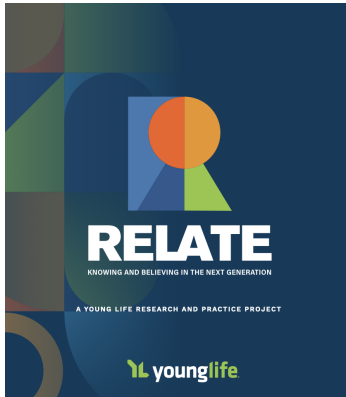




RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation

Young Life

Review Date: Nov 12, 2024

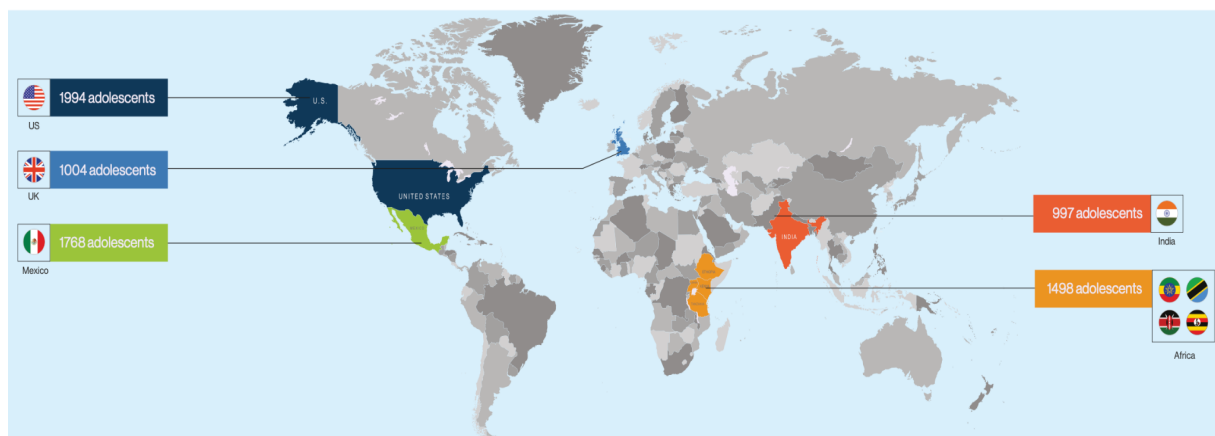
Reviewed by: Beth Ann Williams

Tags: Youth Culture Global

“More Than Their Worries” - An Introduction to Today’s Adolescents

Young Life is a Christ-centered ministry that helps kids know Jesus, grow in their faith, and serve Him. They do this by building authentic friendships with middle schoolers, high schoolers, and college students. In the 2022-2023 ministry year, over two million kids worldwide were connected with one or more of Young Life’s youth leaders.

Young Life commissioned the RELATE research project to gain a deeper understanding of upcoming generations and identify ways to support their flourishing. This global study includes surveys from 7,261 teens, aged 13-24, across eight countries in five regions, representing diverse ethnicities and geographies. In addition, researchers conducted focus groups in six of the countries, gathering more detailed insights from 60 survey participants.





This project was designed to go beyond typical Gen Z research on technology and mental health to ask deeper questions: Who are they, really? What do they care about? How has their culture shaped their values? Young Life aims to shift the conversation about this generation from a focus on anxiety and stress to one of resilience and possibility.



“Showing Up” - Relationships matter

Parents and family are the most influential figures in the lives of teens and young adults, but other adults also play a crucial role. A strong majority of teens—seven in 10 aged 13 to 17—report having at least one non-family adult who genuinely cares about them. Most also say they have at least one adult outside their family they can rely on in times of need (p. 10).

Unfortunately, this support decreases as young people enter their 20s, with fewer than two-thirds reporting having a non-family adult they can rely on. This decline is less pronounced among those with more education, suggesting that extended educational experiences may help expand young adults' support networks beyond their family.

