SHINING A LIGHT ON RESEARCH AND INSIGHTS INTO TODAY’S YOUTH CULTURE
I’ve been involved with Barna Group for several years, helping with research and dissemination of what we’re learning, especially as it relates to youth culture. What we’ve discovered has several direct implications on Christian camping.
We're beginning to understand some of the differences between millennials and Generation Z (born roughly between 1999 and 2015). You’ve already been employing millennials for some time, and Gen Z staff members are just around the corner (as the oldest members of Gen Z are 18-year-olds). Not only will understanding some of the key differences between these two generations help you as you lead and manage staff, but Barna’s findings about Gen Z will also be important for you to consider as you program and minister to these young campers.

**Generation Z and Technology**

While millennials were early adopters of mobile technology and social media, Gen Z has never known a world where these realities weren’t ubiquitous. This is important because both mobile technology and social media have shaped the way our cognitive function happens, as well as the behaviors we develop in light of these new tools.

For example, because teens have new ways to connect virtually, they’re getting their driver’s licenses much later into their adolescence. “Why should I drive to meet up with my friends if we’re all Snap chatting until later than I can stay out anyway?”

Because of technology, today’s teens have more information available to them regarding risk and reward and healthy living. We can’t be certain about what causes what, but we are seeing lower risk factors for Gen Z. Teen pregnancy, smoking and drinking are lower than previous generations. Because teens are spending less time “out with friends,” and instead connect virtually, there is simply less time for these risky behaviors to occur.

Compared to millennials and older generations, Gen Z teens get less (or something very different) out of social media. In his book *Revenge of the Analog: Why Real Things Matter*, David J. Goggin...
Millennials will soon be the ones running your camp or conference center. As you look at leading these leaders, these tips will help set you (and them) up for success.

1. **Don’t assume you know them.** Research has given us invaluable insights into the distinctive traits of this generation, but we need to be careful not to superimpose those ideas on every millennial we meet. This generation values people who take time to get to know them and not make assumptions.

2. **They want to make an impact now.** They need to see that what they do makes an impact. The more you can link what you need them to do to a significant outcome, the more likely they’ll be to get/stay engaged.

3. **Give them greater, holistic context.** If you make a statement about biblical standards or Christlike conduct to a millennial, you make a statement that comes from centuries of church history and theological reflection, which may not be present in the foundational context of a millennial. It’s important that we explain ourselves holistically, and do not assume that words like grace, holiness and sanctification are as richly understood. Also, there are distinct lenses we take for granted when making statements. We make a statement from a theological lens and neglect to share it from a pastoral lens because we assume that is a given. For millennials, they need to see applications holistically.

4. **Show them The Power.** If it's real and true, then demonstrate it. Otherwise, it’s just empty. If a relationship with Jesus makes a difference, show it — don’t tell it. And if it’s a relationship and not a religion, that should be demonstrated as well. I changed two things in my work with teens. I try to use the Bible directly more than summarize it, and I pray for people right on the spot when a need or situation presents itself. Those two shifts in demonstration have yielded positive results.

5. **They want opportunities to lead.** Previous generations had to pay their dues before they were given opportunities to leverage their skills and gifts. This generation wants leadership opportunities sooner than they may be ready, but they’ll leave if not given a chance. This generation has options; be careful not to mistake their indifference to your opportunity or organization as entitlement. We should be looking to engage them while also providing mentors.

6. **Be open to reverse mentoring.** It’s not just older generations who can share in wisdom; this generation can help us understand the world that is changing and help us navigate it. Don’t miss an opportunity to learn from them.

7. **Invite them to collaborate.** Millennials think and dream differently. Leverage that by inviting them to the table to imagine and create — not just to do their “job.”

8. **Being young doesn’t mean they “get” Gen Z.** While your young leaders are closer in age to the next generation, that doesn’t mean it’s easier for them to connect with those they’re serving. Just a few years of life after college places them in a radically different social community, and they’ve also experienced life stages that haven’t been experienced by those who are younger — even those who are just a few years out of high school.

