

Parenting **GEN**



JASON JIMENEZ

As a parent of three Gen Z kids myself, I really appreciate how Jason's book touches on a broad array of issues facing this generation. It's easy to get stuck focusing on one issue or another, but this book is a practical guide to taking a step back, looking at the full landscape of Gen Z concerns, and evaluating when and where parenting adjustments would be helpful. More importantly, *Parenting Gen Z* will leave you encouraged—not overwhelmed!

NATASHA CRAIN, speaker, podcaster, and author of *Faithfully Different*

Parenting Gen Z is an absolute must-read! You might be overwhelmed, confused, and worried as a parent, but that's understandable, and Jason Jimenez won't shame you at all. He brilliantly explains how changes in our culture have influenced many children's beliefs, then describes how you can influence their thinking and behavior. (He's not afraid to tackle any topic!) His writing is engaging, his comparisons make learning easy, and his illustrations help the truth come alive, making it easier to successfully implement the many practical suggestions. You'll want to keep the book handy, since there is so much hope in these pages. This book needed to be written, and Jason is definitely qualified.

KATHY KOCH, PHD, founder of Celebrate Kids, Inc., and author of *Screens and Teens*, *8 Great Smarts*, *Start with the Heart*, and *Resilient Kids*

Many of us know that raising kids today is more challenging than ever before, but a lot of parents can't explain why that is. Why does parenting in the twenty-first century seem so difficult? Jason Jimenez has done us parents a huge service: His book helps us *know* our Gen Z kids so that we can truly *help* them. He provides insights into what kids today think and value,

the cultural forces that shape their hearts and minds, and the challenges they face. And it's only after we understand Gen Z that we'll be able to meet them where they're at and effectively guide them toward Christian maturity. Jason also provides a wealth of tools and action steps, making this book a truly practical guide for all parents.

BRETT KUNKLE, president of MAVEN and coauthor of *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World*

Parenting is hard! When our culture is moving as fast as it is today, and with the unprecedented challenges Gen Z is facing, parents need all the help we can get! No one parents perfectly, but that doesn't mean you can't be faithful and intentional as you raise your kids to follow Jesus. I'm excited that Jason Jimenez has written *Parenting Gen Z* to equip and encourage parents as they seek to pass on their faith to the next generation. This timely book will help prepare you for the challenges and opportunities along the way.

JONATHAN MORROW, director of cultural engagement and student discipleship at Impact 360 Institute, author of *Welcome to College*, and creator of the course *5 Things Every Teenager Needs to Build a Lasting Faith*

In *Parenting Gen Z*, our buddy Jason Jimenez has created a masterful, reader-friendly guide for parents raising kids in a crazy world. We love Jason's bold stance on many hot topics and the care he shows as he teaches parents how to exercise their authority with confidence. Jason offers fresh ideas that we, as dads, are sure to implement in raising our own kids.

DAVID AND JASON BENHAM, entrepreneurs and coauthors of *Whatever the Cost* and *Living Among Lions*

Parents today face lots of pressure and chaos in this ever-changing world, and *Parenting Gen Z* does a wonderful job in bringing peace and order to this chaos. Jason Jimenez provides a well-defined understanding of the issues at hand, and he does so in a way that feels like a conversation. His clear and doable action steps caused me to reflect and embrace more intentional practices with my kids. While the parenting journey is daunting, Jason's book is full of hope and encouragement for parents who want God's best for their children. As a pastor and a dad, I am excited to share this book with the parents I know!

PATRICK MCCRORY, generations pastor at Carmel Baptist Church

With just the right balance of eye-opening statistics, practical advice, and real-world perspective, *Parenting Gen Z* is a must-read for any parent, teacher, or youth leader who wants to lead this generation well. Jason Jimenez pulls back the curtain on the struggles, fears, and doubts our kids are facing—often unbeknownst to us—while offering parents plenty of hope and helpful tips to move forward in love. Highly recommended!

BRITTANY ANN, founder of EquippingGodlyWomen.com and author of *Fall in Love with God's Word* and *Follow God's Will*

Every generation exhibits the beauty and brokenness of humanity. Jason Jimenez offers an eye-opening look at the tendencies of Gen Z, providing practical advice on how to engage and influence them with the truth about who they are—and who God is.

SARAH STONESTREET, cohost of the *Strong Women* podcast and mom to four Gen Zers

Parenting Gen Z: Guiding Your Child through a Hostile Culture
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*To my wife, who exemplifies God's grace and has helped
shape me into the father I am to our four children.*

*To my dearest children: Tyler, your character is admirable.
Amy, your passion for truth is contagious. Jackson, your
empathy is laudable. Hailey, your love for life is remarkable.*

I love you all!

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Introduction

Gen Z Parents Are Overwhelmed

PARENTS TODAY are in panic mode.

“We don’t know what else to do,” one desperate mother told me. She and her husband had been trying for years to get their teenage son some help for his depression. “Nothing seems to work.” Their son remains despondent and shut off from the rest of the world.

Another parent, a man in his mid-forties, said he felt like a failure and blamed himself for his two grown sons’ loss of faith. With eyes filled with tears and a crack in his voice, this father pleaded for God’s help as he and I prayed for his hope to renew and that his sons would one day return to faith in Christ.

Along with increasing cases of depression and abandoned faith among their children, a growing number of parents are facing the challenges that come with learning that a son or daughter is either gay or gender confused. Almost without fail, parents will come up after I speak somewhere and ask for advice on dealing with a child who identifies as gay or transgender. Some want to know how to balance unconditional love without compromising their beliefs; others want to know how they missed the signs. I can still hear the sobs of a woman who broke down as she shared how her daughter

had disowned her family after marrying an older woman right out of high school. “I just want my baby girl back,” the mother pleaded.

