

Grace 4 Kidz

KEEPING THE GOSPEL SIMPLE, FREE AND CLEAR!



Generation Alpha

Helping Leaders and
Parents Minister More
Effectively to This
Generation

by Janine McNally



GENERATION ALPHA

Helping Leaders and Parents Minister More Effectively to This Generation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Who are these Kids?	3
2.	Alpha's World	5
3.	A Moving Target	7
4.	Restoring Relevance	8
5.	Restoring Trust	10
6.	Restoring Belief	12
7.	A Second Language	13
8.	The #1 Priority – Relationships	17
9.	Preteens	19
10.	The Future of Kid's Ministry	20

1. WHO ARE THESE KIDS?

You're in Kid's Ministry, yes? Well, do you know who Generation Alpha is? They are the new kids on the block. Generation Z and Millennials have cycled through our children's ministries and we are now working with Generation Alpha. In the seeming blink of an eye, we have transitioned to "Generation Alpha," the first generation to be born entirely in the 21st Century and into an age of technology. They will never know a world without iPhones and social media. These are the kids to whom you are ministering. Do you know them?

Each generational cycle lasts approximately 15 years and we are now firmly engaging with this latest one. Although statistician's labels vary, most agree that Millennials were born in the years 1981 – 1996, and now are aged 26-41 years. Many of them are now parents. Gen Z's years include 1997 – 2010 and are the youth and young adults of today (12 – 25 years). The newest generation have been labeled as Alpha (2010-2024). Generations tend to reveal their characteristics as they grow up so not much has been written about them yet. But if we wait until then, they will be gone from our focus and the next group will be here.

Alphas are the kids we are working with each week in Kid's ministry. While outwardly they appear the same, they are very different from their predecessors. Yes, kids are kids, but this new generation have some unique needs and qualities. Do you know them? Do you understand them? Have you made appropriate adjustments for them? Or are we assuming that "kids are kids"?

While most characteristics reveal themselves during the teen years, researchers have begun to make some predictions. These children are expected to be more educated, more likely to earn a college degree and more likely to be surrounded by college-educated adults compared to prior generations.¹ They will also be surrounded by more wealth since their parents are preferring smaller families with less children to provide for and therefore, more money to go around.

“Subsequently, their Alpha children are the most pampered and wealthiest in terms of materialistic possessions and gadgets, making them instant gratification seekers, selfish and overindulged cohort.”²

Generation Alpha is also on track to become the nation's most racially and ethnically diverse generation yet. Alphas will consist of a high number of children with foreign-born parents and children who are foreign-born themselves, representing more countries around the world than previous generations. The world is fully accessible to Generation Alpha allowing them to be more aware of current trends, movies, music, celebrities and influencers, each having a reach far wider than in the previous generations. Fashion, food, online entertainment, social trends, communication, viral YouTube videos and memes are all part of Alpha's "education." Parents are finding it extremely difficult to shield children from the wider world.

This generation is predicted to be more mobile in many areas of their life, from where, when and how they will work, study, travel and live. Today the average length of staying in one working role has shortened to just under three years which means they might have up to 18 different jobs over the course of their lifetime. Many of these jobs don't yet exist, but will involve robotics, Artificial Intelligence, coding, app development and data analytics.

Encouraging the Future: How do we do it?

The first step to encouraging Gen Alpha is to realize that they are here. They are the kids in Children's Ministry and they speak a different language. We have not yet touched on the greatest difference - their engagement with technology. For many of us who belong to the Boomer or the Buster generations, technology is an entirely foreign language, yet this is what they speak. It's not enough to think that we can remove it from their world. It is here to stay, so keep reading!

2. ALPHA'S WORLD

When comparing the world of Alphas with previous generations, it's difficult to imagine a more confusing time. The staggering social changes have thrown us into a world where we have to deal with hard and sometimes controversial questions at younger ages and in earlier stages of development. Issues that had been settled for us and never questioned by past generations (such as marriage and gender) are now front and center and up for re-definition for our Generation Alpha children who are too young to know how to critically assess them or understand the implications. Kids today are exposed to a constant media barrage of shocking and corrupt events: ongoing wars, mass shootings, death and crime. They are witnessing the devastation of our country.

Cohabitation, divorce, absent fathers and single parent households are now commonplace. Alpha kids are more likely to live in single-parent households — and in greater numbers — than any age group before them. Imagine the confusion that must enter a child's mind when they realize that are being raised by two moms or even more bewilderingly, two dads. Any of these issues alone would have a significant effect on the emotional and behavioral development of our children. Is it any wonder these kids are confused?