In the moment, however, education isn't always immediately socially beneficial. For many young people, the social aspects of school can be challenging. Half of all teens report struggling to make friends, with girls facing this more often than boys (p. 13). Major transitions often lead to feelings of loneliness and a loss of identity. Even if teens seem eager for independence, they may still crave deeper connections and the reassurance of "being known" (p. 15).



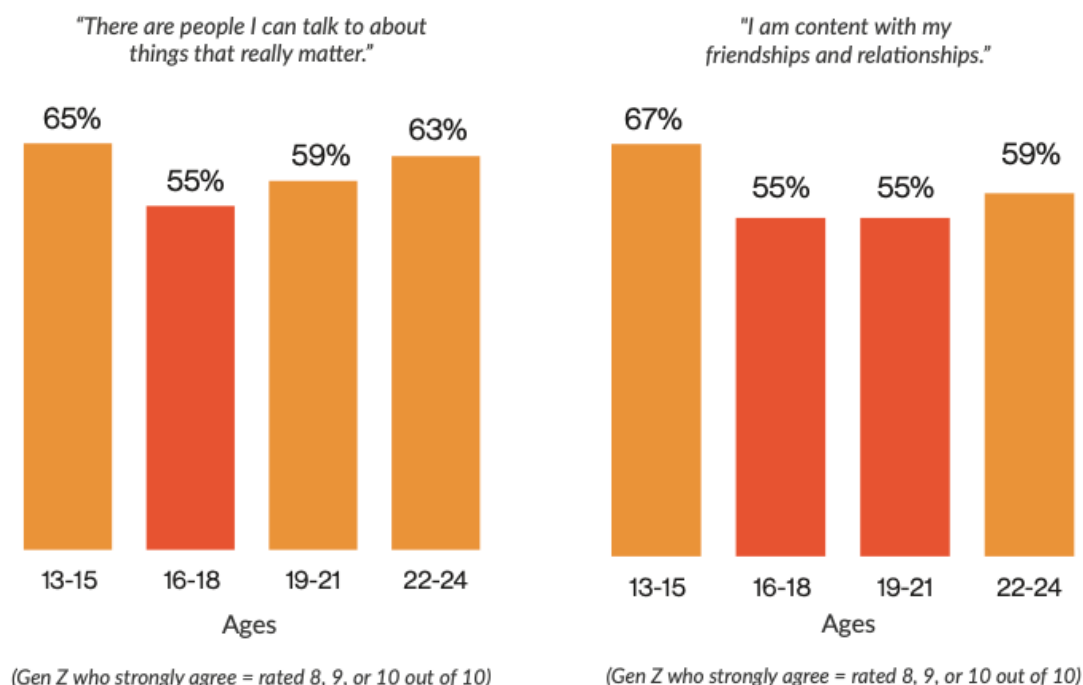
One way we can help teens keep strong relationships outside of family is by encouraging them to **continue learning**.

It doesn't matter how. Pursuing a certification, applying to a university, signing up for a trade school, or doing an apprenticeship may help them find mentors and older friends who can keep them from feeling isolated or lost during those critical years.



“Belonging, close relationships, and positive self-concept all have a strong impact on flourishing and overall well-being.”¹

Youth aged 16-20 are particularly vulnerable as they navigate the significant changes of moving away from family and transitioning into independent adulthood. These challenges are reflected in their responses. Teens aged 16-18 were the least likely to say they have people they can talk to about things that truly matter. Additionally, 16-21-year-olds reported the lowest levels of contentment with their friendships and relationships compared to both younger and older respondents.



Gen Z is in particular need of reassurance about their self-worth—over 40% of them are uncertain that they are deserving of love.

