# Training Seminar

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# Abstract

Technology use and its impact on Generation Z can be seen either as an opportunity or an obstacle among parents. This training seminar will address areas in which parents have a role to play in monitoring technology use and guiding their children to make appropriate choices. Areas of historical relevance, intergenerational ministry, biblical foundation and its formation within the home, proper technology use, and Gospel ways technology is an effective and engaging tool will be discussed. By the end of this seminar, parents will have enough information to focus on the opportunity side of connecting with youth through modern technology while also learning tips on how to best monitor technology use among their children.

*Keywords*: technology, parenting, social media, Generation Z

# Introduction

Navigating the use of technology and raising children is a relatively new phenomenon. As technology such as computers, cell phones, and social media has evolved over the last thirty years, parents have attempted to learn and keep up with the latest trends with something they are learning as they go. Most parents raising members of what is known as Generation Z did not grow up with the technology available today, and they did not learn about any of it from their parents or grandparents. As adults, they were learning the ins and outs of this new technology as it was released. Technology is also rapidly evolving daily, sometimes hourly, and is hard enough to navigate as an adult, let alone parenting about it. Technology use can be seen as an opportunity or an obstacle among parents; sometimes, it combines both.

Generation Z, born approximately between 1997 and 2012, comprises approximately 20.6% of the U.S. population (Duffin, 2022) and is the first post-Christian generation (McKnight, 2021). “Members of Gen Z do not have a point of reference spiritually to biblical truth” (McKnight, 2021, p. 39). William Bernstein (2013) states that Generation Z was born into the fourth great communication revolution—the era of electronic coding of information. Technology shapes Generation Z's worldview. So even if parents do not feel they have technology wholly figured out, they must understand the many facets of technology to communicate with and train their children.

While there is no direction specifically relating to technology in the words of Scripture, there are imperatives given to parents regarding raising children. While the landscape of the Bible may look different today, children are still a gift from the Lord, just as they were thousands of years ago (Psalm 127:3). Parents are instructed to train up their children while they are young so that even when those children become adults they might not depart from what they learned at home (Proverbs 22:6). Parenting in this new digital age is not easy, but it is possible.

**What is Generation Z Saying?**

It might surprise many parents, but Generation Z is very concerned about their technology use. According to Ypulse (2022), Generation Z ranks technology use and social media as the number one and two most significant issues facing their generation. To put this in perspective, Millennials, the generation before Generation Z, ranks technology and social media as numbers four and seven, respectively. Because Generation Z is worried about technology use, they actively seek to do something about it. They are pushing for Big Tech to be held accountable for its part in this digital age, creating healthier usage initiatives, and asking for more restrictions on access (Ypulse, 2022). If those who comprise Generation Z are asking for restrictions, it means they want boundaries, and parents should be participants in this the most. It is no longer possible to blindly give digital access to children just because everyone else is doing it. Parents must take responsibility for what technology they allow their children access.

Generation Z feels like they are always "on" because they are always connected. "The rise of mobile and smart media has seemingly led to a culture of constant contact" (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 54). Teens spend a large percentage of their daily time on the internet, scrolling through social media, texting, and watching videos. "It's not a surprise then that the more time teens spend on social media, the sadder they are and lonelier they feel" (McKnight, 2021, p. 39). If what children see and absorb has this much influence on their mental well-being, parents must be proactive in ensuring children get biblical instruction as well.

God instructed the people to teach their children the words of God's commandments, to talk about them at home, and talk about them when they are walking about so that their children's days might be many (Deuteronomy 11:19, 21). God tasked the Israelite parents to teach their children his word because he knew that it would be good if they walked in obedience. The same is true today. Parents must remember early on to build a solid biblical foundation in the home. If children know their identity is found in Christ, they may be less likely to seek out their identity through comparison on social media.

Parents Need to Set the Example

As mentioned, parents did not grow up with the abundance of technology readily available to teens and young adults today. Parents may have fond memories of playing in the street, riding bikes around town, and not going home until the streetlights came on. Parents today had little access to television and video games, and even the telephone was limited to being connected to a cord. Generation Z today has everything their parents had little access to right at their fingertips.

