

# New Research Explores Teenage Views and Behavior Regarding the Supernatural

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(Ventura, CA) - If the spiritual world is elusive and controversial, one certainty is the prevalence of the supernatural dimension in mass media. Supernatural beings, stories, and themes have invaded America's entertainment choices - from movies (such as *Underworld*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* ), to television programs (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ghost Whisperer* ), to books (*Harry Potter*, *Goosebumps* ), and video games (*Doom*, *The Darkness* ).

The nation's most media-drenched consumers are well aware of these portrayals of the supernatural: more than four out five teenagers say they have witnessed supernatural themes in media during the last three months. This insight comes from a new report issued by The Barna Group that examines teens' media exposure to the supernatural world, as well as a variety of other aspects of teens' experiences and perceptions of the immaterial realm, including their participation in psychic and witchcraft activities, their beliefs, and their influencers.

The report, called *Ministry to Mosaics: Teens and the Supernatural*, is based upon three nationwide studies conducted among more than 4,000 teens by The Barna Group. The new resource - available only through the company's website - is designed to help youth workers, pastors, and parents understand and respond to the spiritual needs of America's youth when it comes to this significant ministry subject. The research was co-sponsored by Mark Matlock of WisdomWorks Ministries.

## Witchcraft and Psychic Engagement

Teenagers relish experiences and the supernatural world provides fertile ground for their explorations. In fact, three-quarters of America's youth (73%) have engaged in at least one type of psychic or witchcraft-related activity, beyond mere media exposure or horoscope usage.

The most common types of witchcraft behaviors were using a Ouija board and reading a book about witchcraft or Wicca, each of which had been done by more than one-third of teenagers. More than one-quarter of teens have played a game featuring sorcery or witchcraft elements. One-tenth of teens had participated in a séance and 1 out of 12 had tried to cast a spell or mix a magic potion.

As for psychic activities, more than one-fourth of teens have had their palm read (30%) or their fortune told (27%). Other psychic deeds included being physically present when

someone else used psychic powers (14%), visiting a medium or spiritual guide (9%), and consulting a psychic (9%).

Walking the line between entertainment and spiritual experimentation, 4 out of every 5 teens have read their horoscope before - and say they do so "just for fun." The new resource points out that while most teens are not convinced that horoscopes are always accurate, more than one-quarter believes they are always or usually true. Only a minority of teens believes that horoscopes are not at all accurate and should be avoided.

### **Beyond-the-Senses Experiences**

The Barna report also explores many dimensions of teens' interactions with unexplainable events. It is no wonder most teens believe in the supernatural realm: many have had experiences that could only be described as supernatural or spiritual. For instance, seven million teens have encountered an angel, demon, or some other supernatural being. More than two million teens say they have communicated with a dead person (10%). Nearly two million youth claim they have psychic powers.

David Kinnaman, the author of the report, pointed out that teenagers are members of the Mosaic generation, those Americans currently age three to 21. "The term 'Mosaic' is a great way to describe teens' patchwork of values and lifestyles: they are the ultimate collage artists, pulling ideas and input from a variety of sources that consist of a great diversity of flavors."

The Vice President of The Barna Group explained that, "Teens give the supernatural world the same treatment as any other aspect of their lives. They cut and paste supernatural experiences and perspectives from a variety of sources - from the movies and books they read, from their experiences, from the Internet, from their peers and families, from any place they're comfortable with. Most of all, they are motivated by their desire to find out what works for them and what feels right. This makes it difficult to minister to them, because most teens today do not process or interpret input in the same way adults do."

The research revealed that many churches fail to address the subject of the supernatural with sufficient frequency or relevance. One of the report's most sobering findings is that only one-quarter of churched teenagers (28%) recall receiving any teaching at their church in the last year that helped to shape their views on the supernatural world! Teens and the Supernatural takes an in-depth look at what influences teens on the topic of the spiritual world, touching on the roles of peers, families, churches, and media.

### **Opportunities and Challenges**

Certain types of teenagers are more likely to engage in dangerous spiritual experimentation, while other groups are less inclined to do so. Among the most likely to experiment were relationally isolated teenagers and those who were experiencing a significant amount of stress and frustration. Many teens try witchcraft or psychic

activities based on a desire to control or influence their circumstances. Teens with few friends or undergoing intense stress were more likely than average to turn to witchcraft or to psychic power to cope with their feelings of vulnerability and insignificance.

On the other hand, possessing an evangelical faith perspective was by far the most significant factor insulating teenagers from unwanted exploration of the supernatural. Evangelical teens were nearly three times less likely than the norm to have engaged in witchcraft or psychic activities. For context, while only 26% of evangelicals had experimented, the next least-likely segment of teens - those who read the Bible at least weekly - showed an engagement rate of 54%.

Evangelicals were also significantly less likely to experiment with supernatural powers and activities than were non-evangelical born again teens (69%) or youth group attenders (66%). Denominationally, Catholics (77%) and mainline Protestants (81%) were slightly more likely to experiment than were Baptists (60%) or non-mainline Protestants (62%).

