



**A Series of Information Resources  
on**

***Youth Subcultures:  
Understanding Subgroups to Better  
Address Barriers to Learning  
& Improve Schools***

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

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## **About Emo Youth Subculture**

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

- (1) how youth are identified as “emos”
  - (2) the impact of this “subgroup”
  - (3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact
  - (4) data on intervention efforts
  - (5) proposed new directions
  - (6) resources for more information.
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## About Emo Youth Subculture

“In recent years, a growing number of teenagers have been dressing to articulate – or confound – gender identity and sexual orientation. Certainly they have been confounding school officials, whose responses have ranged from indifference to applause to bans. Dress code conflicts often reflect a generational divide, with students coming of age in a culture that is more accepting of ambiguity and difference than that of the adults who make the rules... Dress is always code, particularly for teenagers eager to telegraph evolving identities. ... In some districts, administrators seek to define the line between classroom distraction and the student’s need for self-expression. ... Often a student’s clothes, intended as a fashion statement can be misread as a billboard about sexuality.

Hoffman (2009)

Because of the way they dress and adorn themselves, some youth groups are viewed as threatening. And, societal concern seems to burgeon as these groups gain widespread popular media attention and are increasingly active and connected on the internet. One irony, as Wilson and Atkinson (2005) suggest, is that the growing attention often results in initially censured fashions subsequently becoming “incorporated into mainstream culture (e.g., by converting subcultural signs into mass produced objects).” Those youth who are called *Emos* provide a dramatic example of the type of subcultural group that has both raised concern and influenced mainstream fashions.

Emo subculture has emerged from its roots in Washington, D. C. in the 1980s to become a global phenomenon. While the precise origins of the term are debated, Grillo (2008) states: “Emo subculture is the latest movement on a continuum represented by goths in the ‘80’s and alternative rockers in the ‘90’s. In yearbooks, they’re the kids who wear exaggerated haircuts and immerse themselves in moody music. In short: the kids jocks have been beating up for decades.” Michaels (2008) notes that the subculture waned for a while, but saw a rebirth in the late 1990s and 2000s when it adopted elements of Glam and Goth culture, and integrated a stronger pop influence.

### Defining Emo Subculture and Identifying Subgroup Members

The term Emo usually is depicted as originating from a melodic subgenre of punk rock music first called “emocore” or “emotional hardcore” and “has evolved to become a well recognized slang term to describe a group with particular preferences in clothes, music and behaviors” (Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008).

Emo music is characterized as emphasizing emotional or personal turbulence, behaviors, attitudes and values. Themes include despair, depression, heart break, and self-loathing. The artistic elements are seen as a reaction to the increased violence within the hardcore punk scene. The new direction taken in the 1980s is attributed to the personal politics espoused by Ian MacKaye of the group *Minor Threat* who is described as turning the focus of the music “from the community back towards the individual” (Blush, 2001; Greenwald, 2003). Another seminal influence is attributed to Guy Picciotto who formed *Rites of Spring* in 1984 to break free of “hardcore’s self-imposed boundaries in favor of melodic guitars, varied rhythms, and deeply personal, impassioned lyrics” that included nostalgia, romantic bitterness, and poetic desperation (Greenwald, 2003). Other bands emerged in D.C. and elsewhere; by the mid 1990s, several independent record labels were specializing in Emo style works; by the early 2000s, Emo broke into mainstream culture. “In recent years the term has been applied by critics and journalists to a variety of artists, including multiplatinum acts and groups with disparate styles and sounds” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emo> ).

In addition to music, Emo more generally is used to describe a particular relationship between fans and artists and a subculture embracing a distinct set of values and behaviors. While their initial “fashions” in the early 2000s were described as “a clean cut look,” as the style spread to younger teenagers, the image has darkened and now is characterized as including black stovepipe jeans, body-hugging T-shirts, scarves, tartans, studded belts and black wristbands, black sneakers and skate shoes, males wearing heavy eyeliner, and some males also wear thick, black horn-rimmed glasses. And, with respect to hairstyle, the emphasis has been on long side-swept bangs, sometimes covering one or both eyes; hair may be straightened and dyed black, but also some adopt short, choppy layers; bright colors, such as blue, pink, red, or bleached blond also are common (Hoffman, 2009; Phillipov, 2009).

