

## **Powerful Parenting for November 16, 2022**

We hope you find this information useful, inspiring, challenging, helpful, sobering, insightful, etc. If you want to be added or taken off this list, just let us know. If you know someone who could benefit from it, pass it along. If you have any comments, concerns, want to be added or deleted from this list, e-mail [david@claytonbaptistchurch.com](mailto:david@claytonbaptistchurch.com).

### **Reflections from Barna's Report on "The Open Generation"**

This past summer, The Barna Group conducted a global survey that included over 24,000 teenagers from 26 different countries. These teenagers were asked about how they view Jesus, the Bible, and justice. These studies brought some impactful discoveries that we can all learn from. This is a brief reflection on Barna's first two reports in the Open Generation study, with a few major themes for parents to consider.

**Teenagers Call Themselves Christians but Don't Know the Gospel.** One of the most striking discoveries of Open Generation was that an overwhelming majority of teenagers call themselves Christians. 52% of teenagers identify as Christians, but this study also noted that "only 50 percent among teens who identify as Christians say Jesus was resurrected; not even half (44%) say Jesus was God in human form." This shows us that teenagers are claiming a Christian identity without understanding foundational truths of the Gospel. Globally, the forefront of our teaching should focus on the Gospel. As we have shared before, this does not always mean the explicit gospel invitation but the truths of our Triune God in creation, redemption, and restoration, and the reality of the fall of humanity should be weaved throughout our short and long-term discipleship strategies. The language we use for the Christian identity should be reconsidered as well because Barna found that "there is a considerable 30-point gap between the percentage of teens who call themselves Christian (52%) and the percentage who say they have made a personal commitment to follow Jesus (22%)."

Throughout the study, those who have made a commitment to follow Jesus respond far more favorably to the truths of the Gospel, open God's Word more regularly, and are motivated to help do something about injustice in the world. As youth leaders, we need to take the first step in understanding what our students mean when calling themselves Christians, leading them to a life committed to following Christ and reading his word.

**Teenagers Own a Bible But Aren't Opening It.** "Three-fifths of teens around the world (59%) say there is a Christian Bible in their home, making it the most common religious text young people have access to." Not only do teenagers own a Bible and have more access to it than ever before, but 44% also responded they believe the Bible is holy. This statistic was not just those who called themselves Christian, it was every teenager surveyed. It seems that teenagers hold some view of respect towards the Bible, which is something church leaders should leverage. The next generation is open to what the Bible says, but only 40% open it more than twice a year, and only 9% open it more than once a week. Obviously, it is difficult to know what the Bible says when it is never opened. Barna defines a biblically engaged teen as one who believes the Bible is "the word of God," "the inspired word of God with no errors" or "the inspired word of God but with some errors," and "reads the Bible several times a week."

There are some positive trends when a teenager becomes biblically engaged. They overwhelmingly affirm (over 85%) the tenets of the historic Christian faith about God, Jesus, and biblical reliability. Just as we should weave the Gospel story through our discipleship strategies, we should aim to get teenagers biblically engaged and open their bibles often. To do this, we can prioritize equipping youth to engage Scripture and train them to understand what they are reading.

**Teenagers are More Engaged When Someone Has Taught Them to Study the Bible.** One final mark that stood out from this survey was that, of the biblically engaged teenagers surveyed, "Three in five Bible-engaged teens (56%) have received help studying the Bible from a parent / guardian. These teens say a pastor, priest or minister (54%), Bible study group / leader (43%) or Sunday school teacher (40%) also contributed to their understanding of the Bible." This statistic alone should open our eyes to the necessity of training parents to study the Bible. We know

that parents are the first place that teenagers will likely engage with the Bible, both from a young age and into the teenage years. Family discipleship that roots them in the Bible at home should be a priority to our ministries.

Second, we can strive to spend more time helping students study the Bible, both in small groups and through large-group teaching. Our posture towards the Bible will influence their opinion of it, and we should begin to consider approaching teaching from the Bible with a focus on leading students to study it on their own. The study was clear that there is a disconnect between younger and old teenagers with biblical engagement, so starting young is wise and productive for keeping students in the Bible.

**Other Interesting Findings.** Statistically, western Europe is the most unengaged, non-Christian group of teenagers in the world. France, Germany, Russia, and Spain each have less than 10% of committed followers of Christ and less than 3% biblical engagement. We do not often consider these countries to be unreached, but maybe we should. These countries will likely remain unengaged and non-Christian for some time. Let's pray for the Lord to raise up workers for the harvest who will train up young men and women to reach places like western Europe with the Gospel.