Perhaps you can relate to these parents. Perhaps not.

— — —

As a father of four Gen Zers, and as a pastor who has worked with parents and students since the late 1990s, I doubt I am overstating it when I say that Gen Z is probably the most challenging generation to raise in American history. And if you’re raising a member of Generation Z—children born between 1997 and 2012—you are likely dealing with your own challenges. Indeed, my wife and I have endured feelings of pressure, stress, and anxiety over our kids. For example, would it surprise you to hear that the members of this generation are becoming the leading consumers of sexually explicit material online?¹ It’s no wonder parents are concerned.

When I first started working with millennials (the generation preceding Gen Z), I encountered enormous challenges. Many in this age group came from broken families and had very little knowledge about the Bible. Every week I counseled parents whose kids were taking drugs and/or having premarital sex.

Fast forward to today: Parents of Gen Zers are dealing with far more complicated and disturbing concerns. The spread of secularism is more evident among Gen Z. The influence of social media and technology on our kids is more profound. Racial and political divides have led to ever more violence. And, of course, we can’t ignore the mass shootings that seem to occur almost weekly in America’s schools. These are matters of grave concern, and I will address each of them.

To do this, I’ve divided the book into four parts. In part 1, “Getting to Know Gen Z,” we’ll explore the eight core

characteristics of Gen Z, the categories of parents raising Gen Z, and three common parenting flaws related to this generation. In part 2, “Concerns Facing Gen Z,” we’ll confront together the real issues facing Gen Z and discuss approaches for engaging our kids on controversial topics. In part 3, “How to ‘Keep It 100’ While Raising Gen Z,” we’ll look at God’s design for the family, what parental discipline looks like, and some adjustments we can make to help create more time with our kids. In part 4, “Forging a Pathway for Gen Z,” we’ll learn biblical strategies to increase our impact at home, review five ways to help discover and nurture the future God has for our children, and consider some special encouragement for single parents.

Let me be clear: I didn’t write this book because I’ve figured everything out as a parent. Not even close. I’m not some sort of parenting master. But I will say that this book is based on honesty, fervent prayer, lessons learned through my mistakes, and the successes that we’ve shared together as a family.

As a pastor, youth pastor, and apologetics speaker, I want to help parents leverage their authority and gifts in the home, and I hope to enable as many young people as possible to find their true identity and satisfaction in Christ.

In *Parenting Gen Z*, my goal is to help you become the parent God calls you to be. This book is designed to equip you with the tools you need not only to combat the many influences threatening Gen Z but also to earn your child’s respect as you speak truth into his or her life. In straightforward and practical ways, I will explain how to parent Gen Z with wit, discernment, and plenty of biblically based wisdom. To help me with this task, I’ll lean heavily on several godly and respected voices in my life—people I look up to and admire for the way they’ve raised their own kids. Finally, I’ll draw on the countless hours I’ve spent with Gen Zers—both my own children and others—learning what

makes them tick so that I might give you an accurate picture of their generation.

You need to know that I'm not going to sugarcoat who Gen Zers are or attempt to downplay the significant challenges you and I are facing as their parents. We'll discuss a lot of the worrisome aspects of this generation. We'll also address some of the common flaws in parenting them. Just as important, we'll touch on the good that exists within Gen Z and the amazing opportunity that you, Mom and Dad, have been given to raise these kids. And at the end of nearly every chapter, you'll find a "Parenting Practice" section with extra tips to incorporate into your family life.

Parenting Gen Z can feel overwhelming at times, but God doesn't want you to worry. He has given you everything you need (2 Peter 1:3-9) to get the job done as a parent. (Yes, even if you are a single parent!) The Bible makes it clear that God will keep you from stumbling (Jude 1:24). As you remain faithful to your calling as a Christian parent, you will reap the rewards of your labor (Ephesians 6:8).

I only ask that you give this book a chance. My aim is to help strengthen your parenting skills. Let's work together to build a lasting legacy that will encourage Generation Z to love God and live for His purposes.

