giving them the ability to engage in impulsive large-scale discretionary spending. Globalization gives North American marketers an ever-widening net through which to "catch" kids around the world. As a result, they sell kids more product, shape their hearts by selling them the worldview elements contained in ads, and feed the epidemic of materialism.

Second, there's the challenge of religious syncretism, a trend that's increasingly celebrated and embraced in a globalized youth culture. Living in a world where relativism dictates that one can choose or create their own religious system based on personal feelings creates an environment where kids who are exposed to the vast array of religions of the world are encouraged to dabble in anything and everything. For kids who have been raised in the Christian church or who have embraced Christianity, the diversity of world religions presents them with options many of them embrace in whole or - more likely - in part, causing them to create all sorts of dangerous faith hybrids which we need to recognize, challenge, and undo.

And third, the dark side of globalization combines with the pluralism and tolerance of our times to desensitize kids to the clear boundaries God has set that enable us to differentiate truth from error, and right from wrong. And when our Christian kids *do* choose to consciously weigh the ethical options related to their choices, they increasingly choose options that are politically - rather than Biblically correct. They are shaped more by the forces of globalization and the times, than they are by God's Word.

But globalization isn't all bad. There are upsides that we should celebrate with our students. First, there's the fact that the world is now at our fingertips, coming to us in real time. Our students are able to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch things that previous generations were only able to imagine. With that comes a deep understanding of the cultural diversity God created to exist around the globe. Our kids are able to see and appreciate the image of God in others who are unlike themselves. The negative stereotypes, racism, and bigotry that have marked American culture for so long - even amongst ourselves in the church - are being challenged and shattered (hopefully) as our cultural horizons and appreciation for others expand.

Second, globalization allows the eyes of our kids to be opened to the world's deep need. In his irreverent and token apology for crossing the line with inappropriate humor, Larry the Cable guy often follows up by mockingly praying, "Lord, forgive me for that and please bless the pygmies in New Guinea." The latter half of that statement represents the way so many of us grew up praying for the needs of the world. It was a half-hearted request for God to bless people that we knew little or nothing about. . . except that they lived far, far away and were somehow less than civilized. Now, our kids are able to see people as people. They are privy to the world's deep needs as they relate to poverty, sexual trafficking, hunger, disease, and a host of other issues.

And third, globalization gives our kids a front row seat to what God is doing in His world. Watching the news, Facebooking a friend who lives on the other side of the globe, Skyping with a mis-

sionary, or traveling to a foreign mission field on a short-term mission trip expands our kids' vision of the Kingdom beyond themselves and their immediate surroundings.

So, how should globalization shape the manner and content of how we parent and minister to kids? Here are some brief suggestions to get you started.

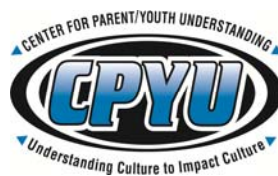
First, go deep in the Word. Greater knowledge of the diversity that exists in God's world will lead us all to face deep, deep challenges to our faith. The truths of the Christian faith that we've come to sometimes thoughtlessly accept and believe as a result of drifting through life in a homogeneous culture can be shattered if we don't take the time to get and keep our bearings. Scuba divers are taught that when they dive deep there is a real risk of getting turned upside down and disoriented in ways that can be deadly. The trick to finding your way is to watch and trust your bubbles as they will always go up and never lie. If you know the Word you will keep your bearings. And if you've got your bearings, your kids will have the benefit of being able to look to and learn from you as they try to make sense of life.

Second, know and exegete the culture. Ignorance to the many changes taking place in our rapidly changing globalized culture might allow you to sleep better at night. But you're not doing anyone a favor if you're choosing to ignore the fact that someone's prowling through your house while you're asleep. And once you know they're there, you need to be able to discern if they are friend or foe. Keeping your ears and eyes open to what's happening in culture will allow you to respond in ways that affirm and celebrate the positive stuff that globalization drops into your lap, and challenge and correct globalization's negative messages and influence. Your responsibility is to help your kids see how the Word speaks to the realities of their world.

And finally, focus your efforts in ways that teach your kids to exercise justice in response to the world's great needs. God is using the realities of globalization to open our eyes to the hurt and brokenness that exists around the world. Gone are the days when people – kids and adults alike – are able to effectively cloister themselves from what's happening beyond the boundaries of their relatively easy suburban or rural existence. The needs of the world beyond our front step – needs that exist both near and far – can't be ignored. Seeing their reality demands a response of mercy and justice that overflows like a never-ending stream – a stream that carries the abundance of our time, efforts, and resources to where they are most needed.

A few months ago I met an 18-year-old named Jared Henriques who – like his peers – has grown up in a global village. In the midst of finding his way through the confusing and muddled mess of contemporary culture, Jared has chosen to listen both to the Word of God *and* to the needs of the world. In an effort to bring his faith to bear on real life, Jared started a company he calls Pocket Change Apparel. The proceeds from the sale of the t-shirts he designs goes to support Compassion International's Un-sponsored Children's Fund. When I met Jared, he excitedly told me that he had already raised \$5000! Jared and others like him are the result of globalization gone good. As people called to influence the kids we know and love for the Kingdom, let's be sure we're doing all we can to lead our kids in that same direction.

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