Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace. When Kids Hurt: Help for Adults Navigating the Adolescent Maze.
ISBN: 978-0801071836

Practical theologians continue to add to the growing body of research regarding adolescents in America. In this vein, Chap Clark conducted an ethnographic study in an American high school to explore youth culture first-hand. The result was the well-known publication of Hurt in 2004. When Kids Hurt is a new edition of this book by Chap Clark and Steve Rabey written with the intention of capturing the analysis in Hurt and presenting it to a broader audience. Their aim is to make the findings more accessible and applicable for adults who care for kids. The book also contains two forms of supplemental material. These are reports from various surveys on trends in youth culture written by Paul Asay and others, and insightful contributions from youth ministry veterans and academics in the field.

The book is organized into three parts. Part one includes Clark’s research conclusions and provides a foundational assessment of youth culture. A brief history of adolescence in America demonstrates why an adolescent of today is not like one of days past. The focus is on the midadolescent who faces a unique sociological and developmental challenge to “function as several distinct selves in their distinct social worlds” (p. 18). Clark and Rabey claim that the dominant experience of a midadolescent is one of abandonment. They review popular and academic literature in combination with Clark’s research and assert that youth are systemically abandoned. Systems such as schools, activities, and sports that once sought to support youth have abandoned them in “favor of the organization’s goals” (p. 37). Parents and family systems are also culpable. In all of these areas, “The loss of meaningful relationships with adults has been the most powerful force in adolescents’ experience of systemic abandonment” (p. 41).

The result is midadolescents creating a world beneath. Historically, we perceived youth separating from adults as a harmless time necessary for identity formation. But this new world beneath is distinct because it is a defensive act, seeking self-protection and even survival. Clark and Rabey claim that this world exists because midadolescents have no choice. Relationships are a basic human need and because they are relationally abandoned, they band together to fulfill this need. Their lives include layers of relationships where they take on various roles and personas to meet
the expectations of the environment (p. 54). But the real self lies hidden, especially from adults. Ultimately, adolescents are hurt and suffering from loneliness in their self-constructed world. The good news, as reported in many other research findings, is that midadolescents want adults in their lives.

Part two describes eight characteristics of midadolescent culture. First, clusters have replaced cliques in the ordering of social life. These are akin to family groups that establish their own “expectations, loyalties, and values” (p. 68), acting as a unit to provide security and protection in the adolescent world. Second, the school environment fails to nurture the development of the whole person and the dominant utilitarian goal of achievement makes cheating prevalent and learning secondary. Clark and Rabey advocate for removal of a “one-size-fits-all” educational environment and support focus on individuals. Third, families are fractured and midadolescents are suffering the effects. The difficult task of parenting combined with busy, hurting parents is an unhelpful mixture. The authors remind parents that kids want their attention, inviting parents to be physically present and provide boundaries amidst relationships with their kids. Fourth, sports contribute to a climate of high expectations, competition, and self-preservation. Once midadolescents begin high school, the average athlete no longer belongs and the lines between “superstars and nobodies” emerges (p. 111). Competitive sports, conclude Clark and Rabey, fulfill the adults in charge, thus abandoning kids.

The fifth insight from youth culture is the lack of sexual ethic nurtured by our “sexually saturated and sexually confused culture” (p. 119). The authors assert that midadolescents use sexual exploration as a cure for loneliness and need to learn how the heart and body are interconnected. Sixth, midadolescents are extremely busy, feel pressure to achieve, frequently fight with parents, and are very eager to keep those around them happy. This results in high levels of stress. They need adults to come alongside them to learn how to cope and manage amidst the juggle of expectations. Changes in ethics and morality are the seventh characteristic. The filter for ethical decisions is “self-interest and self-protection” (p. 149). This includes justifying choices to lie, cheat, and plagiarize. This generation needs adults to teach and model integrity and honesty. The last insight involves the prevalence of partying and alcohol use among midadolescents. Surprisingly, Clark and Rabey report these practices are not an end in themselves, but a means to create “community celebrations” (p. 168). People have always created such experiences and this is the attempt of midadolescents to do so in the world beneath.