More personal issues such as self-harm, suicide, abortion, sex trafficking, drug overdoses appear in the news daily. Children are faced with the indoctrination of secular humanism and critical race theory in schools. It's no wonder they are confused and struggling. The world is going mad, and our kids have access and exposure to it all in their back pockets. With these cultural challenges at the forefront of our children, we must address them and prepare our kids for the onslaught of pressures they will inevitably face. If we don't, who will?

Relativism is attacking the church's stand on absolute truth. Absolute truth is in direct conflict with the post-modern culture in which kids are growing up. There is no right or wrong. Your "truth" might be different from my "truth". What is right for you is right and what is right for me is right. The mantra of postmodernism is tolerance, inclusiveness and approval of all lifestyles and beliefs...even those that are in direct opposition to the Word of God. Take a stand for Biblical truth and you are labeled narrow-minded...intolerant... or worse, a bigot.

There is a very real race for the souls of children. There are so many "isms." False religion, atheism, pantheism, secular humanism and a host of others are racing to reach them. Humanism and postmodernism engulf our children through the television, school, celebrities, friends, social media, political messaging and more. The days of valuing the messages from parents, teachers and pastors have been replaced by the competing voices of social media and online commentary. Children now have access to more belief systems, opinions and voices than ever before. Most of them are coming to children through social media and online activity, and often they contradict the beliefs of parents and churches. The race is real and we must be the first ones there.

At the early ages, kids cannot differentiate between these different voices. Brittz says, "They don't have the objectivity to judge which voices are worth listening to and which are not."³ Our entire culture is aggressively indoctrinating our children with their secular worldview while in churches we are failing to connect the stories of the Bible to the real world. No wonder we are losing them.

As if our world wasn't confusing enough, along comes a worldwide pandemic to add to the mix. Experts tell us that the age at which we're exposed to a traumatic event determines how embedded it will be in our psyche, and Covid 19 qualifies as a traumatic event when it comes to our children. Generation Z likely felt the impact most during the various lockdowns, when significant life events were canceled and schools were closed; when remote education became the norm and school formals and graduations were cancelled; when gap years were delayed, sport stopped, and their social lives almost ceased to exist. Mental health problems skyrocketed with complaints of boredom, depression, loneliness and anxiety. As a result, Gen Z became known as the most anxious generation.

Most agree that Covid will also have a significant impact and be a "defining moment" for Generation Alpha, our youngest kids. Parents and teachers might be frustrated with their seeming addiction to their devices, yet when the pandemic forced schools to close and most workers to operate remotely, the only solution was technology. For Alpha kids, screen time skyrocketed, with the screens themselves becoming their classrooms and substitute childcare. Families were confined to their homes and kids were unable to visit friends, play in the park, or visit their grandparents. It may be years before we fully grasp the extent to which this major global event will impact this generation.

It has become evident that our kids are suffering from more mental health problems than any other generation of children in American history. In the fall of 2020, it was estimated that that 1 in 4 young adults contemplated suicide in the last month and similar numbers exist for those who meet the criteria for having a serious mental illness.⁴ Why the decline in mental health? Some believe it comes down to personal factors like personality, home and family situations, and personal trauma and history. But other issues must also be considered - the different pressures students face today, the rapid pace of change, technology and a greater awareness of mental health conditions.

Unfortunately, most churches live in a bubble of niceties, smiling and shaking hands, while teaching wonderful Bible stories but neither addressing the hurt nor discussing the solutions. Please don't get me wrong – Bible stories are wonderful, and we obviously need excellent Bible teaching, but we must also address the issues outside the church walls. We are losing kids and their families at an alarming rate and we must ask ourselves why? Our wonderful world has become a dark and dangerous playground, and we need to call our children to come inside where they will find safety in our Savior. We cannot allow the distractions to steal our future. We must do whatever it takes to get their attention.

3. A MOVING TARGET

The busy life of a Children’s Ministry leader leaves little time to stop and think, let alone read a book about change. We are often encumbered by the seemingly endless tasks, that to stop and evaluate major changes is just not on our “to do list.” But we know the statistics. 75% of church kids are leaving when they grow into adulthood. Unfortunately, the current trend is that their departure is getting earlier with kids leaving during middle school when their calendar of other activities is bulging and there is no room for church.