“Invite us to your dinner table” - Getting to know Gen Z

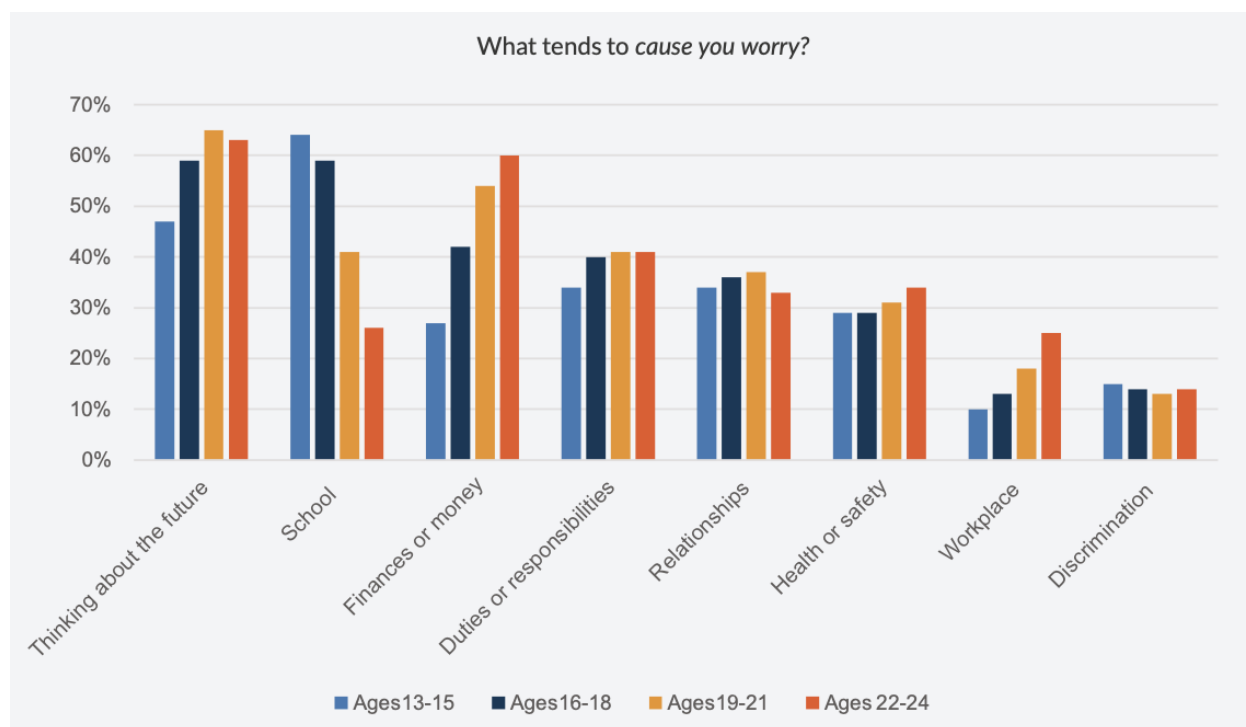
How can we show young people that they are loved? What does it look like to communicate their worth? It might be simpler than we think. The RELATE findings highlight that bridging generational gaps or “getting it” isn’t as important as many adults fear. Teens want the adults in their lives to be genuine and authentic more than they want them to be cool.

¹ YoungLife. “RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation,” 2024, 17.



“Teens and young adults want authentic relationships - no fuss and nothing formal.”²

Many members of Gen Z feel a heavy weight of responsibility and concern, with their biggest collective worry being the future—not just their own, but the world’s. They are uncertain about how to secure their future, as the traditional paths followed by previous generations seem less stable. This burden is reflected in tangible ways: 61% of Gen Z report having a medically diagnosed anxiety condition (p. 22).



Helping young people navigate their worries starts with listening. Younger teens generally want to be heard and validated rather than given advice. As they enter their 20s, they tend to seek input from a wider circle of trusted adults and become more open to concrete suggestions. While it may be tempting to offer solutions immediately, listening is often more valuable than speaking.

Given the importance of belonging, it’s encouraging to note that over three-quarters of today’s teens and young adults feel a strong sense of family connection, particularly in Africa



² YoungLife. “RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation,” 2024, 22.



and India. Similar to overall relational satisfaction, there is a decline in family connection between ages 16 and the early 20s, often followed by a renewed closeness after college, when they feel more independent and secure in their identity.