From a mental health perspective, Emos are stereotyped as being emotional, sensitive, shy, introverted, or angst-ridden and as prone to depression, self-injury, and suicide. While it is a rather glib statement, Martin (2006) notes that in distinguishing Emos from Goths some have suggested that Emos hate themselves, while Goths hate everyone.

### **What is the impact of this subgroup on society and on subgroup members?**

The degree to which this subgroup has been seen as a threat to society is noted by Michaels (2008):

“A bill to ‘curb dangerous teen trends’ in Russia’s State Duma describes emos as 12-16 year olds with back and pink clothing, studded belts, painted fingernails, ear and eyebrow piercings, and black hair with fringes that cover half the face. The bill says emo culture’s ‘negative ideology’ may encourage depression, social withdrawal and even suicide.

The degree to which elements in society have been a threat to Emos was reported online in a *Time* article on Emo-bashing in Mexico in 2008.

“The trio of long-haired teenagers grasped the plaza wall to shield their bodies as hundreds of youths kicked and punched them while filming the beating on cell phone cameras. “Kill the emos,” shouted the assailants, who had organized over the Internet to launch the attack in Mexico’s central city of Queretaro. After police eventually steamed in and made arrests, the bloody victims lay sobbing on the concrete waiting for ambulances while the mob ran through the nearby streets laughing and cheering. ...

As well as running riot in Queretaro, a mob also attacked emos in the heart of Mexico City this month. Furthermore, emos complain they are being increasingly threatened and assaulted by smaller groups on the streets on a daily basis. ‘It’s getting dangerous for us to go out now. We get shouted at and spat on. We get things thing thrown at us. There is so much hate out there,’ said Santino Bautista, a 16-year-old emo high school student sitting in a Mexico City plaza alongside other teenagers in tight black jeans and dark makeup. ...

Most of all the assailants target the emos for dressing effeminately, still a provocative act for many in a macho Mexico. ‘At the core of this is the homophobic issue. ... It is the conservative side of Mexican society fighting against something different.’

The emos make a soft target for the aggressors. The vast majority are teenagers, often just 15 or 16 years old. Most are from comfortable middle-class backgrounds with little experience of the street battles in Mexico’s hardened barrios. And by its nature, the emo scene attracts followers who prefer intellectual indulgence to fistfights. In the lead-up to the mob attacks, there was increasingly aggressive talk against emos in online forums and TV music shows. Blogs raved about “killing emos” and showed cartoon drawings of decapitated long-haired heads.” (<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1725839,00.html>)

Society also has been concerned that members of the subgroup might be a suicide threat (Definis-Gojanovic, 2009; Martin, 2006). For example, because of their connection with the Emo subculture and Emo social networking on the internet, the deaths of two teenagers in two separate incidents in 2007 have been widely cited to support this concern. And, another teenager's murder was also discussed as related to Emo subculture. However, Phillipov (2009) has stressed that this link was only tenuously established and that "moral panic" in relation to youth music and subculture is a rather common feature of discussions in the media (e.g., media is seen as building-up concern to a degree that is disproportionate to what are likely to be actual risks).

On a more individual level, concern has been raised that members of this subgroup tend to be overly emotional, feel misunderstood, engage in self-harming behavior; they also often are targets for bullies – including homophobic attacks because of the effeminate look of some in the subgroup (Grillo, 2008; Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008). And, at the same time, practitioners suggest that the group seems less likely to seek help for mental health concerns.

### **What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?**

Because of their dramatic general appearance, Emo youth have been a particular concern in discussions of school dress codes. Such discussion emphasizes fashions that distract students from instruction, go against community standards, raise safety and mental health concerns, and so forth. The difficulty in formulating and enforcing dress codes that are not discriminatory has kept schools from establishing general policy.

Stimulated by concerns about Emo and other youth subgroups, another common policy discussion is how such subgroups and their antagonists are using new technologies. Youth subculture is widely extolled and attacked through websites and sending e-mail and text messaging. Particular concern has arisen in response to reports of individual harassment. David-Ferdon and Feldman (2007) indicate that "state and federal legislators and school officials are responding by passing, modifying, or enforcing laws. For example: school districts in Florida, South Carolina, Utah, and Oregon are creating new policies to deal with cyberbullying." At the same time, these researchers stress:

"Stopping adolescents' access to and use of electronic media is not the answer.... Reliance upon blocking or filtering software is insufficient to address this issue. ... Research on parental monitoring and offline aggression indicates significantly higher rates of aggression in youth who report very low parental monitoring compared to those who report very high parental monitoring, suggesting that parental monitoring is a strategy that may be effective for the prevention of electronic aggression".

