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Kids don't hold back the hugs

Internet has helped make trend an international youth movement

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Beyond all the hand-wringing over the so-called hugging ban at Oak Park's Julian Middle School -- kids are not allowed to hug each other hello in ways that impede hallway traffic -- lies a broader cultural issue that has remained largely unexplored.

Hugging, once the province of clueless parents and dorky self-help gurus, has been embraced by kids from Hong Kong to Krakow to suburban Chicago.

Among the signs that hugging is hip: In recent years, schools from Des Moines to Cornwall, England, have asked students to cut back on the practice. In Pequot Lakes, Minn., where hugging became an issue in 2000, some middle school students reported getting 60 hugs a day.

And closer to home, Oak Park parent Suzanne Dubin, 42, says hugging has been prevalent at the village's other middle school, Brooks, for at least four years.

"I remember thinking, this looks like an episode of 'The Sopranos,' with everyone greeting each other with a hug," Dubin says.

With the aid of the Internet, hugging has become an international youth movement, with teens and twentysomethings descending on public spaces all over the world with "Free Hugs" signs and then filming - and posting on YouTube -- the resulting awkwardness, confusion and joy. The original "Free Hugs" video, by an Australian using the pseudonym Juan Mann, was selected by YouTube users as the most inspirational video of 2006. Mann also appeared on "Oprah."

By August, the movement had made it to the World Scout Jamboree in Chelmsford, England, where "Free Hugs" signs were a common sight, according to the News & Record in Greensboro, N.C.

Trend watchers at Teen Research Unlimited did not have data on hugging, and trends director Rob Callender said he didn't see any obvious catalysts for youth-hugging in pop culture, with



the "hug it out" phrase popularized by the HBO TV show "Entourage" likely appealing to an older crowd.

"It really is interesting, because it seems that if this is something that is widespread, instead of just very localized, then teens are actually out in front of popular culture in this," he said.

"The media tends to play up conflict and controversy -- discord is probably a lot more interesting than a lack of strife. But because of that, things like this don't necessarily get played up as much. And that might be why we haven't really seen it pop up on the radar screen."

Kathleen Gasperini, senior vice president of the youth culture marketing research company Label Networks, says hugging is in keeping with current youth trends such as the quasi-Christian "To Write Love on Her Arms" campaign, which fights depression and teen suicide, and promotes the notion that "Love is the movement."

"There is a kind of a movement going on where it's like, support each other instead of embracing a competitive attitude or being more [cliquey]. It's out here in California. You see it in New York as well," Gasperini says.

A half-dozen students interviewed in Oak Park said that hugging comes naturally to them, and that many girls and some boys have been hugging since grade school. None knew where the hugging trend came from, and some expressed surprise that their parents didn't hug their classmates in the '70s and '80s.

"The times are different. My kids seem much less self-conscious than I was at that age," said Julian Parent-Teacher Organization co-president Lynda Shadrake.

Hugging makes sense in the context of what we know about Generation Y: that the current crop of teens, tweens and twentysomethings is cohesive, very collaborative, optimistic and fairly easygoing, Callender says. Generation X, in contrast, is generally viewed as more cynical and less social.

"Structured play groups and collaborative play, and things like that were just coming onto the scene when [Gen Xers] were kids, so [they] may not have been raised in a plays-well-with-others environment to quite the extent that this generation is, and you might be seeing some of that," Callender says.

"I mean, [these kids] really seem to be playing well with others."

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