We can see the empty chairs of the missing children. Perhaps it was baseball season, with its many weekly practices, which placed a time crunch on one of your families, only they didn’t return when the season ended. Maybe for another family, it was the quarterly dance recital with its accelerated rehearsal schedule, which was “only temporary” at first but meant their return was sporadic before it became non-existent. Thankfully, some new families came, filled in the missing gaps and perhaps reduced the urgency of finding out why. But what about the missing ones? Why did they leave? We ask ourselves, “could I have done something to prevent it? Is there any hope or are we resigned to losing an entire generation?”

With more resources than ever before, the research suggests that kids are more spiritually distant than ever. With a retention rate after children’s ministry of only one in four, we need to ask ourselves some tough questions. Why are so many leaving the church? Perhaps, more importantly, why do some stay? The target has moved! The kids who are now in our ministries have so many different needs and life challenges than in years previous, and my guess is that most of our ministries are still the same. Valerie Bell makes an excellent point:

“Today’s church kids are growing up in both a secular and church culture that are unlike the cultures in which most adults grew up... I fear our assumptions of “sameness” – our cluelessness in the midst of huge cultural shifts - may lead us to be unresponsive to the needs these shifts present.”⁵

We must understand our audience well enough to know how to reach them. The church in America risks losing more families if we are not willing to rethink its approach to children’s ministry. Indeed, “the challenge for the Church is that our current children’s ministry systems were designed for a different era... Gen Z and now Gen Alpha need a different system.”⁶ We must stop the hemorrhaging of the children and families who are leaving in droves for what seems to be greener pastures but in fact, is a very dark world. It will require unprecedented imagination and collaboration in approaches to children’s ministry.⁷

This is worth your time! Don’t give up. Our children might be different that previous generations, but we have the answers. Don’t be discouraged. There is hope!

“Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...”
Philippians 3:13-14

4. RESTORING RELEVANCE

Why are they leaving the church? Their issues are three-fold – they feel that it is no longer relevant, they have become disillusioned with the church as an organization, and worse, they have abandoned their belief in God. As a result, nearly three out of every four teens who have grown up in the church have quit going and thousands more will join their ranks this week. Something needs to change.

While the biblical message is timeless, we cannot assume that our methods and strategies are still culturally applicable. What worked well before won't always grab the attention of kids today. Many people today feel church is no longer relevant. That is to be expected since it's a different time, a different culture and they are different kids. It's time for a reexamination of our methodologies. Are you willing to evaluate and change?

While we continue to preach the good news, if our teaching lacks the application to the felt needs and questions of a new generation, it will fall on deaf ears. Troubled marriages, divorce, confused sexuality and absent fathers have plagued society for centuries but the onslaught of technology and social media has resulted in a resurgence never seen before. Worse, the church struggles to know how to deal with them. People are struggling with complex issues and when unchurched people think about church, they don't always see a connection to their daily lives. Many believe the church is irrelevant and are disappointed by the same old church services. Many say they are "tired" of church as they have known it growing.

The evidence of this is reflected in the decreased attendance we are witnessing in the church. Once regular families are becoming more sporadic as they fill their lives with alternative activities, which seem, at least in the short term, to provide a greater fulfillment. Unfortunately, when families begin to habitually skip church, they are entering a slippery slope. They are sending a message to their children that church is not important. Other activities are given precedence and church is just another option for how to spend a Sunday. Jesus might be a part of their lives, but He is not the in the center. The Bible is a helpful book, but not a priority. Parents whose own commitment is minimal, are raising children who are biblically illiterate, possess a shallow, unnurtured faith and whose convictions are likely to crumble under the world's pressures.

Irrelevance is defined as having "no importance or relation" to what is being considered, "being inapplicable or not pertinent" or "not connected with". Our entire culture is aggressively indoctrinating our children with their secular world and our churches are perceived to be "irrelevant." Church is for faith issues, not work, school, money, mental health, and a host of other real-world issues. People in our communities are asking questions and they are not sure if the church has the answers. We must provide Biblical solutions to their felt needs. If we leave them empty, why should they come? With the rapid hemorrhaging of our families leaving for more "relevant" activities, we must do something. Parents tell us that they want the church's help. They are fearful and overwhelmed, not knowing what to do.

We know the answer! Jesus Christ is the answer! He's the answer to all of life's issues. We must ask ourselves the difficult questions and find a way to share Him in a language that our kids will understand. Let's begin to address the struggles our kids and their parents are facing. Let's do our part to make this a wonderful world for our children. We can change our strategies and methods without compromising our message. Let's become RELEVANT again.

