

Understanding Today's Teenagers and How to Reach Them

The world is changing at an increasingly rapid pace – meaning the world of the young people in your church and community is radically different than the one you grew up in. How do you keep up with these changes and respond to them? What are the most significant trends, and how can you adapt to them so that the gospel is relevant to this generation?

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I. Yesterday today forever, Jesus is the same.

- A. 1 John 2;6
- B. Philippians 2: 1-11
- C. 1Corinthians 9: 19-23
- D. There is no doubt that youth culture is changing, but looking to Jesus helps us to understand how we can still reach young people, even today.

II. Changes in Youth Culture

- A. Generation Changes:
 - 1. Generation x: Born 1960-1980
 - 2. Generation y: Born 1980-2000 (Millennials)
 - 3. iGeneration (z): Born 1996–2010
 - 4. (Generation Alpha: 2011-present)
- B. Question:
Who/what was an authority figure for you when you were a teenager?
- C. “The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in places of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company....
And tyrannize their teachers.” Quote attributed to Socrates
- D. Barna: more atheistic, more likely to self-identify as LGBTQ
- E. Generation WE, or Generation ME?

F. Below are some comments or observations about the iGeneration based on various studies, reports and youth ministry experience. In small groups, circle the observations that you have experienced in your own ministry situation.

- Information at their fingertips
- Advertising must be personal and visual/non-static
- FOMO "Fear of Missing Out"
- Moral individualists (versus relativists)
- Re-wired brain (especially by pornography)
- Enter puberty younger, stay longer
- Increased multi-tasking?
- Living in community of four-six people (often online)
- Fluid view of gender identity - increased number of teens self-declaring as
- LGBTQ
- Technologically savvy
- Creative and entrepreneurial
- More socially conservative than Millennials
- Prefer face-to-face communication to virtual communication
- Prefer to be an active participant than passive consumer
- Spiritually very open - to anything
- Confused view of what it means to follow Jesus
- Overly busy AND very bored
- Want self-improvement and to have an impact on society
- Prefer goal or action-oriented community
- More broken families
- Find it hard to have longer open conversations
- Seeking to be understood and loved (especially by parents)
- Prefer authentic community over entertainment
- Commit to relationship-based discipleship rather than programs
- Self expression through emojis rather than NVC

G. Does this information make you feel hopeful or hopeless?

H. Although changes in youth culture may make you feel hopeless or out of touch, we believe there are many reasons to feel hope in these changes.

Why?

1. Young people actually want to form relationships with older generations, even though they may not understand how - they want to be KNOWN.
2. Young people are open to the Gospel message - they are willing to LISTEN.
3. Young people are seeking significance - they want to SERVE. (generationWE, not ME)

- I. The reaction for youth ministries might be:
 1. Create a strategy for building relationships which give young people a Christo-centric IDENTITY.
 2. Equip the church members to interact with and SHARE the Gospel in a way young people can understand and react to.
 3. Create opportunities for young people to have an IMPACT on your ministry and community.

III. A Jesus-centric view of reaching young people today

A. John 1: 35- 2:11

B. What were some of the ways Jesus reached out to and interacted with his early followers?

C. What can we learn from Jesus about reaching out to today's young people?

IV. There is no "follow me" without "follow up"

In 2017, Josiah Venture conducted a study of young people who made a decision to follow Christ during an EXIT outreach tour in the Czech Republic. The study sought to examine what drew these students into the local church (or turned them away from it). Some of the key findings of the project include:

1. **Follow-up should be continuous and personal.** Continuous means that if a student did not attend an event, they may feel they are not welcome at other events, so it is important to continue inviting them. Personal means individualized. Students were more likely to attend a follow-up event when they were contacted personally, rather than receiving a mass Facebook invitation to an event.
2. **Churches need to have a clear pathway to disciple new believers.** They should know who is contacting the students and inviting them to a specific event or Bible study focused on grounding new believers in their faith. It takes relational energy to disciple new believers, which the churches must be willing and able to invest. Without this investment, the new faith begins to "hibernate."
3. **Students have a hard time understanding how or why attending church is an important part of their new faith.** Churches who lead the students first into relationships (for example, through a small group setting) will later see the young people in church. However, without the relationship, many teenagers will not make the wider step to Friday youth group or Sunday church.

4. **Students knew that accepting Christ would lead to change, but were afraid of what that would mean.** It greatly helped them to hear stories from other believers about how they grew in their faith.

V. **Being a church young people like to attend**

In 2016, the Fuller Youth Institute released a study (of mostly Millennials) called “Growing Young” to examine how churches can become more effective at working with young people.

This study was based on 250 churches who were increasing the number of young people they were reaching, and resulted in six “core commitments” successful churches are making. In their own words, they are:

1. **Empathy.** Churches who empathize, understand the main questions that young people are asking and journey with them as they figure them out. Three questions are being asked:
Who am I?
Where do I fit?
What purpose do I have?
2. **Jesus’ message.** For younger people, Jesus is first and Christianity comes second. Jesus is magnetic. He’s a message, a person, and a context who can handle our biggest questions, including our doubt. Young people connect with that.
3. **Keychain leadership.** This is leadership that isn’t centralized control. Every leader has keys of authority, power, and influence, and as young people are ready for them, leaders know how to hand the metaphorical “keys” to them.
4. **Prioritize young people.** From allocating a budget to speaking their language, churches doing well to reach younger audiences invest in them.
5. **Focus on families.** One of the best ways to reach young people is to equip their parents and partner with them.
6. **You don’t need a big budget, and you don’t have to be perceived as “cool.”** You can leverage your time, talents, and volunteers to serve, and any leader can get better at engaging young people, no matter how “old” they are.

VI. **Learning from Jesus – yesterday, today, forever:**

- A. Focus on discipling the few, who disciple others
- B. Build a relationship based ministry rather than program based ministry (program is a tool, not an end)
- C. Give the appropriate “challenge” and follow up

- D. Integrate young people into the wider Christian community – it isn't impossible!
But the wider community needs to reach out too!
- E. Allow young people to be active participants, not passive consumers
- F. Identify and nurture future leaders while they are still young
- G. Communicate in a language and medium young people understand
- H. Know your theology on tricky subjects (LBGTQ), but respond with LOVE to those who are seeking

Suggested Readings:

Gen Z: the Barna Group

Growing Young: Kara Powell and Jake Mulder

Sticky Faith: Kara Powell and Chap Clark

Losing Heart: One Hope and the Youthscape Center for Research