

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Generation Z

axis

They're like "Millennials on steroids"...except when they're not like Millennials at all

Are you looking at today's teenagers and wondering why they're always online or how on earth their views on sexuality, government, and life in general can be so drastically different from yours?

In the U.S., the most recent generation to come of age is Generation Z, or Gen Z. American society has gone through incredible change in the past few decades, which has especially impacted how teenagers see the world because of their age and level of development. In this Guide, we want to look at how the generations have changed over time, what has shaped Gen Z's views on life, and how that knowledge can help you connect with your kids better.

— What is a "generation" and why do they matter?

We can [define a "generation"](#) as "a group of people born within a certain period of time whose shared age and experiences shape a distinct worldview."

As you read through this guide, bear in mind that whenever we're talking about large masses of people, we can't avoid stereotyping them. We simply can't generalize trends across a culture and cover the experience of every individual. Also, there could be multiple, contradicting trends within one generation. People are endlessly diverse. Nevertheless, we still think that evaluating the generations is helpful because of the truths we can glean. As [Business Insider explains](#), "Defining generations helps researchers see how coming of age during certain historical events and technological changes the way people see the world."

— What are the primary generations of the 20th and 21st centuries?

Not everyone agrees on the exact name for each generation, nor do they agree on the precise year when each begins and ends. We've done our best to give estimates based on the sources we found.

Except for where other links are cited, we've gathered the following information from [CNN](#), [MarketingTeacher.com](#), and [studies cited by BuzzFeed](#).

The Lost Generation, b. 1893—1900, came of age during WWI

Defining events:

- Mass production of the Model T
- World War I
- Prohibition
- Women's right to vote

What are they known for?

People use the term "Lost Generation" to refer to those who entered adulthood around the

time of WWI and who suffered loss or disillusionment as a result of the war. [Brittanica says](#), “The generation was ‘lost’ in the sense that its inherited values were no longer relevant in the postwar world and because of its spiritual alienation from a United States that...seemed to its members to be hopelessly provincial, materialistic, and emotionally barren.”

The works of [early twentieth century writers](#) such as Gertrude Stein (credited with coming up with the generation’s name), Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot captures the disillusionment and overindulgence of the members of this group.

The Greatest Generation (G.I. Generation), b. 1901—1924

Defining events:

- The Great Depression
- FDR’s New Deal
- WWII
- Pearl Harbor

What are they known for?

News anchor Tom Brokaw is credited with naming this group the “Greatest Generation,” but they are sometimes called the “G.I. Generation” because of their service in WWII. The members of this generation are known for their strong work ethic, high morals, and sense of duty. They tended to avoid divorce and debt. They built modern America by helping to develop its infrastructure and gave rise to the suburban middle class. The majority of them were religious, and there was a significant increase in the level of education during this time.

The Silent Generation (the Lucky Few), b. 1925-1945

Defining events:

- Post-War “American Dream”
- Korean War
- Space race/moon landing
- McCarthyism
- Cold War/bomb shelters

What are they known for?

Described by some as “grave and fatalistic,” the Silent Generation is known for not wanting to go against the government or the “system.” They had higher employment rates than either the Greatest Generation or the Baby Boomers, but men’s and women’s roles were traditional, with women generally staying at home (88% were not in the workforce). Women also had children at an average younger age than any other generation. Men tended to stay at their jobs for their whole lives. Divorce and having children out of wedlock were taboo. This generation was characterized both by wealth and conformity. No member of the Silent Generation has ever been president.

Baby Boomers, b. 1946-1964

Defining events:

- Vietnam War/protests
- Watergate/Nixon resignation
- Woodstock
- Summer of Love
- JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy assassinations

- TV

What are they known for?

The “Baby Boomers” get their name from the dramatic increase in the birth rate following World War II and are the only generation [officially named by the U.S. Census Bureau](#). In contrast to the Silent Generation, the Boomers were willing questioners of authority. The time period when the Baby Boomers came of age was one of great social and cultural change in America. Besides the civil rights movement, there was the controversial Vietnam War, the sexual revolution, and the culture of rock and roll. Premarital sex and divorce became much more common. Even though many stayed at home, women started working outside the home more than ever before. Yet at the same time, Boomers tend to have a positive view of tradition and authority.

