

Key Characteristics of Today's Adolescents: The Millennial Generation (1980/83 – present)

(From the Center for Ministry Development)

Who is this emerging generation? What do they believe? Where do they want to go? Sociologists, researchers, the media and youth workers use a variety of names to identify this generation: Mosaics, Millennials, Net Generation (N-Gen), Navigators, the Y Generation.

Using these years, the Net Generation adds up to over 81 million young people, which is approximately 30 percent of our current population. In case you haven't picked up on this yet, this group is larger than the Baby Boomers. This is not **just** a few kids coming alone with some new trends. These Millennials are bringing a force into our American culture for which we need to be prepared.

They are growing up in a world that is remarkably different from the one older adults have lived in. They are still pretty young. In fact, they are so young that (assuming they were born in 1980):

- They have no meaningful recollection of the Reagan era and do not know he was ever shot.
- They were 11 when the Soviet Union broke apart and do not remember the Cold War.
- They have never feared a nuclear war.
- They have only known one Germany.
- They are too young to remember the space shuttle blowing up, and Tiananmen Square means nothing to them.
- Their lifetime has always included AIDS.
- Soda bottle caps have not only always been screw-off, but have always been plastic.
- They have no idea what a pull-top can looks like.
- Atari predates them, as do vinyl record albums.
- *Star Wars* looks very fake and the special effects are pathetic.
- They may have heard of an eight-track tape, but they probably have never actually seen or heard one.
- The compact disc (CD) was introduced when they were one year old.
- They have always had an answering machine.
- There have always been VCRs, but they have no idea what beta is.
- They cannot fathom life without a remote control (neither can I).
- They were born the year the Walkman was introduced by Sony.
- The Tonight Show has always been hosted by Jay Leno.
- Popcorn has always been cooked in a microwave.
- They have never seen Larry Bird play basketball, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is a football player.
- The Vietnam War is as ancient history to them as World War I, World War II, or even the Civil War.
- They have no idea that Americans were ever held hostage in Iran.
- Most have never seen or used a rotary dial phone.

General Trends

Given that the oldest Millennials are just into college, the research on their generation traits continues to be done. The results of the currently available research are pointing towards several significant trends:

Self-reliance – They believe that becoming successful is up to them, and they are not depending on others for help. Finding a good job is a priority. They are the young navigators. They must chart their own course and captain their own ship: “It’s up to me to create my own well-being.” They value personal experience and are prone to seek out critical thinkers. They are independent and emotionally and intellectually open. They strongly value individual rights: the right to be left alone, the right to privacy, the right to have and express their own views. They want to be treated fairly.

Empowered adventurers – Research shows that this generation has a confidence that comes from a strong sense of their ability to accomplish things that have been entrusted to them. They think and learn in interactive, nonlinear ways. They are willing to explore, search and navigate.

Love of family – In light of all the troubles in the world in which they live, there seems to be a surprising trend toward relying more on their family as a sanctuary against the difficulties of life. They view their parents as the most important source of guidance and emotional support.

Relationships are paramount – They rely strongly on close personal networks of friends and family. They also have a desire to be connected with others: friends in school, interest groups, and online virtual communities. Peers are important and are not always a “pressure.” There seems to be a significant shift in how this generation responds to peer pressure. When asked, “How pressured do you feel to do the following?” these figures show how many indicated “Not at all” for the listed activities: drink alcohol – 77%; smoke – 77%; take illegal drugs – 84%; have sex – 72%. This is far different from some of the images of adolescent life that we see portrayed in the media today.

Global icons – Brand identification in the consumer market seems to be at an all-time high. It’s important to wear the right jeans, wear the right athletic shoes, and drink the right kind of beverage. The generation is returning to the tried and true dream of all marketers – brand loyalty.

Educational achievement – Their main priority in life is to get a good education, and their core value is personal competence. This generation identifies a good education as the gateway to success.

Diversity is important – This generation values diversity unlike any before them. They have a high tolerance for differently held beliefs. They believe strongly in equal rights. Discrimination against minorities is in the top five issues about which they are very concerned. They know they are growing up in an increasingly multicultural world.

Consumerism – These kids know how to shop. They are not going to be fooled into buying products that don't meet their needs. They are skeptical of slick marketing promotions. They are working in order to be able to purchase. Eighty percent of the teenagers in the U.S. are working 15 or more hours a week.

Mobility equals freedom – This generation promises to be one of the most mobile ever. They don't intend to stay at home. They have aspirations to travel, not only around this country, but also around the world. They already travel on the Internet to many places, and now they want to go there in person.

Mediavores – This generation is addicted to media. It is not uncommon for them to be doing their homework, listening to a CD, watching television, and communicating on-line at the same time. They are giving new definition to "multitasking."

Unabashed fun seekers – After all, this generation is still mostly made up of kids. Kids want to have fun, and this generation is no different. They will not be bored, because there are so many options open to them.

Service-oriented – They have a strong sense of the common good and of collective social and civic responsibility. They are more knowledgeable than any previous generation about social issues. They are very socially concerned about the environment, AIDS, drugs, homelessness, crime, and discrimination. They engage in service activities more than any previous generation.

Hungry for the transcendent – They are spiritually hungry. While more than 80% of young people today will identify themselves as believers, the question that should be raised is what do they believe in? They are hungry not just for answers, but more importantly the knowledge of how to find them for themselves. They are seeking a practical, pragmatic, everyday faith they can grasp that will help them to make sense of the world around them.

Hope – This is a significant change from the previous generation. These kids are growing up with hope. They are not pessimistic or cynical. Rather, they are optimistic and realistic and expect to be happy adults (adapted from *Young Life Magazine*, Spring 1998).

Their Preferred Lifestyle

Teenagers would like to have more structure provided,

BUT without having their independence or their freedom to experiment impeded.

Teenagers want to learn from the experiences and wisdom of their parents,

BUT they're not willing to allow their elders the latitude to impart those lessons in a manner that fits parents' needs and styles.

Teenagers struggle with the effects of stress,

BUT they continue to book busy schedules.

Teenagers appreciate more time in intimate experiences with their families,

BUT they will neither push nor create those opportunities.

Teenagers are frightened by the potential consequences of many risky behaviors,

BUT they flirt with those dangers regularly.

It seems like these kids are open to input and help from their parents, but on their own terms. It will take a creative, sensitive approach to make it happen effectively, but the possibilities look good.

How to Speak to Them?

- They are the future—and they know it.
- Respect their intelligence, knowledge and ability
- It's about how and where you fit into their world, not how and where they fit into yours
- Part of a “push-button” society; in fact, leading it
- Choice over loyalty
- Highly-sensitive “B.S. Meters”
- Talk TO them, not LIKE them
- RELEVANCE! Show how you offer VALUE
- Communicate message quickly and clearly
- Search/need for value will continue, and only intensify as more sources (TV and other) compete for their attention.

Information about the Millennials is taken from a variety of current research sources.