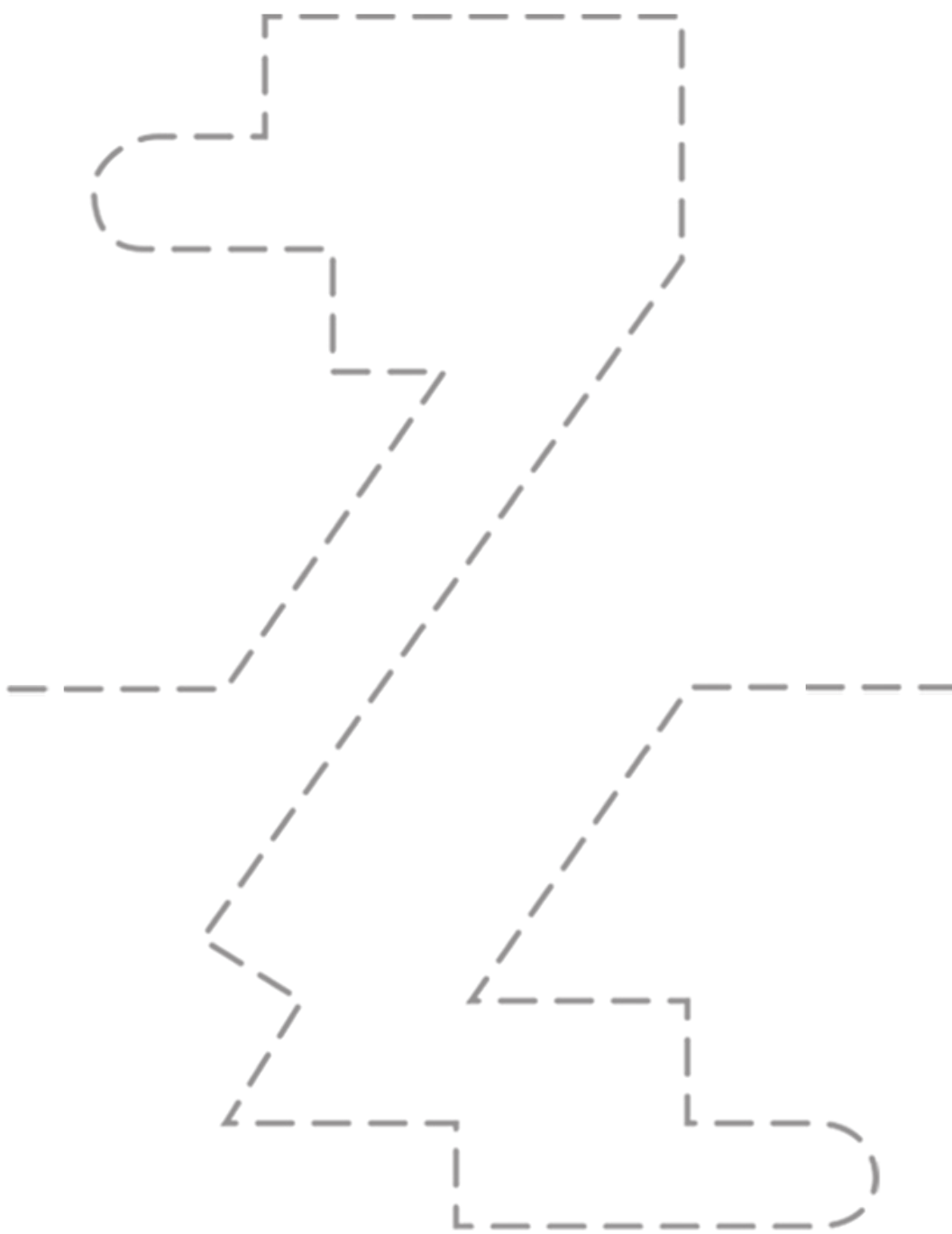
So what are we waiting for? Let's embark on this journey together.

Jason Jimenez

PART ONE

GETTING TO KNOW

GEN Z



1

WHO IS GEN Z?

YOU MAY OR MAY NOT have heard of the band Twenty One Pilots, but chances are that your Gen Z kid has.

Multiple writers have described the Ohio duo as “the band of Generation Z,” largely because their lyrics address the doubts, angst, and confusion that this generation faces. In their hit song “Stressed Out,” Twenty One Pilots front man and chief songwriter Tyler Joseph introduces an enigmatic character he calls Blurryface.

You might be scratching your head right now, wondering what on earth is a Blurryface. I’ll do my best to explain.

To fans of the band, Blurryface represents the insecurities and emotions that many Gen Zers attempt to conceal from others—with varying degrees of success. A closer look at Gen Zers revealed to me that they are experiencing symptoms of stress and depression on a greater scale than previous generations. And because of

increased suicide rates among their peers, Gen Zers are burying more friends than any other generation. Beginning with the bloodshed at Columbine High School and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Gen Zers have grown up in a world of violence, mass shootings, cyberterrorism, and media hysteria, creating yet another label for Gen Z: “The School Shooting Generation.”¹

Add in the emergence of a global pandemic that threw Gen Z into a tailspin—schools closed, graduations canceled, and job opportunities evaporated—and it’s no wonder that Gen Z is weary and struggling to keep it together. As one sixteen-year-old told me, “I feel like all I do is worry about what’s to come.”

This is where Blurryface comes in. Near the end of the first verse, all his Gen Z angst comes to the forefront: “I was told when I get older, all my fears would shrink. But now I’m insecure, and I care what people think. *My name’s Blurryface and I care what you think*” (emphasis added).²

As the song continues, Blurryface laments the loss of a carefree youth—when he dreamed of rocket ships and outer space, when his mom sang him to sleep at night. But now he’s preoccupied with student loans and the pressure of making money. In many ways, Blurryface truly embodies Gen Z—transitioning from a world of youthful make-believe to a place where people are stressed out by the pressures and insecurities of life.

I care what you think.

While folks of any age can become addicted to social media, Gen Zers are more likely than most to obsess over what others think of them. Frantically checking online to see if people liked or commented on their posts is a way to reassure themselves that they are seen and affirmed. Many times, it’s not about needing people to agree with their points of view as much as it is seeking validation for who they are—for their very existence.

I care what you think.

EIGHT TRAITS

For much of recent history, millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) have gotten most of the attention, casting a shadow on Gen Z. But here's the thing: Gen Z represents nearly as many people as the millennial generation. We're talking about a difference of only a few million. There are roughly seventy-two million millennials, while Gen Z is more than sixty-eight million strong.³ There are even some estimates that say Gen Z outnumbers millennials.⁴ Regardless of which generation represents the greater numbers, a significant question remains: Which generation will have the greatest impact? Many signs point to Gen Z.

Some Gen Zers are at the age when they're beginning to impact the world economy, global politics, educational policies, and business in general. They may be getting married, starting families, and making decisions about the role of religion in their lives. To better understand Gen Z, we should first recognize that it's virtually impossible to identify every single trait common to this generation. That's just part of the challenge when trying to decipher the true meaning behind a character like Blurryface.