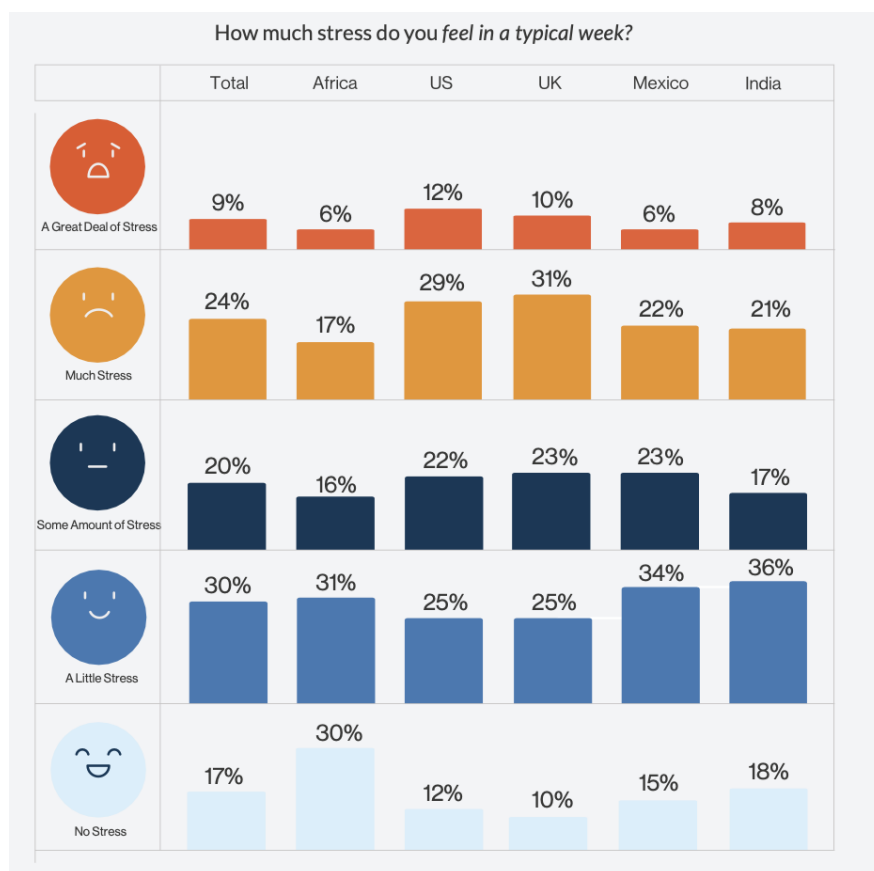
However, family belonging isn't the same for all young people. Youth who identify as atheist, agnostic, or non-religious report a much lower sense of family connection compared to their religious peers. This may result from a lack of clear expectations around behavior or relationships within the family. Consequently, they are also less likely to seek help from family members when facing challenges (p. 27).

“Over and over teens told us how much they appreciated being invited into people’s homes for a meal and having a conversation - about anything.”³

Stress

Stress is a normal part of adolescence, particularly for 16-18-year-olds. While no one enjoys living with stress, learning to manage it is an important part of growing up. The RELATE report found that young people turn to music, books, connecting with friends, exercise, and prayer to cope with stress (p. 29).

Stress levels varied by geographic region. Youth in Africa reported feeling less stressed than their peers, with their responses and qualitative data reflecting assertiveness, curiosity, zeal, and an entrepreneurial spirit. In contrast, youth in the US and



³ YoungLife. “RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation,” 2024,32.



UK expressed feeling stressed about decision-making and meeting their perceived potential.

Talking about stress and mental health is a positive step for this generation. Today's young people don't necessarily associate mental health with disorders; instead, they view it as part of a broader, holistic conversation. A simple way to check in with a young person could be to ask, "How would you rate your mental health right now?" (See below for more check in questions.)

We can't solve everything for them—nor do they expect us to. Instead, the report suggests starting by listening. Create spaces where young people feel comfortable sharing their questions and stressors, and reassure them that they're not alone.