Many parents of older Generation Z children were using regular or disposable cameras or chunky video camcorders to record their child's first words, steps, and memories. As cellphone technology advanced, phones could easily capture and record images and moments. Furthermore, as social media came on the scene, parents could upload these cute images onto things such as Facebook and Instagram. Prior to storing photos on phones and posting them on social media, parents had to carry photographs in their wallets to show off to people or send photos in the mail to relatives. However, with the dawn of social media, parents had to learn what was acceptable to post and not post on social media. As many people know, social media has taken on a different tone since being first released. Posting photos of one's cute infant or toddler could result in those photos being shared with strangers worldwide who might not have one's best interests at heart. As a result, it has become necessary for people to choose their level of privacy to protect themselves. Adults have to learn to self-monitor before they can teach this to their children.

Many parents today grew up in a culture of "Do as I say, not as I do." However, if one saw their parents drinking, they might think drinking is okay, even if that meant underage drinking. If a parent watches inappropriate movies or uses inappropriate language, a child might think it is okay to do the same. The same is true of technology use. Children are watching what their parents do at all times. Andy Crouch (2017, pp. 27–28) writes, "Children have been competing with their parents' screens for attention their whole lives...Children, teenagers, and young adults are navigating a minefield of potentially life-altering choices, often with strangely little guidance from older adults, who are, after all, glued to their own screens." Parents and leaders have a weighty responsibility to set an example for those entrusted to their care.

Parents and leaders also need to feel comfortable setting limits and boundaries on technology. Both James Emery White (2017) and Andy Crouch (2017) provide similar guidelines as it relates to technology. They suggest:

1. Limiting phone minutes, texts, and online hours. Teach children to not let technology take over their lives.
2. Do not allow cell phones in rooms at night, or at least have them turned off when they are in the bedroom.
3. Set times during the day to have technology-free time.
4. No cell phones at the dinner table — use this time for face-to-face conversations and interaction.
5. Keep all computer use in a public area.
6. Have a pre-determined age for the use of social media. Most social media apps do not allow usage before the age of thirteen. Even then, make sure at least one parent is monitoring social media use and/or a “friend.”
7. Do not allow televisions in bedrooms, especially younger ones.
8. Keep up to date on new social media networks and apps children and teens use and access.

While not every parent or family will utilize all of these suggestions, these ideas are guidelines to assist with what other parents are doing. They may also give a parent the confidence to know they have the ability and authority to make these decisions for their children.

**The Impact of Technology on Generation Z**

Technology encompasses so much more than cellphones, computers, and television, and technology always interrupts and reshapes culture. The arrival of the printing press allowed for the distribution of printed material. Trains, boats, planes, and automobiles transformed how business is conducted, and people can move more freely and frequently in this God-created world. Healthcare technology allows for life-saving procedures and medicine. Unless one lives in a remote jungle or island, technology impacts every facet of daily life. Technology is not inherently flawed because it does good, but not all aspects of technology have the same benefits.

Many are concerned with technology's impact on the developing brain (Baker, 2017). The use of technology, specifically digital technology, impacts personal relationships as people are glued to their phones and not engaging in person-to-person conversation. There is also concern about the increase in sleeplessness and addiction as the constant access and bombardment of notifications trigger a "Pavolovian-type" response (Baker, 2017, p. 119). The growing brain is reshaped by what is fighting for its attention. Children, as young as infants, also face brain development issues as they interact with digital media at early ages.

