

Your kid or mine? Reaching troubled youth: Reaching troubled youth

by [Lynn Schofield Clark](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

The movie *Thirteen* does not represent every teen's story, but it does show every parent's nightmare. It's the story of an angry girl. Tracy (played by Evan Rachel Wood) is angry at her well-meaning mother, Mel (played by Holly Hunter), whose harried life as a single parent makes her resort too often to responses like, "We'll discuss this later." Tracy is angry that her father has abandoned her and that her mother is getting back together with her drug-addicted boyfriend. She's already turned some of her anger inward, engaging in the self-mutilating practice of cutting her arms to turn her emotional distress into physical pain.

In junior high, Tracy discovers that the clean-cut, good students like herself are no longer at the top of the heap. Instead, it is the sexually alluring, fearless and outrageous "bad girl" Evie (Nikki Reed) who garners the attention of boys and girls alike—including the attention of Mason, the older brother from whom Tracy seeks approval. Once she discovers the rules of the game, Tracy ingratiates herself with Evie, copying her style of dress and then proving her own recklessness by stealing a woman's pocketbook. In an obsessive and eventually homoerotic friendship, Evie becomes a catalyst for Tracy's experiments with drugs, casual sex, body piercing and crime. Evie moves into Tracy's bedroom as the two up the ante in their desire to out-outrage each other.

Perhaps the most useful message of this movie comes through the background details: as Tracy moves away from her former social group, many people just as resolutely distance themselves from her. We see Tracy's former friends looking at her with disgust from across the lunchroom. We see caring and capable teachers focusing their efforts on the students who are trying to succeed, apparently unable to keep Tracy from following her self-destructive path. We see Mel's busy and equally distracted friends denigrating Tracy, and making only minuscule attempts to reach her. We glimpse the once-friendly neighbors looking away when Tracy attempts to make eye contact with them.

Tracy has chosen a path of trouble, and in a world of busy adults struggling to shepherd their own children through the difficult teen years, the easy path is to avoid such girls, even shun them.

Religious organizations are noticeably absent from the lives of everyone in *Thirteen*. Therefore a troubled teen like Tracy has few resources outside the immediate family. According to research from the National Study of Youth and Religion, religiously active teens are much less likely to engage in risky behaviors than nonreligious teens. This means that in many cases, church-attending teens won't find young people like Tracy and Evie in their youth group. But is that reassuring or troubling? It may be comforting if you are a parent. Yet if your teen is one of the 20 to 40 percent of religiously active teens who experiment with alcohol and drugs, it means he or she may be on the road out of youth group, joining Tracy and others in an increasingly self-destructive and isolating journey.

If some children are neglected in our society, they are—as educational theorist Henry Giroux points out—being closely targeted by at least one segment of society: corporate marketing. Tracy steals to keep up an appearance of ultra-hipness: teens like her are constantly encouraged to confuse buying power with empowerment.

Giroux observes that the previous two decades have seen a rise in cases of neglect, abuse, hunger, poverty and homelessness among young people. At the same time, funding has been cut for education, health care, after-school programs, youth employment and other youth programs. This means that for many young people, there are now fewer opportunities to experience what psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has termed “flow”: the pleasurable feeling a teen has when engaging in an activity that demands total emotional and mental concentration, like playing the piano or participating in a team sport. Studies have found that young people who regularly experience “flow” are less likely to participate in delinquent activities.

There is no guarantee that investment in youth ministry, after-school programs, or other such efforts will necessarily change the fate of people like Tracy and Evie. Nevertheless, communities are challenged to offer a faithful response to those in need. This film reminds us that we are called upon to love those who are hurting even when they threaten to hurt themselves or others, and we are asked to offer support to the beleaguered parents who often become isolated from others through the actions of their children. We are also needed as public-policy advocates for the

young people who are too often overlooked.

Being loved and accepted without reservation is what every teen needs. Mel's embrace of Tracy at the end of the film serves as a potent reminder that we should never let go of kids, including those who most want to distance themselves from us. Some parents will breathe a sigh of relief as they leave the theater, thankful that what happens to Tracy is not happening to their kid. Better to leave with a rallying cry: this shouldn't happen to anybody's kid.