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you feel like I listen to you?
2. What are the last three memes you sent to someone?
3. What is one thing you wish older generations understood about you?
4. What's something you're really afraid of?
5. What would be your idea of the perfect day?



Three Steps to Communicating with Gen Z by Tanita Maddox

The report includes a practical approach to communicating with Gen Z from Tanita Maddox, National Director of Generational Impact for Young Life.

Gen Z wants to ask older generations for advice on difficult decisions. They want to share personal thoughts but worry they will fall on deaf ears or uncompassionate hearts.



We can't assume we understand their experiences; we haven't lived in their cultural moment.

Here are three helpful steps for communicating with young people in your life:

1. Admit you don't understand the experiences of kids today.
2. Admit you don't speak the language.
3. Ask questions and listen in a way that the young person in front of you feels heard.



“All the World’s Their Stage” - Talent, Individuality, Confidence, and Belonging

Looking at Instagram or TikTok, it's easy to assume that Gen Z aspires to be celebrities. We might dismiss their impatience with traditional education and career paths, but real-world factors—such as the high cost of education, climate change, rising conflicts, and cancel culture—have left them feeling they can't rely on institutions. They are aware of the many choices available to them, but also carry fears about making the wrong ones.

“They feel pressure to be self-reliant, and that’s causing a lot of stress.”⁴

Many young people are bypassing the traditional path of college, career, and security, instead embracing the tools and opportunities offered by the digital economy. However, access to the digital world can be a double-edged sword. Following influencers, for example, can constantly remind them of what they could be achieving, often leading to unrealistic comparisons.

⁴ YoungLife. “RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation,” 2024, 38.



The level of digital engagement appears to be less of a concern for those who both create and consume online content. However, the RELATE report advises caution for teens who spend more time scrolling and consuming content than actively creating or engaging with it (p. 47). This pattern of passive engagement is a more significant issue among young people in the US and UK compared to other regions surveyed.

When I'm online, I'm <i>always or most</i> of the time ...					
	Africa	U.S.	U.K.	Mexico	India
Posting or creating my own content	34%	22%	18%	19%	27%
Engaging with or commenting on other people's content	26%	23%	21%	19%	22%
Following or scrolling only	39%	52%	60%	30%	38%



How can older adults help?

Affirm kids but also reframe their thinking. Demonstrate unconditional love. And most importantly, be available! This may be the hardest part, but presence, availability, and consistency all help communicate “you are loved and valued.” Kids shouldn’t feel like they have to compete for adults’ attention. Cross-generational friendship is not easy and takes focused time and energy. Be sure you can make time and space for it!



The Empathetic Generation

Overall, Gen Z has a good self-concept. They reject the idea that how much money you have, or what college you go to, or what title you have makes you “you.”

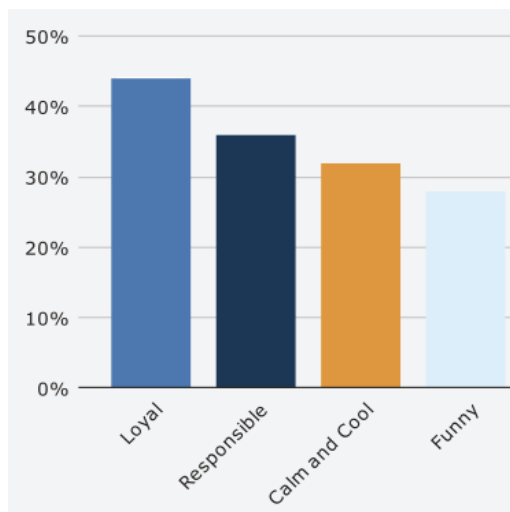


Self-concept⁵

- I like myself.
- I believe I'm worthy of being loved.
- I'm proud of something I've accomplished.
- I can make a difference in the lives of others.

This generation wants to be defined by qualities they can control. The two most common words they use to describe themselves in their own words were "kind" and "good." When asked to select from a list: "What do you want to be known for?," the most common response was "loyal" (see right).

