

A REVIEW OF *HURT*

By Jesse Morris

The youth of America have been abandoned, says Chap Clark in his coming-of-age book *Hurt*. Clark gained this perspective on youth by spending several years in a high school getting to know them, gaining their trust and entering into their world. The advantage to this is that Clark may have gained more honest responses from high school youth than most sociologists do when they send out surveys. The flaw of this data collection is that it is just one high school in one area. This means that this book, while serving as an accurate representation of some youth culture, cannot be called absolute truth. Clark's points may be generalized, but his premise is strong and most importantly, it's logical. Youth have been abandoned and it's up to us to reclaim them.

You might be asking how youth have been abandoned. Clark doesn't mean to come down on parents and adults in general, but basically it's because everyone is too self-involved. Many adults are still struggling to figure out their own personal identities, so they can't help their children evolve and mature as people. Systems like sports, drama and even youth groups are all ways parents can abandon their children. Clark isn't saying these things are negative in themselves, but once they are used to get the kids off their parents' hands, then everyone's motives need to be reexamined. Granted, this may not be the case for every youth or parent. But most youth at some point in their development will feel abandoned by someone they thought was important in their life. This leads to semi-permanent distrust that predominantly continues throughout the rest of adolescent development. Clark gives countless examples of this.

Another thing he talks about is how youth attempt to get out of their abandoned state and become part of the "world beneath," a safer sub-culture where they find belonging. Youth turn to many things to gain a sense of trust and belonging. This includes partying, experimenting with drugs, alcohol, sex—anything that they perceive will get them accepted. This is how clusters form. Youth form clusters—small, gender-based groups—because they find other people who have something in common with them and build it into their own culture. Clusters have rigid, unspoken rules; violators of the cluster's rules can be severely punished. For example, something as simple as not eating lunch with the right group of people can be grounds for excommunication from the cluster. This is how youth can abandon each other. This often leads to further distrust of others. That is why some youth are so willing to try risky behaviors like drugs and drinking. If it is socially acceptable within their cluster, then that's all that is important. Not all clusters are the same, and some clusters are hostile to each other.

Another challenge that Clark addresses is the bipolar attitudes of youth toward adults in their lives. Adolescents feel the need to push people, particularly adults, away in order to protect themselves from being hurt and rejected. However, youth really do want adults in their lives. They need people on whom they can depend, but they also want and need their own space. Youth won't fully develop if adults smother them, OR if they are given too much space. Relating to a teenager is a fine line—one demonstrated by the fact that youth will tell you to stay away while at the same time motioning you to come in. They want adults to be dependable, to be there whenever they need you.

What this means in a practical sense for youth leaders is that when a young person calls and needs to talk, you need to be there for them. They need to be a priority. Youth remember, and if adults aren't there for them when they need it, they will be hurt.

As pessimistic as Clark's book may seem, it does offer hope. Clark goes through five strategies to reclaim youth from abandonment. The first point is that those working with youth need to understand youth culture. This can mean anything from watching the movies youth watch to listening to their music, including MTV. Adults need to experience anything that broadens their understanding of what youth face.

The second point is that those who work with youth need to work together. Youth ministry is not an individual operation; adults need to bypass their differences—whether they are religious or political or whatever—for the sake of rescuing youth and addressing issues they face.

The third point is that adults need to take responsibility for their position. Teachers need to watch for the welfare of their students. Coaches need to be treating their players with equality. All adults need to check their motives to see if their encouragement to youth is not just pushing their own agenda.

The fourth point is that parents need to be equipped to parent their children. In a world of change, parents need to adapt—what worked for them as children is not guaranteed to be something their children will be receptive to or understand. The most important thing is to be connected with your children.

The fifth and final strategy is to make sure that in every community there are adult advocates who know the youth are in their court. A myth that Clark wishes to dispel is that a single role model is the most effective way to reach youth. Youth are receptive to multiple media and people. The worst thing about a single mentor is that eventually they may leave the youth's life, and this can actually be more damaging than if the youth never had a mentor in the first place. Youth need more than one significant adult connection in their life.

This is why the book *Hurt* is effective. Clark lays out real truths that are both abrasive and accurate. The amazing thing is that in the end, *Hurt* offers hope and solutions. But the only way for these ideas to work is for parents, youth workers and adults in general to realize that things are different and this is a changing world and they need to adapt.