Meanwhile, central and southern Africa are likely to be the places where Christianity will continue to flourish. Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa all boast over 50% of Christian teens who have committed to follow Jesus and over 20% of biblically engaged teens. It will be interesting to watch how the Lord will use young people in these countries to spread the good news of the Gospel.

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### **Teenage Brains: What is Happening and Why It Leads to More Risky Behavior**

It's not easy being a teenager. Once adolescence arrives, navigating new skills such as managing emotions, gaining more independence from parents and the responsibility of decisions make it a challenging time. Boys and girls will experiment, take risks, make mistakes and eventually become adults. And when we think of adolescence, some of the issues that come to mind are drinking, mood swings, abuse of digital technologies and social networks, first sexual relations, drugs, unwanted pregnancies, fights. It is a complicated stage in life that once we are adults we struggle to remember and often don't understand.

For adults that live or work with teenagers there is also a challenge. But understanding how teenagers see the world or what makes them behave in a certain way is important. And part of this is understanding the development cues that help them to define their personal and sexual identity, and learn how to be part of a peer group – disengaging emotionally from parents to let friends start to meet their emotional needs more.

**Pleasure seeking.** Scientific advances in neuroscience help us understand how adolescents carry out the decision-making process. Perhaps the most significant finding is that they do so with a brain that is still developing, so not all of its competencies are fully acquired. And this can lead to mistakes. During adolescence, there are many situations that require making decisions: trying something new, approaching another person we find attractive or transgressing a rule established by the family. All these decisions involve two areas of the brain that mature at very different times.

The mesolimbic system that is responsible for, among other things, regulating our body's reward system. This system reinforces the repetition of behaviors that create pleasure – such as partying with friends – or survival behaviors – such as drinking water from time to time or on very hot days. Activation of the mesolimbic system is partly mediated by hormone production. This is why during adolescence its activation is very high.

The prefrontal cortex is also a key area of the brain at this time, which is responsible for executive functions such as impulse regulation and self-control. One of its functions is to assess the consequences of a behavior. The prefrontal cortex, however, is in development during our adolescent years. This means there is a maturity deficit in the brain regions that are responsible for behavioral control.

This imbalance, which in the scientific literature is called the Dual Systems Model, is key to understanding why adolescents sometimes make the decisions they do. In their heads, a highly activated pleasure-seeking system is combined with a developing conscious behavioral regulation system. In short, it is the perfect combination for teenagers to engage in behaviors that adults consider risky.

**Feeling part of a group.** In addition to individual development, the social world of adolescents is also key at this stage. In these years, peers become a fundamental part of socialization and learning. Boys and girls don't disengage completely from family, but they do expand their social circle. Increasingly, they look for trust, support and security in their friends. Adapting and adjusting one's behavior to be part of, and feel integrated into, that group becomes a priority. And group norms will, to a large extent, regulate individual behavior. What others see as positive and accepted will be desired and repeated. What is censored or seen as negative will be repressed.

In this way, developing teenagers will try to conform to what they assume the group expects of them while facing elements such as peer pressure – that is, the influence that the social group is able to exert on a person – or even “imaginary hearing”, a characteristic of adolescent cognitive development that makes them think that others are always looking at them, assessing and judging their actions.

**The role of adults.** Adolescent development is a complex process with very particular characteristics. They cannot yet be considered as adults, but childish behaviors are also being left far behind. Risk-taking has been, and still is, characteristic of adolescence. However, this stage does not have to be stormy, neither for them nor for the adults in their life, if we understand what is happening and why they act in this particular way. And managing difficult situations is also easier if we can give them specific tools and support. Here are three tips from scientific studies:

1. Making mistakes and taking certain risks is an adolescent process: the important thing is to learn from them.
2. The brain development of this age group means that the pleasure of experimenting with certain risky behaviors prevents a proper assessment of their consequences. It is necessary to explain, carefully and with understanding, what these consequences are.
3. Adolescents need to feel free to experiment and make mistakes, but they also need to know the limits and consequences. Although they want to be independent, they still need to feel cared for by the adults.

The adolescent perspective is very different from the adult perspective. Understanding their point of view and valuing it as such is fundamental. They need to feel listened to and, above all, understood, while they navigate what can be a difficult time.

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