Caring adults can support and validate these values by focusing on how kids live, rather than just what they achieve (p. 51).



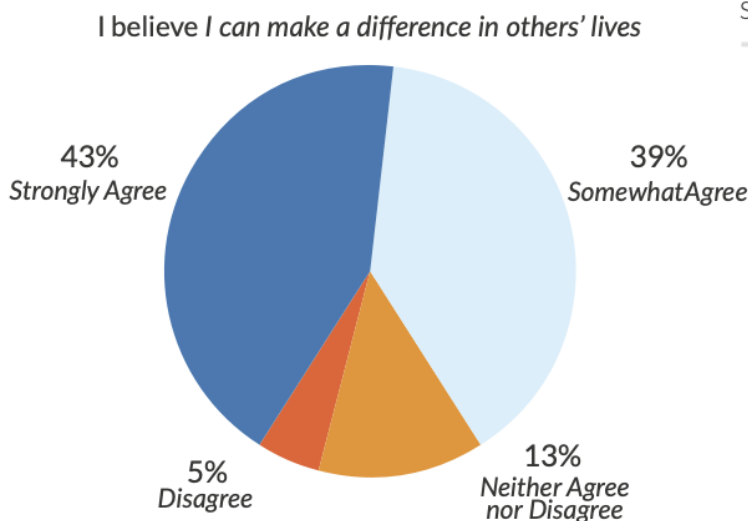
⁵ YoungLife. "RELATE: Knowing and Believing in the Next Generation," 2024, 39.



This generation also has a strong sense that they can make a difference in others' lives, a feeling that was especially pronounced among youth from Africa. This sense of purpose is closely tied to religious identity. And it's not just aspirational—many young people have already taken action. A significant number report being involved in initiatives aimed at addressing issues of justice or suffering (p. 52).

Some of the causes they said are most important to them include:

- Mental health
- Health/disease
- Personal safety
- Climate change
- Job opportunities
- Pollution



Conclusion

The RELATE report concludes on an optimistic note, highlighting that while this generation of young people is deeply connected through technology, they also seek meaningful human connections, value family relationships, and are not overwhelmed by anxiety. They have strong hopes and dreams for the world and are eager to be part of making it better.

At OneHope, we share this belief in the potential of each new generation to advance God's kingdom through love, service, and connection with others. We've enjoyed learning from young people around the world and are inspired to become better listeners to their concerns moving forward. We encourage you to explore the full RELATE [report](#), which offers valuable insights on how to start meaningful conversations, ask thoughtful questions, and be fully present for the young people in your life.





Conversation Starters:

Throughout this report, the authors included a range of questions and prompts designed to start conversations and check in with the young people in your life. Below, we've compiled some of them for you.

- What does it mean to be authentically yourself?
- What do you want to be known for?
- What are some issues that are important to you?
- Why are you concerned about them?
- What would help you feel more yourself in this situation?
- Do you think other kids feel the same way?
- What are you most worried about for the future?

When they are telling you about something they are experiencing:

- Tell me more about that.
- What were you doing when that was happening?
- How did you feel about what was going on?

Here's one idea: Share about your own journey through a visual timeline. Include photos of yourself and different jobs or experiences you tried. Show failures, successes, and how you navigated both. Consider including stories about how you managed your budget and lifestyle at different points; this helps to combat an expectation of instant financial success and comfort and reduces anxiety around making the “wrong” choice. The point of this exercise is to bring to life the considerations, the corrections, and the learnings that took place as you navigated each step of your life's path so that Gen Z can develop a vision for resilience rather than a straight and narrow path that leads only to success or failure.

Additional Resources

[Access the full RELATE report](#)

[Learn more about the RELATE project](#)

[Fuller's summary](#) by one of the research team members

[Quick video summaries of key themes](#)

 **RELATE #1 | Showing Up - Relationships Matter**



 **RELATE #2 | How to Connect with Gen Z**

 **RELATE #3 | Standing Out to Fit In**

 **RELATE #4 | The Empathetic Generation**