TATTOOING AND PIERCING OVERVIEW

Adult society has reacted generally negatively to teenager body piercing as it has to tattooing. To many parents and adults it seems abnormal, even shocking, disrespectful to one's own body and to social norms.

For a teenager, body piercing may be a way of establishing his or her personal uniqueness as a person, or being part of what's cool and going on. It may be a fashion statement or something that looks good.

Before getting into more discussion of a topic like this, it's best to listen to piercers themselves. This is how Lindsay and Molly (both 18) explain it:

The day I turned eighteen, I got my eyebrow pierced. I always thought it looked cool and it felt like an act of independence to get it done. My older brother is extremely conservative, so my parents haven't had a lot of experience with teenage rebelliousness. Even though they don't like the way it looks, I don't think they even notice it anymore. I've been a vegetarian for quite a while now and they're supportive of my diet. The rest of the world is not as supportive since I pierced my eyebrow. Storekeepers look at me like I might steal something. I couldn't get a summer job because of it. I got hired at a pizza parlor, then was fired when I wouldn't take it out. I tried to explain that it would close up without a retainer, which I didn't have with me, but I was sent home. Even Hardee's, which is always desperate to find workers, wouldn't hire me. (Kalergis, M.M. [1998]. Seen and heard: Teenagers talk about their lives, p. 38. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang.)

I've always questioned authority, not necessarily followed the rules, so it's not out of character for me to question an institution like marriage. I mean, I don't have pierced ears, but prefer a lip bar. I think it suits me better. It's called a labret and the definition in the dictionary is 'a lip ornament worn by savage people.' I like that. I don't necessarily like peoples' negative reactions to something non-traditional. When I tried to get my old job back, the manager said, 'No, because your piercing is offensive.' Well, I think his judgmental attitude is offensive. The funny thing is a lot of the grown-ups who disapprove of body piercing or baggy clothes probably felt misunderstood as hippies when they were young. (Kalergis, 1998:84)

Cullen is 16. She admits to having a problem with authority and doesn't feel the need of her parents' attention. She sees herself as pretty laid back but ambitious; she loves the attention she gets when her band is playing before an audience. Cullen stands out as a unique person. Although she doesn't show any tattoos or piercing, she has opinions on such behavior:

I just kinda live in my own small circle of friends, so I can't speak for my entire generation—just us. If we pierce our body or make graffiti art, it's not to offend others but to express ourselves. Adults get upset if you don't behave just like them. If a kid grows his hair long and then shaves his head, he's just experimenting with his own personal style. If you find a look that expresses how you feel, it makes you feel good about yourself. It's fun to paint your face, wear weird clothes or do something crazy with your hair. It's just a form of personal expression, a confirmation that you exist. (Kalergis, 1998:61)
Identity, the quest for a distinguishable selfhood, is prominent in these voices. There is also a challenge to authority or norms coming down from others. These young people are very sensitive to the way adults can threaten their identities or disparage youthful sub-cultures.

Experts are bound to make more of body-piercing. They may link it to traditional rites of passage. Do the vanishing makers in urban society create a void which needs to be filled with such initiations? Is body piercing in any way related to scarification in other cultures? Does it create bonds among cohorts or peers in a confusing age?

Others may ask if tattooing and body piercing might not be one small step toward creating pain that lets feelings out and restores some kind of personal control. Is it something shy of self-mutilation, the scraping or cutting of one’s skin? "Why would someone want to endure the initial pain and then awkwardness of a tongue ornament?"

These questions are best put to those who have chosen to adorn their bodies in such a way—and perhaps to their friends. Without such discussions adults are bound to be in the dark, remaining mystified by the progressive shocks sent them from the current generation of teenagers.

For additional information, please see the topic, Self-Mutilation.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you have, or have you ever had a tattoo or body ornament other than an earring? What do you see as the difference between an earring and a lip, eyebrow, or tongue ornament? Do you think a tattoo is much the same as a body ornament?
2. How much body adornment would you consider too much? Why?
3. What conversations about piercing have you had with someone who has chosen to pierce her or his body?
4. How would you teach your 9-12 year-old children about body piercing?
5. How might this article and this issue be discussed in a class or youth group?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Children growing up need first of all to feel love from their parents (and siblings) and respect for themselves as unique persons.
2. Children ought to be taught, and teenagers encouraged, to love their bodies and to treat them with high respect.
3. The most positive attitude parents and non-piercers can have toward someone who has a body ornament, is one of respect for the person and that person’s uniqueness. Negative attitudes and actions produce negative responses.

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