5. RESTORING TRUST

This generation values integrity, transparency and honesty and they question whether it can be found in the four walls of the church. Their trust is gone. 20% of those who walked away say it is because they became disillusioned.⁸ 36% of Gen Z and Gen Alpha say the church has hypocrites.⁹ 66% of skeptics say that church scandals and abuse turned many of them away from belief in God.¹⁰ These are their perceptions, but to them, perception is reality. Are we practicing what we preach?

They are watching closely. A hint of hypocrisy is all they need to see, and they are turned off. They observe church leaders who say one thing and do another. When they see a church which is focused on power, politics and money, or they experience the trauma of a church split, or the moral failure of a leader, disillusionment follows and they make the decision that it's not worth their time. Why continue to be involved with an organization that says one thing and does another? When they see their church behaving more like a country club, caring about no one outside their group they leave. When they witness a church arguing over something as simple as the color of the carpet while war, poverty and disease wipe out thousands of lives they move on.

If the hypocrisy continues at home where they observe their parents only attending church because it's the socially acceptable thing to do, but displaying no evidence of their faith at home during the week, they take notice. Worship songs from Sunday are replaced with cursing and gossip during the week. We can't fool this generation. The result is a generation believing that the answers to the world's pain must lie elsewhere.

We all know that the church is not perfect. Hypocrisy and failure will always exist wherever people congregate. There will always be sin because we are all sinners. No one knows that better than we do. The church is like Noah's Ark. It stinks sometimes! But we also know that it is better to be on the ark with the smelly animals, than outside. We must teach our kids to keep their eyes and their focus, on the perfect person, Jesus, not on the imperfection they see around them.

The other perception of the church is that we are negative, judgmental, hypocritical, and disconnected from real issues in the community. Nothing is more important than our reputation in the community. We may think that is not true, but it's what the community perceives? We should be speaking more about what we support rather than what we're against. Why not use our platform to spotlight local organizations, non-profits, and businesses? We can show that we're for others, not just for ourselves. We can get involved in local community organizations and better understand the real issues in the community. What if the church joined the local Chamber of Commerce or participated in the local school council for up-close involvement in the community? It might help us to truly understand the needs of our community and be a step in the right direction towards restoring trust.

Words are not enough. Our behavior must back up what we say. The community around us needs to see the church in action. Our love for one another should be evident to those outside of our faith. That's how they will see Jesus - by our love. That's how we will begin to restore trust.

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:35

6. RESTORING BELIEF

The most devastating reason given by those who have left the church is that they no longer believe. There is a new name for those Gen Z and Alphas who have abandoned their faith: the “nones” - defined by the claim to have “no religion”. They are the fastest growing group in the United States and surprisingly, 78% of them admit that they grew up in church.¹¹

Another new phenomenon we are seeing is that the social lives of families are no longer centered around the church. They rush in and out on Sundays without any real, deep connections. Church is something to attend, not participate in. There are other places to find friends and unfortunately, without meaningful relationships within the fellowship of the body of Christ, they are more prone to be less consistent in their attendance. When no one will even notice when they aren't there, why would they bother to come?

While there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the issues, it is becoming clear that we need to teach the “why” behind our beliefs. Does God really exist? Is the Bible trustworthy? Why is it worth following Jesus? Did the resurrection really happen? Our North American culture is aggressively teaching our students their secular humanistic worldview and how to defend it while churches are teaching wonderful Bible stories without connecting them to the real world. Our children need to be able to defend their Christian faith and answer the questions raised by our very vocal world. The world is undermining what they have learned, and we must find a way to restore biblical authority in their thinking.

It is also crucial to share real life stories and testimonies showing how God is working in people's lives. We must move our teaching from the theoretical to the practical and from principles to application. We need to be real, transparent and vulnerable, willing to share some of the personal ways that God has answered prayers or helped us.

7. A SECOND LANGUAGE

2010 was the first year of this new generation, and is most appropriately the year that iPads were launched, Instagram was created and "app" was the American Dialect Society's word of the year. Technology is the second language of the Alpha Generation. Is this an addiction or a blessing? Maybe both? One thing is certain - they will be future experts.

Alphas are not afraid of technology or touching buttons to learn what those buttons do. They are growing up with "Artificial Intelligence", otherwise known as the familiar voices of Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant, which they connect more than with their parents or friends. More than half (65%) of children ages 8 to 11 already own or have access to a mobile phone.¹² They are known as "Generation Glass" because they are being raised as "screenagers". They wear it on their wrist, carry it in their back pockets and use it all day in school. They shop, connect and play constantly on their devices.