Generation X (Gen X), b. 1965-1980

Defining events:

- Fall of the Berlin Wall
- End of the Cold War
- AIDS crisis
- MTV/music videos

What are they known for?

Gen Xers come between two large generations and, compared to Boomers and Millennials, have less of a tendency to see themselves as unique. They often are stereotyped rather negatively as cynical and passive. They’re individualistic, motivated to learn, and have a lot of startup founders compared to other generations. They’re the first generation in which women had greater levels of education than men, and they are known for having a lot of personal debt. Many of the parents of Gen Xers were divorced or checked out due to being focused on their careers. Gen Xers have tended to marry later and divorce sooner than previous generations.

Millennials (Gen Y), b. 1981-1996

Defining events:

- 9/11
- Obama election
- Great Recession
- Rise of global internet

What are they known for?

In 2016, Millennials surpassed Boomers to become the largest living generation. Millennials show a greater aversion to labels and institutions compared to previous generations. They are less likely to identify with a political party, marry, join the military, or identify with a religion. They are known for being more optimistic than cynical and are [three times as likely not to be married](#) when compared with the Silent Generation at the same age. Millennial women are twice as likely to be in the workforce as women from the Silent Generation. It became much more common for Millennials to identify as LGBTQ+ compared to those in previous generations, and it also became more common for Millennials to continue living at home between the ages of 25 and 35. Millennials’ parents tended to be fairly involved in their lives and to praise their achievements.

Gen Z (iGen), b. 1997-2012

Defining events:

- Global terrorism
- Trump election/Brexit
- Social media natives
- YouTube/digital content
- Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage

What are they known for?

Gen Z is known for being anxious and hard-working. Some think they will end up being the most entrepreneurial generation. They've grown up in a world where everyone has a smartphone, there was a black president, and same-sex marriage is a constitutional right. Gen Z tends to see morals as relative and is growing up in a far more diverse world than previous generations have, both when it comes to race and gender identity. For example, MarketingTeacher.com reports that "Since the early 1700s, the most common last name in the US was 'Smith,' but not anymore; now it is Rodriguez."

How Gen Z is different from & similar to Millennials?

In some ways Gen Z takes trends that were noticeable in Millennials and makes them more extreme (hence why some call them "Millennials on steroids"). In other ways Gen Z is simply different.

Technology

Technology is one of the first aspects of the modern world that comes to mind when asking what major cultural events have shaped Millennials and Gen Z. During both generations' lifetimes, the [internet became a key part of everyday life](#). Social media followed in the early 2000s, which was in turn followed by the smartphone.

However, Gen Z is more influenced by devices than Millennials, with 40% of them saying they are "digital device addicts." Gen Zers are 25% as likely to see themselves as device addicts as Millennials are. Unlike Gen Z, [Millennials remember MySpace](#) and were around when the iPod was new, trendy technology. They also tend to post more openly online. The defining device of Gen Z's generation is most definitely the smartphone, and Gen Z grew up with social media and YouTube (literally, YouTube was created and grew up with them). Gen Zers tend to be much more private about their online activity compared to Millennials.

Jobs/careers

The times have unquestionably changed since the Silent Generation, when people (mainly men) tended to stick to one job for their whole lives. Both Millennials and Gen Zers expect to [change jobs every few years](#) for a variety of reasons.

But while many Millennials pursued higher education (which didn't necessarily help them in their careers), Gen Zers are more likely to go right into jobs after high school. They're entering the workforce sooner than Millennials did, and their careers and financial stability are a significant priority for them. As we said before, Gen Z has an entrepreneurial focus. They tend to stick with their jobs longer than Millennials do and are comfortable with pursuing non-traditional ways of developing skills (e.g., YouTube videos).

Life goals and values

Neither Millennials nor Gen Zers are very concerned with traditional life milestones such as getting married or buying a house. [Neither values company loyalty very highly](#), but both

generations want their employers to invest in them. While Millennials tend to be idealistic, [Gen Zers are more practical](#). Millennials tend to value teamwork, while Gen Z is more independent and competitive. Both want to make a difference in the world and to have purpose in their lives. Yet while Gen Z does want purpose in their jobs, they are [unlikely to give up financial security](#) to attain it.