In the rest of this chapter, I will do my best to shed some light on Gen Z by laying out eight core traits of this generation:

1. Divergent Identity
2. Significant Creativity
3. Religious Uncertainty
4. Sexual Fluidity
5. Ethnic Diversity
6. Progressive Mentality
7. Language Sensitivity
8. Emotional Instability

Your child may not manifest each and every trait. That's to be expected. These eight core traits paint a collective picture of Gen Z, not of particular individuals. As we dig deeper into these character traits, we'll better understand and relate to our kids' generation. This new level of understanding can help us as we pursue stronger and more intimate connections with our children and as we seek to raise them according to God's principles.

First Trait: Divergent Identity

Gen Z is not just a bunch of smartphone addicts. They are a divergent generation. In Veronica Roth's popular young adult book *Divergent*, the main character, Tris Prior, in many ways represents Gen Z.

Divergent takes place in a dystopian future where humans are divided into five factions based on individual defining traits. When Tris enters adulthood, she undergoes an aptitude test designed to determine her distinctive trait. Her test results, however, are inconclusive. Tris realizes her identity is not reflective of any single faction. Her inconclusive results make her "divergent"—in other words, like much of Gen Z today.

A taste of Gen Z's divergence was on full display in 2019 when the *New York Times* surveyed hundreds of Gen Zers for a multimedia presentation titled "900 Voices from Gen Z, America's Most Diverse Generation." The finished product includes quotes from young people across the social and geographical spectrum. As I read through each one, several quotes stood out. Take this one from Andrew, born in 1997: "I am a gay Chinese-American cis man raised in Xian, China, and Boone, N.C., with the ability to immerse in white Southern culture as well as the communist society of China." Will, born in 1999, declares, "I'm both queer and Black, which is a weird combination for ever feeling like I truly fit in anywhere." Mary,

from Wyoming, defines herself as a gender-nonconforming “gay multiracial girl.”⁵

How does one define a generation when that same generation is self-admittedly in a constant state of flux? The idea that one’s identity and expression of that identity can change over time is referred to as *fluidity*. A 2019 report titled “Into Z Future” from the Innovation Group explored the habits, influence, and expectations of Gen Z:

[Gen Z] have grown up immersed in a digital-first society marked by severe shifts in economic, environmental and political circumstances. They’re the hyper-connected, highly opinionated generation, moved to activism as the internet and social media landscape has made them acutely conscious of and concerned about world events. Having lived in an era of overall progress when it comes to issues like marriage equality and body positivity, they’re forging new territory in broader conversations about identity; this is the cohort of gender fluidity and inclusivity in all its forms.⁶

This means that one way for parents to view the fluidity of Gen Z is to think of them in terms of today’s most popular social media platforms. Each has its own unique characteristics: YouTube has replaced Facebook as the dominant platform among Gen Zers, not only providing entertainment but also helping shape their perspectives and politics. Snapchat is a place where Gen Z can experiment with their identities and carry on endless conversations. Twitter is the social media megaphone that Gen Z uses to express opinions and hashtag the causes they believe in. TikTok, the zeitgeist of culture, gives Gen Zers the ability to easily upload and share short expressive, humorous, or politically charged videos. Tumblr

is a microblogging environment wherein Gen Z can be whatever they want. Last is Instagram, a social networking app that offers Gen Z the opportunity to influence brands, friends, and followers through stories, images, and videos.

Some of these apps and platforms overlap in form and function, but taken as a whole, they allow for far more fluidity online than is feasible in everyday life. In the digital world of Gen Z, divergence is key because it gives them access to limitless expressions.

Second Trait: Significant Creativity

Gen Zers are poised to become the most educated generation of content creators America has ever seen. Demographic research shows that Gen Zers “have higher high school graduation rates and lower dropout rates than those who came before them, and they are more likely to be in college.”⁷

From anywhere with a wireless signal, Gen Z can reach the world (or at least anyone with a phone). All you have to do is spend a few minutes on TikTok to see how crazy, funny, and creative Gen Zers can be. They are equally adept at monetizing their efforts through Patreon or GoFundMe to raise support for a cause or a person in need.

In effect, Gen Z represents millions of little businesses being operated from bedrooms around the world.

One of the most prolific Gen Zers today is Kylie Jenner. This twentysomething social media influencer has a personal net worth in the hundreds of millions! Some might say that Jenner’s only famous for being famous, but her financial success demonstrates how this generation of digital creators has learned to leverage themselves as a “personal brand.” Yet for many Gen Zers, their passion for creativity isn’t just about money—it’s about expressing themselves in a way that captures their essence and hopefully inspires others.

This was on full display after the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Before the school shooting, Emma González didn't have a Twitter account. Within days of the massacre, González went to Twitter. In a little over two weeks, she had hundreds of thousands of followers. And now González and her gun-control activist friend and fellow student David Hogg have millions of followers on social media. Together, they are two of the world's leading voices on gun control. (Remember that the first defining trait of Gen Z is “divergent identity”? Well, González now goes by the first name of “X” and uses the gender-neutral pronouns “they/them.”)

Here are some questions to consider regarding your own Gen Z kids:

- How connected are your kids to the rest of the world?
- How much of their creativity is on display through the way they interact using technology?
- Are you pretty impressed or disturbed by the huge following your son or daughter has on social media?

Third Trait: Religious Uncertainty

The increased religious disaffection among Gen Z is among the most troubling and unsettling trends affecting this generation—especially for their parents.