—Mark Matlock
Sax shows the limited appeal of the purely digital life and the robust future of real, tangible things. It’s this shift in culture that explains why you’re more likely to see teens listening to vinyl or cassettes, reading books and taking pictures with real film. This is not some trend about tangible “things,” but is about what is authentic and real.

**Camp Application**

The desire for something authentic and real is a tremendous insight for camps that are programming for teens. What are you providing that allows your campers to have experiences that are meaningful and tangible?

**Generation Z and Faith**

Research is showing that Gen Z is less exposed to Christianity than previous generations. In the past 25 years, we have seen those without a personal connection to Christianity double among those under the age of 30. This is the first generation where there are just as many teens growing up not exposed to church as going to church. That means that campers who come to you from a church-going family are attending school or playing sports with kids who have no idea what Christian beliefs are. So there are fewer places outside the church and home where Christian values and beliefs are being reinforced. It’s also possible that you’ll see more campers coming to you with very little biblical knowledge or understanding of Christianity. It’s essential that we understand teens through this lens.

In *Smart Faith*, a book I wrote with JP Moreland (NavPress), we discuss the anatomy of a belief. Essentially, a belief is comprised of content, conviction and centrality. For example, I might hold a belief that exercise is good for your health. That statement alone is the content, but it’s only with reflection and study that I might say, “I strongly believe exercise is good for your health,” and perhaps even argue with someone who believed otherwise. This doesn’t mean that I actually exercise until I decide to make it central to my life.

As Christians, we tend to focus on the content, strength of belief (conviction) and the centrality of that to our lives. We even use traditional apologetics as a means to strengthen the conviction of that content (believing it will lead to centrality). I think there’s a fourth important aspect of the belief, and that’s the plausibility of the belief’s context. A belief requires a larger framework to be considered plausible. This generation is growing up without a context for plausibility for the content of the beliefs that compose Christian faith, and that makes conviction and centrality more challenging.

Remember the apostle Paul’s words
in 1 Corinthians 2:4, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Generation Z has access to countless terabytes of words, but they’re short on seeing the power of God in their lives.

You’ve heard CCCAs phrase, The Power of Camp. It may be that camp was created for such a generation as this. The opportunity to experience God through the revelation of His creation and His Word exists all over camp.

Camp Application

How can you provide opportunities for “plausible context” to be discovered at camp? How can you make space for demonstrations of the Spirit’s power? A talking head may not be as effective as significant time in silence or a liturgical practice that allows a camper to experience the presence of God.

Science vs. Faith

A shift we’ve seen over the past decade or so is the role that science plays in the belief system of the next generations. If it comes down to the truth of the Bible versus science, science will win. Unfortunately, the average Christian has left the science conversation, as have many pastors. But fortunately, there are many Christians who are practicing scientists.

These scientists, along with conservative Bible scholars and theologians, are in exciting conversations that help us reconcile science and Scripture in ways that may make some people feel uncomfortable, but will pass the “intellectual honesty” test of skeptical millennials and Gen Z’ers. It’s essential that we are in this conversation. The days of, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it,” are gone. We have to live in the tension of the two ways God has revealed Himself if we want these generations to see the Word of God and His existence as credible.

Interestingly, science is helping in the premarital counseling I do with millennial couples. I now have statistical support that cohabitation is a factor in the likelihood of divorce. I find it easier to discuss this (and see it embraced) rather than just sharing what seems to be antiquated values (to younger generations).

In the end, it’s important to remember that while there are some things about teenagers that never change — they still go through the same emotional, physical and cognitive transitions — there will always be things that make each generation different from the previous one. By staying connected to youth culture and the things that make Gen Z unique, you’ll be better equipped to minister to them and lead them to a life with Jesus.

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Mark Matlock has worked with youth pastors and students for two decades. He speaks to thousands of students around the world each year at PlanetWisdom Conferences, and presents biblical truths in ways that motivate people to change. In addition to being an advisor to Youth Specialties National Youth Workers Convention, Mark is the founder of WisdomWorks Ministries, an organization exploring the accelerated acquisition of wisdom in teens. Mark lives in Texas with his wife, Jade, and their children.