

## The Hashtag Generation

Just before school started this year, one of my grandchildren was looking over her supply list. She asked her mom, “What is a *hashtag* 2 pencil?” Her mom looked at her in disbelief! She had no idea that the symbol “#” could stand for “number or pound”. In her world, it always meant *hashtag*! This interaction made me even more aware that our students are viewing our world through a completely different lens! Their understanding, their ideas, and their way of thinking are greatly influenced by living life in a social media world.

Every generation is influenced by culture. This generation of students, known as Generation Z, are experiencing a very different culture than most current adults. They do not remember 9/11 and have only known a world where terrorist attacks are the norm. They’ve never known life without the internet or cell phones; younger Z’s have never known a world without *smartphones*. Google has always existed. They take Wi-Fi for granted. They typically prefer texting and messaging on mobile apps or online platforms over face-to-face communication.

They spend between six and nine hours a day absorbing media, according to a survey from Common Sense Media. Among teens, 92% go online daily, Pew Research reports. Most of this screen time is spent being connected to “social” media, but many teens express that they feel totally disconnected, isolated and are depressed. This generation of students are empathetic self-starters that want to stand out and make a difference in the world. They value uniqueness, authenticity, and creativity. They do not rely on their parents as much as previous teen generations did. One of the reasons for this is that their parents (Gen Xers) repeatedly warned about “helicopter parenting,” have reacted by giving them plenty of space. This hands-off parenting has yielded both pros and cons. On the pro side, Z’s are pretty self-directed and confident. On the con side, they are not necessarily equipped with much real-life wisdom or many boundaries. In an age of cyber-bullying, sexting, and internet porn—not to mention hacking, scams, and identity theft—the consequences can be dangerous. These students look to the internet, rather than trusted adults, for answers to their questions. Their “truth” becomes whatever an online answer provided – regardless of who was doing the answering.

On the positive side, “They’re a hopeful generation, but realistic,” says Josh Branum, family pastor at Faithbridge Church in Jacksonville, Florida. “They see the world for what it is. They’re not afraid, but they’re going into it with their eyes wide open.” Z’s want to make a difference in the world. They’re keenly aware of justice issues concerning poverty, human trafficking, refugees, racism, and more. They want opportunities to have an impact, and they’re likely to become generous givers to charitable organizations as adults.

We are blessed at Westbrook to be able to address the whole child – not just academically, but also spiritually! **The most important thing that we do here is what affects eternity!** That is why we have added a Spiritual Development Coordinator, Mrs. Kelli Croyle, more engaging chapel times, and this year we are adding a new high school Bible curriculum with consistent teachers/advisors. This curriculum is costing more than any other curriculum we have purchased – but it is the only curriculum that has the potential to affect eternity!!! The creators of this curriculum have taken all of the previously mentioned characteristics and through prayer and research have developed a curriculum that has the capacity, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to draw this generation to Christ!

The research tells us that GenZ kids are tired of information! They want interaction, someone to talk to them, believe in them! Appropriate relationships! With Christ as our foundation, the next building block in our school is relationships! We want to lead our students to find their identity in Christ – not in social media or in our upside down culture, but to find the TRUTH expressed in God’s Word.

I want to share some specific ways that we can appropriately influence this generation:

1. Teach and example the art of good communication! Have family dinner together and talk with each other about the events of the day. Teach your student to make eye contact.
2. Have no phone zones. Create times and places in your days/nights when devices are put away - for adults as well as students.
3. Praise your student for the unique way he or she is created. Research together ideas for expressing that uniqueness.

4. Practice what you preach! Live a life of authenticity. Express regret when you mess up.
5. Prayer – We have to fight for this generation with specific prayers for specific needs. Pray with and for your student. Pray that your child will discover their purpose and find what they were created to do. Pray for your child’s teachers and friends who have the opportunity to daily impact them.

“Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.” Nehemiah 4:14b

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Characteristics and quotes are from Facts and Trends. LifeWay. (2018, October 31). 10 Traits of Generation Z. Retrieved from <https://factsandtrends.net/2017/09/29/10-traits-of-generation-z/>

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