While Gen Z children probably didn't receive their first digital screens until their later school years, its purpose was most likely for education. For Generation Alpha, technology has been present from the beginning. You might have seen it – a toddler squirms at a restaurant while the adults attempt to have a conversation, and a parent shoves a phone into their grimy little hands to entertain them. Grandma babysits her two young grandchildren, and hands them her iPad so they can watch a movie while she tries to clean up their lunch mess. Mom downloads the latest preschool game onto her laptop so they are entertained as she prepares dinner. The toys of the Alpha generation are smartphones and iPads. By the age of two, they are able to master touchscreens and navigate through apps on smartphones. Gen Alpha will never know of a world without devices.

Pornography, bullying, violence and abuse have been around for centuries, but the onset of the digital revolution has made them inescapable. While growing up "logged on" and "connected" can have its advantages, these technologies are now so prevalent in the home and school that they have become ever present companions, rather than a trendy accessory.

Screen time has doubled since 2015. There is even an officially recognized source of anxiety (nomophobia) for the fear of being without your smart phone.¹³ In a recent survey, it was found that on average, a child spent approximately 7-8 hours on mobile devices, with the majority of their time devoted to the internet, social media, gaming, and texting.¹⁴ Since children this age tend not to be under constant supervision, some parents may not even realize how much media their child is actually consuming. YouTube has become their favorite source of information. Why ask a person for the answer to an embarrassing or troubling question, when you can ask Google?

As a kid, my sense of identity came from my family and my friends. For children today, it largely comes from the internet and social media, which destines them to be on an emotional roller coaster. Their identities are being shaped by social media. It is who they are. They receive, read and send as many as ten thousand messages a day amidst multiple activities. They feel a constant pressure to be checking their accounts for followers, “likes” and comments. It’s the first thing they look at in the morning and the last thing they see before they go to sleep.

The increased use of technology brings with it an abundance of detrimental consequences, from cognitive, psychological, and physiological issues, impaired social and emotional well-being to safety issues.

1. Cognitive Development

Studies are constantly being done on the effects of the excessive use of technology on the brain and its functions.

“The years from three to five represent a formative stage of development. Too much screen time is a set up for atrophy, or underdevelopment of these higher-order brain networks. The brain just doesn’t have to do any work. It will be harder for kids with underdeveloped networks to learn. It’s like the lights are on, but nobody is home.”¹⁵

Another study conducted by the National Institutes of Health in 2018 reported that children spending more than two hours on screen per day demonstrated lower language and thinking test results, and children spending in excess of seven hours per day on screens were found to experience premature thinning in the brain’s cortex, the outermost layer of the brain that processes thought and action.¹⁶

Cox Gurdon also states “It’s clear that children who have too much screen time can have deficits in other areas, like language, imagination, and emotions.¹⁷ I don’t know about you, but atrophy, premature thinning, neuronal changes and deficits sound serious to me.

2. Instant Gratification

Technology is the ultimate shortcut tool leading children to believe in instant results and immediate gratification.

“A finger swipe on a tablet results in action on the screen, and with that, the child’s brain responds with dopamine, which is the chemical messenger for happiness – it’s how we feel pleasure. And from that, over time, a child will start to internalize deeper in their brain that all actions should have immediate effect and bring immediate joy.”¹⁸

This “instant everything” inevitably leads to shorter attention spans and a lack of persistence. The tendency is to avoid struggles and challenges, and give up easily. Kids become frustrated when they can’t find an immediate answer and have trouble accepting any level of failure.

3. Psychological Issues and Mental Health

Excessive screen time is also suspected of being the primary cause behind the deterioration of the mental health of kids today. Those who spend a significant time focused on playing video

games, texting, and using social media are being found to experience a much higher rate of mental health issues and delayed social development. The immediate result of social media dependency are often feelings of jealousy, inadequacy, anxiety, shame and anger when comparisons are inevitably made. Social media distorts reality when people present an unrealistic version of themselves, designed to impress their friends and followers. Children feel these pressures keenly.

4. Physiological Issues

A number of physical issues are also created and compounded by the excessive use of technology. The time meant for sleep is being traded-off with the use of technology at night-time. Texting, chatting, playing games, and watching movies are all robbing our children of the sleep they so desperately need. There is also a concern for the abundance of sitting and a lack of physical activity.