While the use of digital media is likely to continue to increase, one must find ways to give oneself a break from it and figure out how to navigate it positively rather than negatively. Parents must understand and participate in navigating technology's usage, just as parents must navigate limiting sugar and creating bedtime routines. Allowing a child to instruct the parent on what they will watch and how long goes against the design of parenting as God intended. If children were in charge, God would never have needed to announce the fifth commandment to honor one's mother and father (Exodus 20:12). Parents must stand in the gap for their children and fight for their children's right to a childhood. "If Millenials were raised by overprotective parents then Generation Z is being raised by underprotective parents…When children need to be protected as never before, they are met with a parenting culture that is less protective than at any other time in recent history" (White, 2017, pp. 52–53). Underparenting is dangerous because there is a lot more influence from easily accessible media that influences a child or teen's decisions in the world today. Issues such as sexting, messages from unknown sources, shared videos (some of which vanish quickly but can be saved or screenshot), more accessible access to pornography, and location tracking put children and teens at risk. There is an incessant need to feed the pathways of the cerebral cortex, which produces pleasure, and demands to be fed at increasing levels, often spiraling quickly out of control (Brain, 2015).

Parents of Generation Z could navigate life without many restrictions when they grew up. While it is true back then that a licensed teen driver could drive a distance from one's home and back without anyone being the wiser, today's parents can track a child's location at all times. While some technology may be viewed as harmful, it has many advantages, and many parents today could not live without location-tracking apps. With the increase in parental tracking technology, some children may feel "watched" or stifled as they attempt to spread their wings. While many would argue this is simply a part of parenting and not overparenting, it can also be an opportunity to teach children about the omnipresence of God.

It is much harder for a child to grasp that God is always watching (Proverbs 15:3) because they cannot physically see God and because a child knows a parent cannot watch at all times. For instance, if a parent is not at home or a child is in their room alone, parents do not have eyes on the child. However, navigating the current technology landscape is a reminder and case-in-point to teach children that "big brother" is always watching. In most places in America, cameras record activity at all times. There are cameras posted on roadways and intersections, cameras on residences, cameras inside stores, and cameras in almost everyone's hands. Small, immature acts of childhood or the teen years can forever be captured and shared over and over. Unlike in the past, these momentary lapses in judgment that might have only seared the conscious may forever alter a child's life. Technology in an untrained hand is similar to handing a child a weapon and playing Russian roulette with them. It may not be the first, second, or third lapse of judgment that causes a problem, but it could be the fourth. Parents must be responsible with their own technology use and then model that behavior well for the children or grandchildren they are raising. It is the parent's job, not society's, to shape the child's worldview. In a Christian family, it must always begin with a biblical worldview.

**The Need for Intergenerational Conversations**

Parents of Generation Z are tasked with helping this generation run their best race. "Hebrews 12:1–2 reminds us that we are surrounded by those who have faithfully carried the torch and who are witnesses to God's work throughout history" (Erlacher & White, 2022, pp. 40-41). It is imperative to know the purpose of all generations, the current generation's issues, and generational differences. One should also be reminded to learn about and know Generation Z through the lens of a shepherd. While Generation Z may appear to be self-navigating and self-assured, they are sheep needing a shepherd who knows the way.

While today's society has the most available information in history at its fingertips, society is slowly losing the art of passing down oral traditions, stories, and instruction. "The decline of social structures previously important as 'meaning makers' in the lives of young people, including the decline of the church as a social institution, has contributed to reduced supportive frameworks" (Brain, 2015, p. 106). As family structure changes and is redefined, families struggle, and many children no longer have the stability they desire. This instability creates physiological stress, which impacts personality, emotion, and connectedness.

Parents are to be the primary discipler of their children. Parents should not relegate this duty to pastors or youth pastors (McKnight, 2021). If parents and grandparents are not regularly discussing the Bible with their children, culture will dictate what a child should believe. However, one can no longer say, "Because the Bible says so," because today's youth have a different authority structure (Bock & Del Rosario, 2020). As mentioned, the family structure is being challenged, redefined, and diminished. "Not all parents are actively involved in the lives of their children. According to research, only three in five members of Gen Z live in a house with two married parents" (Callison, 2022, p. 51). Single-parent homes are on the rise, older generations are dying off, and stories are not being shared. Where a child may have relied on the advice and guidance of grandparents who may have been rooted in the Word in the past, Generation Z obtains information from more than familial sources today. A parent or leader must present issues to children intentionally by showing them why they should care and what God has to say about it in the first place. Parents need to remember not to compartmentalize their faith so their children will not. Compartmentalizing faith is a driving force behind Generation Z leaving the church. It is imperative to help them discover "why and how God's moral commands matter to their lives" (Bock & Del Rosario, 2020, p. 489).