Raising kids with a solid biblical footing is a top priority for most Christian parents, and the challenges presented by Gen Z are innumerable. I remember meeting for coffee with a dad who expressed the concerns he and his wife were facing with their recent high school graduate.

Allen, a successful doctor in his late forties, shared with me how hard his son's first year in college had been. At one point

in our conversation, Allen expressed something I've heard many times from other parents.

"I just hope that what he learned at a Christian school, and what his mom and I have tried to instill in him through the years, is enough to keep his faith strong in college," Allen said.

Then came the kicker: "But I gotta be honest, Jason. I have my doubts. With all the partying and drinking on college campuses, and the easy access to drugs and hookups, my wife and I worry for our son. And when I say worry, I mean it never goes away. I stay awake sometimes wondering who my son was hanging out with last night."

Social Profile of Gen Z

1. How they think, connect, communicate, and learn is all connected to their smartphone.
2. They are less happy and more hyperactive when spending over four to five hours a day looking at their phones, playing video games, or watching TV.
3. They are more likely than millennials to be "homebodies."
4. They are sheltered and coddled like millennials.
5. They don't get enough sleep.
6. They feel left out and as if their lives don't matter.
7. They are more depressed and contemplate suicide more frequently than previous generations.
8. They are pragmatic when it comes to career choices.
9. They are very involved in activist causes aimed at making a difference.
10. They like to stand up for truth and do the right thing.

I sympathize with parents like Allen. It's tough not to worry about your kids, especially when it seems like almost every day another young person is announcing on social media how he or she recently deconverted from Christianity.

Consider Drew, a typical Gen Zer. Drew was raised in a Christian home. His parents divorced when he was eleven, and as Drew entered his teen years, he developed serious anxiety. He'd sit in church, asking God to help him stop worrying so much. Drew's mother set him up with a counselor, and he received some relief talking through his issues. But the anxiety never really went away. Drew continued to pray, attend church, and visit with his father's family every other weekend. But one day Drew was struck with these thoughts: *Is what I believe even true? I mean, I've prayed and tried to grow in my faith, but none of it seems to matter.*

From that point forward, Drew began to retreat from any activities related to faith. No more church. No more reading the Bible. No more gathering to pray with others. Drew decided that he was no longer a practicing Christian. Drew began constructing his own elaborate system of doubt as he pursued what he called a "spiritual liberation from religious oppressiveness."

Deconversions like Drew's don't always make headlines, but they do leave scars—scars that can last a lifetime. Countless parents have firsthand experience watching their teens and adult children join the growing number of Christian dissenters. And unfortunately, these parents don't always respond in the most helpful ways. They either *overcompensate* for their child's doubts by adding even more religious activities to the family calendar, or (and this is equally detrimental) they *overlook* the crisis of faith because they don't know how to deal with the prospect of a child rejecting Christianity.

If this has been your experience, you are not alone in dealing with the hurt and disappointment. Indeed, Drew's journey might

be similar to your own child's story, since nearly half of Gen Zers claim no religious affiliation.⁸

Octavio Esqueda, a professor at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, writes, "Gen Z were born in a context where religion in general, and Christianity in particular, are no longer a major influence in American culture. The secularization of society has been a trend in the last few years, especially in the Western world, and Gen Z are growing up in this new social context."⁹

Dr. Esqueda's description of Gen Z's shift away from Christianity is the spiritual plight of this generation in America.

With minimal knowledge of Christianity, the Bible, and other religions, Gen Z is perhaps the least religious generation in recent American history. They don't attend church much at all, so they're not familiar with even the most common Christian words and phrases. Most Gen Zers wouldn't know what it means to be "born again" or to "pray the prayer." Try asking them, "What are your spiritual gifts?" or "Are you walking in the Spirit?" You might as well be speaking a foreign language.

Speaking to this very issue, author Rod Dreher has this to say: "American Christians are going to have to come to terms with the brute fact that we live in a culture . . . in which our beliefs make increasingly little sense. We speak a language that the world more and more either cannot hear or finds offensive to its ears."¹⁰

Truth is, Gen Zers have a hard time subscribing to any particular religion or set of religious beliefs. They don't like labels, and they avoid *exclusive* dogma that challenges moral relativism. Gen Zers see themselves at the center of their own "creative" truth: They are consumed with their own personal experiences, accomplishments, wants, and desires. Many of today's hit songs are about "self." The Gen Z worldview is largely predicated on the raw emotions of the individual.

My friend Dr. Kathy Koch wrote an excellent book for parents titled *Screens and Teens: Connecting with Our Kids in a Wireless World*. In the book, Kathy lays out five self-affirming lies that Gen Z believes about themselves:¹¹

Lie No. 1: I am the center of my own universe.

Lie No. 2: I deserve to be happy all the time.

Lie No. 3: I must have choices.

Lie No. 4: I am my own authority.

Lie No. 5: Information is all I need, so I don't need teachers.

These five self-affirming lies have wreaked havoc on the spiritual state of Gen Z. For many Gen Zers, being spiritual isn't about attending religious services, reading the Bible, or participating in group Bible study. To them, pursuing their wants and desires is as important as maintaining a traditional faith that's linked to religious practices and spiritual disciplines. Elizabeth Drescher, author of *Choosing Our Religion*, shares how Gen Z has expanded their definition of *spiritually uplifting activities* to include attending protests or supporting social justice causes.¹²

Simply put, Gen Zers are all over the map when it comes to their views on religion and morality.

Fourth Trait: Sexual Fluidity

Another significant cultural shift within this generational group is the emphasis on affirmation—at least to a point. And nowhere is this more evident than in the area of sexual identity.