5. Online Safety

There is a growing access and easiness of bullies, sex offenders, and traffickers in targeting their prey, while staying anonymous. With the growing technology, crimes have become more digital in nature.

In a survey of school students, “a quarter of those who said they had experienced bullying at school had experienced it via social media, text messages or emails.” Home is no longer a safe haven. Bullying used to be confined to the school yard, but it now follows them home in their back pockets. Kids can be incredibly cruel with their words in person but even more so online with abusive messages, hurtful images or videos, nasty gossip, excluding or humiliating others, or creating fake accounts in someone’s name to trick or degrade them.¹⁹ Globally, one out of six parents admit their children experienced cyberbullying and one in six knowing a cyberbullied child.²⁰

Convinced yet? These statistics are overwhelming and make me want to destroy every device I see. I recently volunteered at a summer camp, and was shocked to see several of the 8-year-olds in my group carrying their own iPhone. They were only eight. Why does an 8-year-old need a phone? They were quite proud of their personal device and waved it in front of the others in the group, creating a sense of jealousy. I felt like snatching it away and tossing it in the trash can. But that reaction is not going to help. Technology is here to stay, and we must learn how to deal with it.

Alpha might have nearly unlimited access to information, but they still need adults to help them translate knowledge into wisdom. There is a tension, where while children need devices for school and to know how to use them, they are still children and need time for unstructured free play and even boredom. Children complain about being bored and we shove a device into their hands but ‘boredom is the space in which creativity and imagination happen.’²¹ They do not have the capacity to determine for themselves how best to consume these technologies.

"Our world today is full of entertainment. It now travels with us everywhere on our phones. We can watch streamed videos, programs, social media, sports, you name it. Nothing wrong with that, but we've now become used to the stimuli it offers us. We hate to be bored. It has led many in Generation Z to believe that boring is bad. But that's not true. While I remember hating boredom when I was a kid, today we recognize something I did not understand in my teen years. Neuroscientists today tell us that our brains actually need boredom. It is in times of boredom— when we have margin in our day and quiet time to think—that we develop creativity and empathy."²²

Children need us to create healthy boundaries when it comes to their second language. We need to invest time into thinking through the pros and cons of the games they are playing and the videos they are watching, and maybe even play with them to provide that guidance. Technology is here to stay, so the question is whether parents and leaders will be available to set a healthy example and create constructive boundaries.

8. THE #1 PRIORITY – RELATIONSHIPS

In an effort to make our ministry more attractive and enticing, we can sometimes get caught up in trying to impress kids with a professional quality of entertainment and technologically. But the truth is, first, that's not possible, and second, what these kids need is actually less stuff and more relationship. Rather than focusing primarily on programs, we need to focus on people. Barna states:

“When comparing twenty somethings who remained active in their faith beyond high school and twenty somethings who dropped out of church, the Barna study uncovered a significant difference between the two. Those who stay were twice as likely to have a close personal friendship with an adult inside the church.”²³

Relationships. That's what really matters. They won't remember the amazing graphics or high-tech lighting, but they will remember the teacher who cared. Whether you are a part of a mega church or if your ministry is tiny, this is achievable in every church. And it won't even take a chunk out of your budget!

- Children are not desperate for our amazing, on-screen graphics. They see much better graphics all week on TV and social media. But they are desperate to see someone in their life who believes in them.
- Children are not desperate for our games and fun at VBS. They play in sport's leagues and have tons of other extracurricular options available to them. But they are desperate for someone who will sit on the floor and play a game with them.
- Children are not desperate for our well-designed Sunday School take home papers. They are already overwhelmed by hundreds of messages that are sent their way every day. But they are desperate for someone who will really listen and care about the challenges they are facing at home.
- Children are not desperate for our quiet seat prizes. They have plenty of trinkets and access to candy already. But they are desperate for someone who will sit with them and quietly pray for their prayer needs.”²⁴

Kids need to know that someone loves them. That they matter to you! That you care. Always remember this old mantra: “Kids don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.” For children to grow and understand God's love, they need to know they're loved, accepted, and cared for by those who are the messengers.

“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” Acts 20:28

Yes, our material is important. We need it to be engaging and to communicate all the right foundational truths. But it's the people, the relationships, that are key.

