

# The Emerging Generation: Looking Forward

Turning 18 is a greatly anticipated event among most teens as they navigate the demands and limitations they are faced with in the teen years. This can be viewed as a rite of passage as well as an open door to independence and freedom. However, what a teen expects things to look like does not always turn into reality. There can be many wonderful opportunities and joys, but there are also many challenges and changes where continual support is needed. An emerging adult is commonly defined as an individual between the ages of 18 and mid-20's. This in-between age is where individuals work to gain a sense of identity, financial stability, and discernment of God's plan for their life, and it is an important generation for all of us to understand and encourage.

## The Challenges

If you have ever sat through a high school graduation ceremony, you have seen firsthand the joy and anticipation in the eyes of graduates as they look to the future. During this ceremony, students are encouraged to go forward with great zeal, motivation, and determination for the tasks that lie ahead. As these students start transitioning to the next phase of their life, most find themselves looking for answers to questions such as Who am I? Who are my friends and supports? What are my goals? What are my values? What is God's plan for my life?

Emerging adults are facing many transitions which can bring about an array of emotions including excitement, fear, worry, and a sense of loss. For some, the decision for college/trade school is an easy, much anticipated transition as it is a time to pursue career goals while connecting with a broader, more diverse group of people. For others this decision may be difficult for a variety of reasons including financial limitations, lack of desire for higher education, or uncertainty about desired next steps. For young adults in the latter category the decision to delay or not go on to further education may bring about a sense of shame, perceived judgement, and a sense of separation from others in their peer group. Other difficult decisions facing this age group include what job to pursue, where to live, what or if they will be part of a church community, and who or when to marry.

Mental health needs can be a concern among this age group as well. Studies indicate around 40% of young adults experience anxiety and depression. Many factors are linked to this rise of mental health needs, ranging from unhealthy lifestyle choices and sleep habits, to the amount of social media or technology consumed. Social media increases the comparison trap and performance pressure which can cause individuals to feel different or not good enough in various aspects of life. Without the right supports in place these mounting pressures can lead to an increased risk of a variety of mental health needs including addiction or suicidal thoughts or actions.

## The Role of Helpers

Some emerging adults seem to manage through this time period with limited difficulty and others seem to face all of these challenges and more. What makes the difference? Is there something that can be done to help the young adults in your life move through these challenges with ease? In order to answer these questions, it is helpful to reflect on what was most helpful for you during these years. Typically, the answer to this includes people who were intentional in their support and encouragement for continued growth. The same is true today as young adults benefit from a community of supportive people who are willing to listen, support, and challenge them.

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As young adults are gaining increased independence and maturity, they have the desire and ability to grow into new roles in their family, church, and community. Young adults play a crucial role in the health and vitality of the church. Parents, Sunday School teachers, and older adults in their lives can play an important role in supporting and encouraging them to be a part of the mission and vision of the church. The Apostle Paul reminds Timothy “*Let no man despise thy youth...*” (1 Timothy 4:12) and this can serve as a good reminder to appreciate the gifts and talents this age group can bring. Feeling needed and valued in a community such as the church can serve as an anchor while navigating the challenges of this time. The following are some things to consider when trying to engage and equip this group of emerging adults.

- **Engage in relationships early on in their life.** It is never too early to start forming relationship with youth in the church. Sundays School teachers have a unique opportunity to connect with youth on a weekly basis to learn about the important things in their life while also building a spiritual foundation. Adults in the church who are willing to take time to engage in service projects, community events, and recreational activities with youth also have the opportunity to develop these relationships and have a positive impact in their lives. Forming relationships is something that takes time but it does not have to be a complicated process; be present, show interest through both actions and words, and be dependable.
- **Be a good listener.** *James 1:19* instructs us to be “... *swift to hear, slow to speak...*” In today’s culture there are so many messages young adults are hearing and trying to discern. They need a safe place to be able to talk through hard conversations regarding faith, church, and present day matters. It is easy to have our own discomfort and emotional reaction to topics like these, but by being willing to simply listen while pointing them back to the Scripture creates a safe, healthy space for young adults to explore these topics.
- **Encourage use of spiritual gifts.** As young adults are forming their identity and making decisions for their life, there is value in helping them steward the spiritual gifts they have and include them in the various missions of the church (1 Peter 4:10). Helping young adults learn about and grow in their spiritual gifts can help them better understand themselves and their place in the church.
- **The strength of hospitality.** *Romans 12:10-15* serves as a reminder of the benefits a church community offers. Rejoicing with young adults in the opportunities that lay ahead and in their accomplishments is just as important as providing empathy and support to them when faced with challenges and unmet expectations. With the young adults in your life, it is important to notice changes in behavior, mood, or even attendance at events and find ways to intentionally connect with them. A friendly face, kind word, an encouraging text, or a warm meal can open up the opportunity for them to step into a place of vulnerability and share their concerns and needs.

Emerging adults are faced with so many opportunities and potential for growth, and as a church family we can help steward them on this path. *Hebrews 10:24* reminds us “*And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works*”. By encouraging and showing support to the young adults in our life, the challenges they will naturally face may seem more manageable as they remain connected to a community of individuals wanting to see them grow into their God-given gifts and abilities.