**Guiding Generation Z to Use Technology for Good**

Because modern technology will only continue to increase, one must learn to navigate it responsibly and purposefully. Many people might believe that our current society is the first to face technology and its impact on the Bible. However, Christianity and technology have been deeply connected throughout history (Campbell & Garner, 2016, p. 24). Technology and the church have grown and thrived through oral traditions and communication turned into written texts. If one only sees the negative aspects of technology without seeing the positive aspects, one might miss out on the potential to use technology for good and God's glory.

As the world witnessed, the COVID pandemic changed the world. For periods of time, people were forced to stay home, stay isolated, not go to work, not see friends, not go to school, not go to church, and not conduct routine day-to-day tasks. Many people became depressed. Brian Barcelona, a youth evangelist, writes about his struggles during the COVID lockdown in his book, *Don't Scroll: Evangelism in the Digital Age* (2022). Before the pandemic, Brian Barcelona traveled and spoke to youth and school groups. He began what is called "Jesus Clubs" on high school campuses.

Although Barcelona is a well-sought speaker and sold-out follower of Christ, prior to the pandemic, he was not actively engaged in the digital space related to youth evangelism. So, when the pandemic hit, he became depressed because he felt as though his ministry was done. He contemplated quitting. However, it was a teenager, a member of Generation Z, who opened his eyes to digital missions. Barcelona believes, "Digital missions are the last line of defense against the spirit of this age" (Barcelona, 2022, p. 61).

If digital missions are the tool God will use via phones and apps in people's pockets, every person, parents and children alike, must be fully engaged. Because parents are to be the ones to model behavior for their children, parents should be the ones leading the charge in the area of digital missions. No longer are people required to travel abroad to share the Gospel; it can now be done wherever one is simply by the push of a few buttons.

Digital media is the way in which the youth of today communicate. Gen Z, sometimes referred to as *iGen* "spends more time on their cell phones, tablets, laptops, and computers than any other generation of students in the country…They spend more time on their screens than they do in face-to-face communications" (McKnight, 2021, pp. 38–39). If what children are typing and watching on their phones and computers is not filtered through the correct lens, it can negatively impact their mood and their social life. Reminding children of scriptures such as Proverbs 21:23, “Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity,” and Titus 3:2, “to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.” While these verses referred to speech during biblical times, they are still applicable today as it relates to what people type on social media or send via text or email. Just because one does not physically speak the words does not mean they do not impact someone’s life. Parents must continually teach and remind their children to speak words of life and encouragement or to hold one’s tongue if necessary. Children today want to be heard; culture tells them they deserve to be heard. It is up to parents to help children navigate healthy ways to voice their thoughts and opinions that respect authority and uplift others.

**Conclusion**

Parents today are navigating new waters relating to parenting children who are considered digital natives. The children of Generation Z have not known the technology they have today, but the parents raising them have. Generations to come will continue to build upon the technology created during Generation Z’s formative years. Therefore, Generation Z could be the generation that sets the standard for properly living with and navigating ever-changing technological advances. Parents and leaders should not speak negatively about Generation Z’s technology use, especially if parents, grandparents, and leaders are also excessively consuming and utilizing the same technology without modeling good behavior.

There is always a gap between older generations and younger generations (Callison, 2022). Some generations may have more changes than others, and this current Generation Z has a more significant gap than in the recent past due to the explosion of technology. However, the older generations must react with compassion to the younger generations and help them navigate the battle between God’s word and culture. James Emery White (2022, p.11 ) states, “As the first truly post-Christian generation, and numerically the largest, Generation Z will be the most influential religious force in the West and the heart of the missional challenge facing the Christian church.” Parents and leaders should pray that the religious force that is present does not move farther away from God but toward him. Older generations must learn to engage Generation Z where they are; often, Generation Z is online and on their phone. That is where they will need to be met and have truth exposed to them to counteract the lies found within the culture.

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