Try an experiment. The next time that you see a child on their device, offer to play a game with them or join them in a fun activity. Often, kids are on their devices because of a lack of emotional connectedness with their parents or leaders. It's our unavailability and busyness as parents and educators that make them default to the easy stimulation of a screen. There are very few kids who will remain engaged to a screen if an adult is ready to connect, play, listen or do a fun activity with them.²⁵

The number one priority is "relationships," before everything. Love them. Love them. Love them. If your kids feel loved, you won't need to "wow" them. You will "win" them! They are craving real relationships and that should be our goal. Not amazing programs, colorful hallways or eye catching VBS backdrops. Those things are great, but loving our kids is greater.

During your time with them, be present and involved with the kids. Join in the activities. Get down on their level and make direct eye contact. Come early, leave late What if you came 30 minutes earlier and hung out with the kids before service starts? What if, instead of rushing out as soon as service is over, you hung around and spent some time investing in that child who doesn't get picked up by their parents until 20 minutes after service is over? Ask about how they are doing at school. Find out what they like, their interests, what they watch and listen to. Be in touch with their families so you know when kids are going through tough times. Pray for them.

Follow up with children who miss two programs in a row. Send a handwritten personal postcard to visitors, absent kids and kids with birthdays. Find out their favorite candy bar, take note and surprise them on their birthday. Even more radical, why not go to their soccer game or take a few of the kids out for ice cream during the week. Visit their home on their birthday. Be the leader who cares. Love them. Love them. Love them. I still remember my Sunday school teacher. I don't remember the lessons, but I remember that she loved me. Let's love our kids. Remember: Relationships!

9. PRETEENS

Preteens: the awkward “middle child.” Too grown up for the children’s ministry, they are tossed to the youth ministry. But they are not ready for the issues and activities of youth, and they don’t fit in with the teenagers. They are viewed by the older kids as immature and silly but they don’t like to feel as though we are treating them as little kids either. Where do they belong? What do we do with them?

Churches are beginning to understand that this age group requires specialized care. They have their own unique set of needs and challenges. It is not as simple as treating preteen ministry as a mini or early youth ministry. Preteens are neither children nor youth and to combine this age group with middle school is unwise. In fact, this is the time for significant learning. The beginning of abstract understanding opens the door for a completely different learning style. Interestingly, preteens might be the most receptive of all.

[During the preteen years] “...a child’s brain is getting ready for adulthood and becomes malleable again. If you were to look at a scan of a two-year-old’s or a three-year-old’s brain and compare it to a scan of an 11-year-old’s, the scans look the same. Very similar monumental developmental shifts are happening.”²⁶

It’s also when our brains get rid of what we don’t need or use, a process called “Cognitive Pruning.” It a time when preteens decide if information is worth retaining or not. What should I remember and what can I discard? They begin to ask questions like, “Is church useful, or not?” “Is the Bible really true or is it just a bunch of fairytales?” “Do I have time for this, or are the other interests in my life more valuable?” They begin to question the value of church. It’s an especially critical time for their spiritual life.

This is the time when they can begin to lose interest. They are no longer impressed by our efforts to wow them with programs and technology – they have seen it all, and much better. It used to be fun, but now, not so much. They’ve finally managed to convince their parents to stop those old boring family devotions and allow them to play soccer on Sundays with their friends. This all-too-common story reflects many church families today. Their “tweens” lose interest and their parents are so fearful of losing their relationship with them that they succumb to the pressure and allow them to skip church... and skip church... and skip church.

How do we stall the exit? We’ve known for a while that 75% of young adults are leaving the church, but the tendency now is leaving sooner, during the middle school years, when their lives become crowded with other interests. This preteen age group is a crucial time and we must capitalize on it, making it as effective as possible. We must curb the exodus.

10. THE FUTURE OF KID'S MINISTRY

Unless we make adjustments, we will potentially lose an entire generation. We must not allow that to happen. We must reach this generation. They might be unique but they are also still kids, and they need Jesus. While many elements of childhood today feel dramatically different from previous decades, childhood itself hasn't changed. They move through the same development stages and still need the love from significant people in their lives.

Kids are still kids and the gospel still works! The next generation wants to see God at work in the church. They want to see His power transform people's lives. How can we compete? What can we do when the world has so much influence? Well guess what - we serve a risen Savior. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is sovereign over all. The adversary might be devious and powerful, but we know the end of the story. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Remember God's heart for kids.

We have the best job ever. What a privilege it is to work with kids.

“And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in My name welcomes Me”

Matthew 18:3-5.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this short eBook. It is just a brief synopsis of the full discussion, which will be in the upcoming book “When you see Fireflies.” Our goal is to encourage and equip you as you work to understand this new generation and endeavor to be more effective and relevant. Check www.Grace4Kidz.org for information on its upcoming release and for more great resources for your kid's ministry!

