

KATHLEEN PARKER

Americans' capacity for denial is rivaled only by the depth of their affection for self-gratification.

They know, for instance, that something's seriously wrong with contemporary culture as manifested by the deplorable behavior of our children. They can see that teens murdering babies, for example, is a bad sign.

In a recent poll, Americans said today's teens and children lack moral and ethical values. "Americans are frightened for and in some cases frightened of our children," said Deborah Wadsworth, executive director of the opinion research group, Public Agenda.

Yet, they're at a loss for what to do. Government programs apparently can't fix the problem. Schools, held hostage by gun-toting students, obviously can't do it. Isn't there someone out there with a key to this vexing puzzle?

Well, yes, but Americans — who these days are more focused on the "I" than the "Thou" — aren't going to like it. The key lurks like some statistical Waldo among layers of percentages and numerical ranges within two recently released polls.

The first was the Public Agenda poll. The second — conducted jointly by Nickelodeon cable network and Yankelovich Partners Inc., a marketing and social research firm — found (guess what?) that children are getting much of their information from television rather than from parents.

As cause-and-effect equations go, this one's not exactly a brain-teaser.

Polls point to absence of parenting

The Public Agenda poll, titled "Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation," reveals little new. We're all familiar with the coarsening of America. Who hasn't pulled up to an intersection next to a car rocking from the bass of some rap "song" filled with words unprintable and images unimaginable? Who hasn't been bumped on the sidewalk by a surly youth whose vocabulary excludes the words, "excuse me"?

Thus, Public Agenda's poll

reported that American adults think teens are "rude" and "irresponsible" and that younger children are "lacking discipline" and are "spoiled."

Parents are "riveted by one goal — the necessity of teaching all children the values of integrity, ethical behavior, concern for others, respect, civility, compassion and responsibility," said Ms. Wadsworth. Their children, meanwhile, are riveted to the television screen.

In the second poll, researchers

interviewed 1,341 children ages 6-17. They found 75 percent of the children interviewed have their own room. Of those, 59 percent have a television set in their room. Thirty-six percent have a video game system; 39 percent have their own VCR; 42 percent have their own telephone, and 40 percent have a computer.

That's a lot of stuff for kids with busy — absent — parents who insist they have to work to make ends meet. That's a lot of distraction for kids who have no one else to talk to.

"Almost everything [children] are seeing is essentially going into their minds in some sort of uncensored or unfiltered way," said Ann Clurman, a partner with Yankelovich.

It's ironic that the same adults who provide their children with the latest in surrogate parenting are demanding stricter government controls on content labeling. If a child is in his room alone with the TV set, who's monitoring the label? Are we operating on an honor code? Nothing gets my child's attention faster than a warning of adult content.

I confess to knowing little about primetime television. While the rest of the world is tuned into "Married With Children," I'm usually watching C-Span or Cable News Network. But, as a result of my news addiction, I know something about the

quality of television.

An old episode of "Seinfeld," considered family entertainment, was played in court last week as part of a sexual harassment lawsuit. Apparently, the accused had related the content of the show to a female colleague. The gist was that Jerry Seinfeld couldn't remember the name of the woman he was dating, but he recalled that her name rhymed with a female anatomical part. Jerry Seinfeld went through the list of possibilities — Gipple, for example — and finally landed on Dolores. Cute, eh?

Even under the best of circumstances — "Seinfeld" being considered one of the higher-quality shows — American children are being bombarded daily, if not hourly, with information best left in the dumpster. They're also being left on their own. The Yankelovich poll also found that one-third of kids ages 6-17 make their own dinner at least some of the time.

Parents, meanwhile, are looking for outside help rather than inside solutions. Two-thirds of those polled by Public Agenda think improving public schools and enhancing after-school activities would be a step in the right direction. Both would be good, but parents would be better.

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