With respect to monitoring, the trend is to encourage parents and professionals to become more aware of what youth are communicating through the new technologies. This certainly is a way to grasp the positives and negatives related to subgroups such as Emos. Of course, the irony of adult monitoring of social networking sites is that the surveillance conflicts with the desire of youth for autonomy (e.g., from adult authority) and privacy.

Other practical recommendations reflect commonly advocated good parenting guidelines (e.g., spend quality time with your kids, open up communication, watch for warning signs, seek professional help when necessary) and suggestions for countering the subculture (e.g., encourage school dress codes, fight against Emo influence on the internet, try to mount media campaigns).

## **Any data on intervention impact?**

There is no evidence of impact for social level efforts to counter the growth and impact of the Emo subculture. Data on interventions designed to deal with the negative impact of most youth subculture groups must be extrapolated from interventions designed to prevent or end specific behaviors or encourage youth to disassociate from groups such as gangs and cults.

In general, available findings indicate a variety of practices show promise for preventing specific behavior and emotional problems, but this is no recipe for those who want to stop youth from aligning with a subculture such as the Emos. There are no evidence based practices for addressing the complexities involved in preventing such involvement. Some interveners may be tempted to use practices designed to scare a youngster out of the subgroup or to employ techniques used by cult deprogrammers. Available evidence suggests that such efforts not only may do more harm than good, their use also raises significant legal and ethical issues. The same applies for efforts to control use of technologies used for social networking.

With respect to school interventions for regulating dress, the Education Commission of the States (n.d.) notes that there have been no long term empirical studies on the effectiveness of school uniforms or dress codes in improving student or school performance. The Commission stresses, however, that “proponents argue that the use of such policies can enhance schools’ ability to achieve their basic academic purposes.”

## **Proposed New Directions**

No agreement exists about the long-term impact on youth who adopt the Emo subculture lifestyle. As is evident from the information provided above, some of the concerns that have been discussed are similar to those raised by other youth subgroups.

From the perspective of our Center’s work, the reason for concern related to any youngster arises when it is evident that significant factors are interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. And, when those factors stem from or are maintained by association with a particular lifestyle, there is reason to address that lifestyle.

At the same time, it is essential to avoid traditional tendencies to wait for problems and then to approach such youth as if they required totally unique intervention strategies. Below and in the box that follows, we offer a perspective about policy and practice related to all students with the first emphasis on promotion of healthy development and preventing problems. Embedded are a few examples to illustrate addressing subgroups such as Emos.

The emphasis is on developing and implementing a comprehensive intervention continuum that:

- *Promotes healthy development and prevents problems*

For instance:

- > providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders about the positive and negative features of youth subculture in general and specific subgroups such as Emos that are in the locale and about how to counter any negative impact
- > establishing working alliances to dialogue with students designated as Emos and those who harass them, with the intent of minimizing negative encounters and promoting social emotional learning

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

For instance:

- > implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible
- > protecting all students (e.g., from bullying or harassment and other negative impact)
- > ensuring a student's status as an Emo isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing regular attendance and motivated participation in classroom learning)
- > providing medical, mental health, and learning supports (e.g., related to social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:

- > identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., related to negative emotional and cognitive impact)
- > establish a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers, social service and juvenile justice agencies)

In contrast to a waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing social rejection, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

## A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

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## **Source for Additional Information**

See our Center’s online clearinghouse Quick Find on  
***Youth Culture and Subgroups***  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthculture.htm>

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools\**

**Online:**

*What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction*

*Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups*

*Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References*

*About Youth Gangs*

*About the Goth Youth Subculture*

*About Hip Hop Youth Subculture*

*About "Loners" and "Losers"*

*About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture*

*About Emo Youth Subculture*

*About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures*

*About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture*

*About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup*

*About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture*

*About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup*

*About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture*

*Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies*

*About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon*

**Others are in development**

\*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.