ENDNOTES

¹ From 2010 to 2019 — the first nine years of Generation Alpha births — the United States saw educational attainment improve among adults between the ages of 25 and 34. During this time frame, adults grew more likely to hold an associate (8% to 9%), bachelor's (22% to 26%) or graduate (9% to 11%) degree as their highest level of educational attainment. Not surprisingly, the share of adults who didn't graduate from high school (13% to 8%) and only graduated from high school (48% to 46%) fell during this same time frame.

² Carter, Understanding Generation Alpha Preprint · June 2020 DOI: 10.31219/osf.io/d2e8g.

³ Hettie Brittz, Barna Group Guiding Children to Discover the Bible, Navigate Technology & Follow Jesus How Ministry Leaders & Parents Partner in Faith Formation 2020, 26.

⁴ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/13/cdc-mental-health-pandemic-394832>.

⁵ Bell, Valerie, Resilient, Child Discipleship and the Fearless Future of the Church. Marceline, MO: Walsworth Pub. Co. 2020, 28.

⁶ Matt Markins, Barna Group, Children's Ministry in a New Reality. Building Church Communities That Cultivate Lasting Faith, 2022.

⁷ Barna, George. Children's Ministry in a New Reality Building Church Communities That Cultivate Lasting Faith, 2022, 9-10.

⁸ Michael Lipka, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/.

⁹ Tessa Landrum, www.kentuckytoday.com/baptist-life/gen-z-is-spiritually-illiterate-and-abandoning-church-how-did-we-get-here/article_ea994828-6cd4-5fbd-8352-496ef3eb9c8e.html/.

¹⁰ <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-state-of-atheism-in-america/>.

¹¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

¹² <https://inspiramarketing.com/heres-what-marketers-need-to-know-about-gen-alpha/>.

¹³ Iowa State University Study, 2015. 58% of men and 47% of women suffer from the phobia, and an additional 9% feel stressed when their mobile phones are off. 55% of those surveyed cited keeping in touch with friends or family as the main reason that they got anxious when they could not use their mobile phones.

<https://archive.hs.iastate.edu/news/2015/08/26/nomophobia/>.

¹⁴ Kumar, Amrit Jha, *Understanding Generation Alpha*, June 2020 Quoting Twenge, 2017. 8.

¹⁵ Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour* New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2019, 13-14.

¹⁶ ‘What does too much screen time do to children’s brains?’, J. Cross, *Health Matters* New York-Presbyterian, accessed 11 February 2021. <https://healthmatters.nyp.org/how-to-manage-kids-screen-time-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

¹⁷ Meghan Cox Gurdon, *The Enchanted Hour* New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2019, 13-14.

¹⁸ ‘What screen time can really do to kid’s brains’, L. Margalit, *Psychology Today*, 17 April 2016, accessed 11 February 2021. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/behind-online-behavior/201604/what-screen-time-can-really-do-kids-brains>.

¹⁹ Hudson, Dale *Fertile Soil, See Kids’ Faith Grow and Flourish for A Lifetime*. Dale Hudson www.buildingchildrensministry.com, 2022, 19.

²⁰ Kumar, Amrit Jha, *Understanding Generation Alpha*, June 2020, 8. Quoting Hinduja & Patchin, 2014, Internet Watch Foundation, 2018 and Ipsos, 2018.

²¹ ‘Screen time and the brain’, D. Ruder, Harvard Medical School, 19 June 2019, accessed 11 February 2021. <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/screen-time-brain>.

²² Immordino-Yang, Mary Helen, Joanna A. Christodoulou, and Vanessa Singh. “Rest Is Not Idleness: Implications of the Brain’s Default Mode for Human Development and Education.” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 4 (June 29, 2012): 352–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612447308>.

²³ <https://www.barna.com/research/5-reasons-millennials-stay-connected-to-church/> Accessed May 21, 2022.

²⁴ Hudson, Dale, *Fertile Soil, See Kids’ Faith Grow and Flourish for A Lifetime*. Dale Hudson www.buildingchildrensministry.com, 2022, 90.

²⁵ Hettie Brittz, *Barna Group Guiding Children to Discover the Bible, Navigate Technology & Follow Jesus How Ministry Leaders & Parents Partner in Faith Formation 2020*.

²⁶ Dan Scott, *Barna Group Guiding Children to Discover the Bible, Navigate Technology & Follow Jesus How Ministry Leaders & Parents Partner in Faith Formation 2020*.