After speaking at a church event, I found myself surrounded by a group of high schoolers who shared their thoughts about gender identity and sexuality. In the middle of the conversation, I asked the group, “Who in this group believes gender is binary?” The oldest guy in the group immediately spoke up. “I think gender

binary terms are restrictive,” he said, “and I don’t think I am alone in believing that.”

I noticed in the corner of my eye a girl nodding her head in agreement. So I solicited a response from her. To my surprise, she was unwilling to share. Before I could say anything, the teen next to her chimed in, saying, “We need to stop labeling people by the gender they were assigned at birth and start accepting them for who they want to be.”

I followed up by asking the group, “So, if I believed that gender is binary, what would that say about me?”

The older student shot back, “That you’re a Westerner stuck in traditionalism and blinded by your religion.”

Unfortunately, what those students shared with me about gender is increasingly supported by Gen Zers. In fact, Gen Z is the first generation to have over half its population buy into the idea that a person’s gender is determined not by biology but by how they “identify.”

Things are getting so blurred with Gen Zers that almost every traditional notion about sex and gender is being called into question. Consider the following statistics:

- Half of adults ages eighteen to twenty-nine believe it is acceptable to be born one gender yet feel like another.¹³
- One in every eight Gen Zers describes their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual.¹⁴
- One in six Gen Z adults identifies as LGBT.¹⁵

When she was in her early twenties, pop singer Miley Cyrus shared an Instagram post about Tyler Ford, her date to an event. In her post, Miley described Tyler as “a queer, biracial, agender person, whose pronouns are they/them/theirs.” In an interview with

Entertainment Tonight, Tyler expressed what “agender” means: “It’s pretty simple. I don’t identify with a gender. I think I am who I am. I’m a person and that’s enough.”¹⁶

The popular dating app Tinder studied nearly 3,500 Gen Zers and found that approximately a third of them had recently “become open to dating different genders.”¹⁷

That’s not all. In an effort to accommodate the sexual and gender fluidity among Gen Z, Tinder (in collaboration with the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, also known as GLAAD) “has selected nine initial terms from which people can choose, including Straight, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Asexual, Demisexual, Pansexual, Queer, and Questioning.”¹⁸

Are you surprised?

So, parents, here’s my question for you: If your son or daughter (or both) is on Tinder, do you know which categories they clicked to describe themselves on their profile?

Increasing confusion over gender and sexuality will undoubtedly have significant implications on how Gen Z sees themselves and what that means for future marriages and families.

If this sounds bleak, I get it. It sounds that way to me, too. But God is bigger than this. Stick with me here, and we’re going to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Fifth Trait: Ethnic Diversity

How many ethnic groups or nationalities are represented in your family?

Probably quite a few.

Why do I say that? Because Gen Z leads the way as the most ethnically and culturally diverse generation in American history. Gen Z includes a higher percentage of Hispanic, black, Asian, and

other ethnic groups than the millennial generation that preceded them.

Take, for example, the Jimenez family. My siblings' and cousins' kids (Gen Zers) represent a broad racial and ethnic makeup. We have Mexican, British, Lebanese, German, and Asian blood—with a dash of Indian. (What would we do without Ancestry.com?)

Another fascinating stat about Gen Z is that 22 percent of them have at least one immigrant parent.¹⁹ This percentage will likely continue to increase in the coming years.

I've been teaching at conferences for years, and I've noticed the increasing diversity among the students. I'm from an ethnically mixed background myself (Hispanic father/white mother) and grew up on the south side of Tucson, Arizona, where a majority of the population was Hispanic and black. I have no problem relating to diverse groups of people from different cultures and backgrounds.

When I consider the cultural and ethnic diversity represented in Gen Z, I view it as an aspect of their beauty. God has created this generation as a representation of our global culture. In fact, most Gen Zers see their race/ethnicity as central to their identity (who they are). This explains why Gen Z is so passionate about their generation's progress in mending racial divides across the American landscape.

Several motivating factors drive this passion. One, as minorities (especially black and Hispanic) continue to increase in number, Gen Z hopes this will reduce racial discrimination. Two, Gen Zers are big proponents of multiculturalism and believe it will decrease segregation and give minorities more opportunities to be seen as equals. Three, increasing ethnic diversity produces fewer ethnocentric families and promotes more interracial relationships, marriages, and families. And four, there is hope that a more diverse population will lead to less racially motivated crime.

Sixth Trait: Progressive Mentality

It won't be long until Generation Z becomes the largest voting bloc in America—one that will (by all estimations) influence our nation's direction for many years to come.

That's a sobering thought, especially considering what we've already learned about Gen Z. Gen Zers have a radically different way of looking at politics. For them, politics isn't about party alliance as much as it's about the issues that are important to them. If a particular candidate speaks to an ideology they are passionate about, they will vote for that candidate regardless of his or her political affiliation.

I saw this firsthand when leading a question-and-answer session with about fifty college students via Zoom. The topic was social issues in American politics, and the majority of the students' questions centered around identity politics. (If you're wondering what *identity politics* means, let me give you a definition from my book *Challenging Conversations*. Identity politics is “the intertwining of discernable overtones ranging from religion to race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and even a mentality of victimization.”²⁰)

So there I was, staring at a computer screen filled with fifty little windows—windows containing Gen Zers from different states, backgrounds, and experiences. I quickly learned that most of my students weren't much interested in discussing the US Constitution or the enumerated powers of the federal government. (*Neither am I, you're probably thinking!*) Instead, these students cared much more about why the government isn't doing more for minorities, the LGBT community, and undocumented immigrants.

