

# The Culture of Secrets

by Cynthia Hopkins

*Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: I have been saying for years that it is a miracle in these last days if our children navigate adolescence without suffering serious spiritual and emotional trauma. The technological explosion in communication devices and social networking is providing our children with exposure and choices that few are equipped to handle wisely. This article makes it clear that the dangers are real and growing. **Parents beware!***

When I was 9, I wrote a 4-letter word on the chalkboard that hung in our garage, and then forgot to erase it. My mom and dad didn't have to look very hard to learn that their sweet daughter wasn't as sweet as they thought; it was written in 12-inch-tall letters.

Then, when I was a teenager, my brothers and I had rooms in the back half of the house, and there we shared our very own phone line. Unlike many of my friends, I could talk on the phone at length without fear of my parents picking up another receiver and listening in. Still, my bedroom shared a wall with the master bathroom. So when I heard the closet door slide or a cabinet drawer open, I knew I had to whisper if I wanted my conversation to be private.

In school, we had to wait until the teacher wasn't looking before we slid a note over the shoulder of a friend, or better yet, casually dropped it on the floor beside that friend's desk on the way to the pencil sharpener. And I suppose that if you wanted to take a racy picture of yourself back then, your only real option was to use a Polaroid. That was tricky, too, because you'd have to wave the picture around in the air for a few minutes to see if it came into focus.

Try as we might to keep things on the down-low, that culture was just not very conducive to secret-keeping.

## **Fast forward to 2013**

Today's teenagers have unlimited storage space for their secrets that fit neatly in the palm of their hands. If they forget to hit delete on an inappropriate conversation, it's a lot harder to stumble upon than my profane and rebellious chalkboard outburst. Even if a teacher does catch them using a phone in class, she would have to have a degree in computer engineering to know what they were actually doing on that phone.

Teenagers are basically the same now as they were when you were their age, it's just that the dividing line between what their friends know about them and what you know about them is ever-widening. What is a secret to parents typically isn't a secret to their friends and everyone else their age who knows them. Information flies fast — texting and social media means pictures are shared, words are picked apart, and mess-ups hit screens with anticipation like the juiciest episode of "Jersey Shore." Nothing is private anymore, except from uninformed parents. When it comes to parents and their teenagers, technology has created a culture of secrets.

This past fall, I surveyed the high school students at our church one Wednesday night in preparation for a course for parents on social media that I was teaching. In the survey, I asked,

"What is one thing your parents don't know about your use of social media?" Here are some of the responses I received:

- They don't know about my Twitter account.
- They don't know I'm on Instagram.
- They don't know who I'm following.
- I have quite a few accounts.
- I talk to guys.
- I'm on there a lot more than they think.
- I block them.
- I cuss on Twitter.
- How many girls I talk to.
- I'm not doing homework when I'm supposed to be.
- I talk to people I've never met.
- I'm on when I should be sleeping.
- I take a lot of pictures.
- The videos I watch on YouTube.
- The people I creep on.

In that same survey, 36 percent of those churching teenagers also admitted to having engaged in sexting.

### **Catch up**

These admissions just scratch the surface. Texting, IM s, chatting online, and sharing pictures are yesterday's news. We parents thought we were on top of things when we got on Facebook. But as soon as Facebook became popular among adults, teenagers went somewhere else. And now, technology provides countless ways for teens to go undercover. Here is just a handful of the current websites and apps that enable (and even promote) secrecy among teenagers:

- Facebook provides private chat windows and messaging, and Twitter offers direct messaging.
- Snapchat is a real-time picture chat app. Users can set a time limit for how long recipients can view their photos and videos, up to 10 seconds, after which they will disappear.
- Apart from privacy settings, nothing on Instagram is hidden. However, Instagram is a springboard for Kik. Many teens meet on Instagram and then start communicating privately on Kik. A teenager who has picture sharing blocked on their texting plan can send and receive photos freely on Kik.
- Keek is an app for video sharing.
- Chatroulette is an online chat website. Unlike Skype, Chatroulette and alternatives like it are designed to help you meet new people. They randomly pair strangers together from around the world for videochatting. Sexual content, especially nudity and pornographic behavior, are common on these sites.
- Formspring depends on secrecy for its success, and even glorifies it. It is a social Q&A website where teenagers can ask questions and make comments anonymously on users' profile pages.

With so many tools at their disposal that allow and invite secrecy, the purity of teenagers is threatened in ways that are increasingly difficult for parents to guard against. As the first

generation to have social media as a part of our lives, we are the guinea pigs. But ignorance is no longer an excuse.

Neither can we deny the facts. Social media has become a huge part of our lives, and will continue to be. When we allow our kids to have access to technology without holding them accountable for how they use it, we are setting them up for moral failure.

How especially relevant are Jesus' words in Matthew 10:16: "Look, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as harmless as doves." Rather than turning our heads, we must lead and equip teenagers to follow Christ, shrewdly and harmlessly, as they navigate this culture of secrecy that they hold in the palm of their hands.

*This article is courtesy of Parenting Teens Magazine.*

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