Both value authenticity, but Gen Z values it even more. Both multitask, but [Gen Z multitasks even more](#) (or if you believe multitasking to be inherently impossible, switches from task to task more often). Millennials saw [emotional maturity](#) as a sign they'd arrived at adulthood, while Gen Z values financial independence. According to Barna, "6 out of the top 10 reasons teens look up to their role model are related to career or financial success."

Mental health

It seems likely there is a greater tendency in Gen Zers to struggle with their mental health. This is [supported by one study](#), which found:

Fewer than half (47%) of Gen Zers say they're content with their lives compared to 60% of Millennials. And, 67% of Millennials believe that their life is full of purpose compared to only 53% of Gen Z. In fact, this youngest cohort reports enduring more "extreme" stress than other generations, and, overall, 58% say they're at least moderately stressed, which is a really telling number.

In the comments we saw under the ["Generations" video cited above](#), a lot of those who identified as being in Gen Z said that they see both themselves and their peers struggling with anxiety and depression. It's possible that the fear of missing out (FOMO), which is heightened by social media, is something that makes this stress worse.

Sexuality

A trend we can observe in Millennials that only grew with Gen Z is a [less traditional view of sexuality](#): "A 2016 survey by the J. Walter Thompson Innovation Group found that only 48% of Generation Z identifies as 'completely heterosexual' compared to 65% of Millennials."

It's common now for young people to see gender as fluid and non-binary. Johnny Depp's daughter, Lily-Rose Depp (b. 1999), [has said](#), "'You don't have to label your sexuality; so many kids these days are not labeling their sexuality and I think that's so cool.'" Gen Zers are more likely than Millennials to support same-sex marriage, transgender rights, and interracial marriage.

Religion and truth

[Barna calls Gen Z](#) the "first truly 'post-Christian' generation" and has found that most previous generations had a "basic education on the Bible and Christianity"—but not Gen Z. Gen Z is also more likely than other generations (apart from Millennials) to say that the problem of evil is what's stopping them from believing in Christianity.

Gen Z typically sees truth as relative, but also cares about there being evidence to support claims. Even though they have a mostly favorable view of the Church, they don't think attending church is that important.

Morality

Gen Zers tend to think that [what's right is what doesn't hurt anyone](#). Why is that? According to Barna, the reasons are complex and include:

- the vast amount of information Gen Z has access to
- the level of diversity they're around
- empathy for people who are different from them

There is, however, a notable difference in beliefs among Gen Zers when comparing Christians to non-Christians. Engaged Christian young people particularly have more traditional views of sexuality. They are more likely to believe that premarital sex and homosexuality are wrong compared to their non-Christian or only nominally Christian peers.

— Which of the previous generations is Gen Z most similar to?

Many agree there are clear similarities [between Gen Z and the Silent Generation](#): “The parallels with the Silent Generation are obvious...There has been a recession, jobs are hard to get, you can't take risks. You've got to be careful what you put on Facebook. You don't want to taint your record.”

Besides caution, two other major similarities between the two generations are their entrepreneurial tendencies and their prioritization of their careers.

— Which generation do they relate with best?

We've noticed through our interactions with families and students that members of Gen Z often relate well with their grandparents, who are typically Baby Boomers. There could be many reasons for this, including that both generations tend to desire financial security and thus make similar decisions in pursuit of that. In addition, as previously mentioned, both generations grew up during periods of rapid social and cultural change. The Christians in both generations experienced social pressures on their beliefs (Roe v. Wade for Boomers, the legalization of homosexual marriage for Gen Z) and grew up knowing that their beliefs were unpopular and considered “intolerant.”

There could be many more reasons for this, but the point is that **Baby Boomers (grandparents) could be key in reaching today's teens and tweens**. When possible, enlist the help of trusted Baby Boomers in your discipleship efforts.

— What are Gen Z's preferred methods of communication?

Unsurprisingly, [Gen Z prefers using devices](#) to communicate. They especially like texting because of how manageable it is:

According to the research, Gen Z and Millennials communicate with others more digitally than in person (65%). This percentage is even higher in English-speaking countries, with the US (73.7%) and UK (74.4%) relying more heavily on digital channels for communication.

Nevertheless, it's interesting to note that Gen Z also appreciates face-to-face communication. [39% say](#) it's “the most effective” way of communicating.

— What are their favorite social media apps and why?

[45% of Gen Zers say](#) they are online “almost constantly.” And what they enjoy online is visual media. Research shows that Gen Z’s favorite social media apps are Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube.