In light of the situation, I cleared my throat and leaned into my screen to address their concerns.

“I hear you guys,” I said, “and thank you for expressing such passion for the less fortunate. Like all of you, I can get upset when I

see certain people being overlooked or mistreated. And we do have an obligation as Christians. The Bible clearly states in Proverbs 31:8-9, ‘Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy’” (NIV).

At this point, the voices talking over each other came to a screeching halt. It was actually kind of amusing. The moment I acknowledged their concerns, all the little faces in the little windows started nodding up and down in unison. It was like looking at fifty parrots bobbing their heads at me. I wish I had taken a screenshot of it.

After I breathed a silent sigh of relief, a male student, Matthew, brought up how it feels like there are Planned Parenthood clinics on almost every block of his New Jersey neighborhood. Sounding a bit perturbed by Matthew’s comment, a student named Becca interjected, “What does that mean? Planned Parenthood does a lot of good. They provide health services for women, cancer screenings, STD testing, and so much more.”

Another student came to Matthew’s defense: “Yeah, but you forgot to mention the service Planned Parenthood performs the most. And that is abortions.”

I noticed that, based on their body language, several other students were about to unload. I couldn’t let this virtual lesson escalate again, so I quickly hit “mute all.” (Boy, you gotta love Zoom sometimes!)

I reminded the class that we were not there to debate these issues. They agreed, so I un-muted them and asked this question: “Show of hands. How many of you support Planned Parenthood?” Almost all of them raised their hands except Matthew and a few others.

“Thank you for being honest,” I said. “Now, how many of you support a woman’s right to have an abortion?”

Again, more than half the group raised their hands. Interesting.

What's ironic to me about Gen Z is that, on average, they are drinking, smoking, and doing drugs less than previous generations. What's more, they apparently don't sleep around as much as their predecessors. Yet they are *more* progressive in their support for legalizing marijuana and same-sex marriage.²¹

Dr. Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, expounds on the diverse views of Gen Z by pointing out that they are generally more liberal-leaning when it comes to drug legalization, abortion, and the death penalty, while somewhat more conservative on gun rights, national health care, and environmental regulation.²² And as reported by the Barna Group (in partnership with Impact 360 Institute), most Gen Zers don't believe that marriage should only be between a man and a woman.²³

Although Dr. Twenge's research shows a slight increase in conservatism among Gen Zers (specifically in supporting traditional marriage, reducing government spending, and protecting First Amendment rights), still well over half of Gen Z's registered voters are motivated by their support for LGBT rights, immigration reform, abortion, universal health care, and welfare reform. And the ballot box isn't the only means by which Gen Zers demonstrate their progressivism. They increasingly engage with and support brands and media organizations that push for change on these political issues.

Seventh Trait: Language Sensitivity

Have you ever said something you thought was innocent yet had one of your kids call you out for your "offensive" language?

I've had plenty of parents tell me troubling stories about how they can't say anything remotely political or even mention someone's hair or skin color without offending their children.

That's because Gen Z is on the warpath to eradicate what they

consider to be offensive language. But let me be clear: Such language isn't really about profanity. Based on my experience working with students, Gen Zers are generally more sensitive than millennials when you disagree with them or bring up a controversial topic. Because of their perceived fragility and sensitivity to certain language or topics, some critics have referred to Gen Z as "Generation Snowflake." Name-calling is never beneficial, but I have found that millennials are typically willing to engage with so-called taboo topics. That's not always the case with Gen Z.

For example, I recall a time when I was hanging out with some young Christian students in between classes. I was their guest speaker at a Christian worldview conference, and I had an opportunity to grab a bite and spend some time with them.

When the wide-ranging discussion turned to worship music, one of the students asked, "What say you, Mr. Jimenez? Do you think Christian music has gotten too soft?"

Meanwhile, I had just taken a big bite of my sandwich. As I tried to quickly chew my food, something told me that this seemingly straightforward discussion about music was about to take a wrong turn. I took a gulp of water and looked toward the student who asked the question. As I did, I noticed several nearby students move toward our table to listen in on the conversation.

"To be straight with you," I said, "yes, I do believe that a lot of the music on Christian radio sounds more like romantic songs than worship songs about the attributes of God."

Not sure where this was going, I could feel the palms of my hands starting to sweat. I elaborated on my answer by adding, "I would even say that the Christian music industry has shifted to a more feminine style of worship."

"Oh, *really?*" responded the inquiring student. "Why would you apply the word *feminine* to describe music, as though that's a bad thing? I mean, I used the word *soft* to point out possible

weaknesses in Christian music, but you chose a stereotypical description of a certain gender that our generation finds offensive.”

Like I said, this was not where I wanted the conversation to go.

We eventually resolved a few things and ended the discussion on a high note (pun intended). I was able to clarify what I meant and to challenge the students on the use of words that have the potential to prompt very different reactions.

Later that night, the conversation about Christian music continued to bother me. *Why do so many young people take things the wrong way?* I wondered. *Why are they so sensitive?*

Looking for answers, I jumped on my computer and tried to learn more about the particular sensitivities of Gen Z. As I perused various articles, I came across a high school student who had openly shared her concerns about how her generation is easily offended. She wrote, “As a member of Generation Z, every day, it feels like society has something new to tiptoe around. Whether that is the language you use or what you post on your social media. It is so hard to keep track of what we can and cannot do anymore, begging a fundamental question: Is Gen Z too sensitive?”²⁴

Has growing up within an environment of designated “safe spaces” made Gen Z hypersensitive? More than ever, it feels like genuinely innocent jokes are perceived as insults.