## **Beliefs**

*Teens and the Supernatural* includes an analysis of teen beliefs on the supernatural dimension. For instance, although three-quarters believe in the existence of an immaterial, spiritual world, there is little agreement about the shape of that arena: almost half think there are good and evil powers in the supernatural world; one-fifth says there is no such thing as good versus evil; one out of 10 offered some other opinion on the matter; and one-quarter said they have no idea.

Teens' ideas about the supernatural are soft and unpredictable, as reflected in these highlights from the report:

- Most teens embraced the biblical position on life after death: "every person has a soul that will live forever, either God's presence or absence" (82%). However, a smaller proportion (61%) believes Heaven is a real place or paradise where people go when they die.
- Most teenagers - 71% - embrace the orthodox Christian view of God (the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the world). A slight majority (58%) say that Satan is a real spiritual being and the enemy of God.
- Teens have mixed perspectives on other supernatural beings, such as angels, ghosts, demons, witches and vampires. When pressed on the matter, large proportions of teens say they are not very certain of their views on these subjects - even among the 89% who believe in the existence of angels.

## **Perspectives**

The 47-page report includes a final chapter filled with recommendations and suggestions for parents and youth workers.

"Everyone wants a simple solution," the 32-year-old Kinnaman explained. "Unfortunately, we discovered the answers are quite complex. Teens need help becoming wiser consumers of media, but that takes a long-term, intensive process of coaching. They would also benefit from more integration of Scriptural perspectives into their decision-making - that is, they need to operate on the basis of a biblical worldview. But that takes years to develop, immense effort, and close cooperation between church and home. Youth ministries need to address the supernatural more frequently as well as customize their ministry to each student by providing mentoring and personalized development opportunities, but most youth groups would have to be restructured to accomplish these goals. These types of strategies yield deep, whole-life results. But it is difficult to adopt these alternatives because they take patience, prayer and an intense focus on transformed lives rather than mere program attendance."

The *Supernatural* report is the first in a series of Barna reports on the Mosaic generation. When Kinnaman was asked to explain the focus on Mosaics, the 11-year Barna Group veteran pointed to unprecedented opportunities among the age group.

"The Mosaic generation is in a state of spiritual turmoil. They long for personal meaning and they are comfortable with incredible technological and media-driven tools that would enable them to accomplish whatever spiritual goals they choose. But millions of teens are precariously close to simply shelving the Christian faith as irrelevant, uninspiring, and just a phase.' Millions of previously churching Busters ended up rejecting Christian spirituality after high school. Mosaics are in even greater danger of making that leap from faith to doubt."

"The supernatural world represents the epicenter of the spiritual struggle for their hearts and minds," Kinnaman continued. "When teenagers settle for cheap alternatives instead of choosing intimacy with God - and relying upon His care and His power - it can lead to years, even decades, of spiritual entrapment in their lives. But with appropriate choices come spiritual rewards. After Jesus rejected Satan's temptations, His ministry flourished. If Mosaics reject spiritual deception and stop tinkering with contemptible imitations of God's power, it could spell the difference between a generation fulfilling its spiritual destiny and one that turns from God during adulthood."

**Research Details** The data described in this article are based on three national surveys of teenagers (ages 13 to 18). The studies were conducted in 2002 (612 interviews), 2004 (1448 interviews), and 2005 (2280 interviews). The 2002 research was conducted by telephone, while the two recent surveys were completed online. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the 2002 sample is  $\pm 4.1$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level; the 2004 and 2005 studies have sampling error rates of  $\pm 2.6$  and  $\pm 2.2$  percentage points, respectively, at the 95% confidence level. All teenagers in the 48 contiguous states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of respondents in the survey sample corresponds to the geographic dispersion of the U.S. teen population. The data were subjected to slight statistical weighting procedures to calibrate the survey base to national demographic proportions.

More about David Kinnaman, the author of the report, can be found at The Barna Group website. Click here for details:

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=AboutDavid>

Mark Matlock of WisdomWorks Ministries co-sponsored the project and provided significant input on the research. Information about his ministry can be found at

[www.planetwisdom.com](http://www.planetwisdom.com)

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## **Definitions**

Non-evangelical born again Christians are defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "born again."

"Evangelicals" meet the born again criteria (described above) *plus* seven other conditions. Those include saying their faith is very important in their life today; believing they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians; believing that Satan exists; believing that eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works; believing that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; asserting that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches; and describing God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today. Being classified as an evangelical is not dependent upon church attendance or the denominational affiliation of the church they attend. Respondents were **not** asked to describe themselves as "evangelical."

Mainline Protestant denominations include the Episcopal, American Baptist, Presbyterian (USA), Lutheran, United Methodist and United Church of Christ congregations. Teens who attend a church in one of these denominations are labeled as mainline attenders.

Non-mainline denominations include all other Protestant denominations, as well as independent and non-denominational Christian churches. © The Barna Group, Ltd, 2006.

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