What’s more, “Gen Z spends more time on mobile devices (an average of 11 hours per week) and streams more content (an average of 23 hours of video content a week) than any other generation. That’s almost one full day spent watching (rather than, say, reading) content.”

— What are their strengths? Weaknesses?

As you can probably already see, Gen Zers have some real strengths. They are pragmatic, they value relationships, and they love people no matter how different they are or how “shocking” their lifestyles might be. They’re interested in being self-starters and in finding creative ways to educate themselves and better their lives. They strongly dislike hypocrisy and are unwilling to go along with institutions merely because of their perceived authority (which has been a weakness of previous generations). Gen Zers also want to see evidence before accepting something as true.

On the other hand, Gen Zers’ emphasis on relationships and acceptance means that they can let their empathy overwhelm their morality. They tend to see truth and morality as relative and can value authenticity so highly that they have an aversion to making any kind of judgment, especially about another person. They can also fail to see that sometimes the most loving step we can take toward people is to confront them with the truth and challenge them to live differently. They need to know where their hope truly comes from and that there is good reason for believing in Christianity.

— How can we encourage and love them?

Because Gen Zers emphasize their education and careers so much, [Barna thinks](#) the church should prioritize “vocational discipleship”:

This means teaching young people about the integration of faith and occupation, helping them to better understand the concept of calling and emphasizing the meaning and theological significance of work (not just their potential for professional or financial success).

[Jonathan Morrow of Impact 360](#) says he believes that students are reluctant to take a stand on moral beliefs because they 1. don’t want to be or appear judgmental and 2. live in a culture that doesn’t believe people can have true knowledge about spirituality and morality. So how can we help Gen Z influence culture instead of letting culture influence them?

Morrow says:

As I have worked with Christian teenagers over the past 15 years, I have developed a framework that I call the “Three Rs of Worldview Transformation.” In order to build a strong and lasting faith, students need reasons, relationships, and rhythms. These are the things we can directly influence.

From a young age, students need parents and other mentors to teach them the truths about

Christianity, educate them about false ideas, and allow them the safety of being able to doubt well. He says, “In short, teenagers need a grown-up worldview, not coloring-book Jesus.”

To a generation that values people and relationships so highly, fostering relationships with Gen Z is essential. Morrow says:

Gen Z increasingly feels isolated and alone, but they hunger for real relationships. There are four strategic relationships we can help them cultivate: God, parents, mentors, and friends (see Prov. 13:20). I am convinced that relationships are the most powerful shaping influence during the teenage years.

By rhythms, Morrow means habits. He says that healthy teens develop good habits, noting that anything we do over and over again will eventually determine our identities. And this principle is “more than just doing the right thing; it’s about becoming the kind of person who loves what is good.”

Discussion Questions

- What do you see as the greatest strengths of your generation?
- What do you think are the greatest weaknesses of your generation?
- What do other generations misunderstand about you?
- What do you appreciate about other generations?
- What have you learned from people in your life who are from other generations?
- Is there anything about the successes and failures of older generations that sheds light on where you are?
- What do you think are the best ways to connect with you and your peers?
- Is Christianity relevant to your generation? Why/why not?

Conclusion

We hope this Guide helps you better understand Gen Z and tailor your parenting and/or discipleship efforts to specifically fit them. As you seek to understand, love, and lead this generation, have grace and patience for both them and yourself. Though different and growing up in a very different world that could’ve even been imagined just 100 years ago, the members of Gen Z are still human beings made in the image of God. No matter how different things become, God’s design for us will never change. Despite all the technological advancements, the rise of globalization, changes in the political landscape, and more, Gen Z still needs relationship, connection, discipleship, love, and Jesus—just as we all do.

Related Axis Resources

- [Parent’s Guide to Discipling Gen Z](#) (coming soon!)
- [Parent’s Guide to Gen Z’s Love of Music](#)

Additional Resources

- “[Generational Differences Chart](#),” West Midland Family Center (*does not include Gen Z*)
- “[Gen Z Kids Are Like Their Great-Grandparents. Here’s Why](#),” Generational Edge
- “[Communicating with Gen Z Employees: The Modern Manager’s Guide](#),” Rise People
- “[Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins](#),” Pew Research
- “[The Strengths and Weaknesses of Every Generation in Your Workforce](#),” GetSmarter.com

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