In the age of social media, many Gen Zers feel the need to shut down (or even “cancel”) those who say or post anything they consider offensive.

Several years back, a number of undergraduates at Columbia College submitted an essay to the school’s newspaper citing how

*In an online survey of 4,000 students, College Pulse found that more than 40 percent of college students disagree with the First Amendment concept that all speech should be protected, especially when they find it hateful or offensive.*²⁵

certain topics are “oppressive” and contain “triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom.”²⁶ These students demanded that the faculty act by providing them with “trigger warnings” before proceeding to teach on aspects of history that might alarm them or cause them to feel uncomfortable due to the presence of microaggressions.

You might be wondering, *What is a microaggression?* According to Merriam-Webster, a microaggression is “a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).”²⁷

The problem is that what a Gen Zer might consider as prejudice or a microaggression is often viewed as harmless by someone from a different background or generation. For example, I surveyed a group of high schoolers who believed the following phrases or questions are actually microaggressions:

- “Let the best man win.”
- “The most qualified person should get the job.”
- “You’re very articulate for your age.”
- “Where are you from?”
- “Where were you born?”
- “There is only one race—the human race.”

In response to requests for trigger warnings and the perceived threat of microaggressions, Alan Levinovitz, an associate professor of religion at James Madison University, writes, “There is a very real danger that these efforts [to institute trigger warnings and safe spaces] will become overzealous and render opposing opinions taboo.” Dr. Levinovitz goes on to stress that if free speech is no longer a freedom that professors and college students can

exercise, then all conversations about race, gender, and religion will be silenced and replaced with diversity and tolerance training.²⁸

As Gen Zers find ever more topics offensive—and seek to stifle free speech and remove certain expressions from their vocabularies, their conversations, their textbooks, and the Internet—there is only one logical outcome: No more healthy debate. No more diversity of thought. A culture that “cancels” dissenting opinions will result in an end to our free and open society.

In their 2018 book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt predict a troubling future for tomorrow’s adults: “If we protect children from various classes of potentially upsetting experiences, we make it far more likely that those children will be unable to cope with such events when they leave our protective umbrella.”²⁹

If you look back at my six statements of alleged microaggressions, I challenge you to find any examples of clear hostility. Will *someone* interpret these (and other) comments as aggressive or insensitive? Probably. It all depends on how, when, and where they grew up, and the family environment in which they were raised. And that is precisely the point! Rather than assume the worst from those who make such comments, why not give them the benefit of the doubt? Unfortunately, that’s not the standard response from many members of Gen Z.

In my experience, the increasing tendency for many Gen Zers is to negatively label anyone who commits a single perceived microaggression as insensitive or even outright racist/sexist/homophobic. And yet in making such assessments, Gen Z fails to see their own judgments as acts of aggression.³⁰ I’m merely making an observation here—I have no desire to argue with Gen Zers over their use of the term *microaggression*. My goal is to better understand their sensitivities. I’ll address this topic in more detail in chapter 4.

Eighth Trait: Emotional Instability

So far, we've covered seven traits that characterize Generation Z, but I want to share one final trait that might be the most descriptive of all. I believe the word that best captures the mood of Gen Z is *loneliness*. Whether or not my assessment surprises you, I am certainly not the only one who thinks this way.

After addressing a group of high school students recently at a private Christian school, I met with several members of the faculty. Many of them described how lonely their students felt, even while surrounded by their peers at school. The vice principal herself openly shared that her own two daughters (who grew up at the school) lacked close friendships. A student invited to participate in the discussion told us that he longed to have more meaningful relationships with his peers, and that he'd felt this way throughout his time in high school.

Why is this the case? Why is Gen Z so lonely?

Yes, we can point to their devices and say that has something to do with it. But it goes much deeper than that.

Take divorce, for instance.

Divorce rates among parents raising Gen Z are some of the highest we've ever seen, with baby boomers leading the way in terms of failed marriages.³¹ The tendency among Generation X was to marry later in life, divorce sooner, and remarry quicker. Unfortunately for Gen Z, they've experienced more broken relationships early on in life—especially compared with their parents and grandparents—which has forced them to grapple with abandonment issues at an unprecedented rate.

When you consider how overwhelmed they feel, the stresses they face, the increase in cases of depression, and so on, it's easy to understand why Gen Zers are battling loneliness on a scale we've likely never seen before.

I'm no betting man, but I think there's a decent chance that

your Gen Z child is struggling with loneliness. I'd be lying if I said my kids have never felt lonely. My wife and I have had many conversations with our children and spent countless hours asking God to deliver them from loneliness. Initiating discussions about loneliness with our kids hasn't always been easy, but it has given us opportunities to share with them how we've dealt with our own loneliness—and the ways that God provided in the end.

Isn't that part of our role as parents—to initiate the tough conversations with our kids and to meet them where they're at?

Now that you've been introduced to Gen Z, in chapter 2 we'll take a closer look at us—the parents tasked with raising this current generation.

Parenting Practice

1. In this introduction to Gen Z, what stood out as something that concerns you? Write it down and pray about it as you continue reading the book.
2. What stood out as something that excites you? Write it down and pray about it as you continue reading the book.
3. Find some time to talk to your kids about their generation. How do your kids feel about the world they are growing up in? What worries them the most? Are they lonely? Why do they think that is? What do your kids see in themselves that you may not see? How confident is your son or daughter about their future?
4. Schedule a time with a few of your friends who also have Gen Z kids. Ask them what they think/know about this generation.

