



Twelve Tips for Parenting in the Digital Age



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Who is iGen?

Kids between the ages of 6 and 23 fall into a generation now getting labeled Post-Millennial or Gen Z or iGen. I want to introduce you to the research on this generation, then process the implications for pastors, leaders, and parents: How do we steward teens in the digital age?

To be honest, I don't know which sin is worse: the arrogance of speaking in generalities about an entire generation, or the sin of ignoring data-trends. With God's help, we can avoid both.

iGen is a recent label given to those born between 1995 and 2012. It is 74 million Americans, or 24% of the population, and the most diverse generation in American history. It is also the most digitally connected and

smartphone-addicted generation. iGen'ers were born after the Internet was commercialized in 1995. They have no pre-Internet memories. Each entered (or will enter) adolescence in the age of the smartphone. As parents, we face many challenges in shepherding these teens in the digital age.

Trends Among Teens

Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, has written the most systematic study about iGen. She ran the datasets, conducted the interviews, and has now voiced her concerns — first published in a feature article for the Atlantic, under the bombshell title “[Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?](#)” The article was an excerpt from the book that soon followed, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*.

If Tom Hanks represented a generation in the movie *Big* — children impatient for adulthood — iGen is the exact opposite: children with the ability to postpone all transitions into adulthood.

Twenge's extensive study summarizes the observations: iGen'ers are safe. They are the first generation to grow up with active shooter drills at school since kindergarten. They are the most protected generation by parents. By preference, they are the most self-cloistered generation of teens. Taking all the evidence together, iGen teens are more likely to be homebodies. Compared to previous generations, iGen teens are *statistically less likely* to go to parties, to go on dates, to get their driver's licenses, to drink alcohol, to smoke tobacco, to ride in a car without a seat belt, or to experiment with sex.

Now many of these trends are good, and we should celebrate the turning away from foolish behavior. But as Twenge says, taken together, these trends offer a portrait of behaviors that mark a generation of delayed adulthood and prolonged adolescence.

Five Marks of iGen

Along with this delayed adulthood and prolonged adolescence, the iGen is marked by a few other things:

1. They are smartphone natives.

According to one [study](#), the average age for children getting their first smartphone in the U.S. is now 10.3 years old. Many of these phones are hand-me-downs from mom or dad, but between 12- to 17-year-olds, nearly [80%](#) identify as smartphone users.

2. They are always online.

iGen'ers are spending less time working jobs, volunteering, engaged in student activities, and doing homework. The result: they're spending massive amounts of time at home and online. They're virtually never offline — driven to their devices by social promise, by friendships, and by relationships.

3. They are secularizing.

Among iGen, about 1 in 4 do not attend religious services or practice any form of private spirituality. “iGen’ers are more likely than any generation before them to be raised by religiously unaffiliated parents” (Twenge, 121). Obviously there are many believers in this generation, but 1 of 4 is thoroughly secularized.

4. They perceive one another through fractured bits.

Using a skill Clive Thompson calls “ambient awareness,” it turns out that teens are good at taking little fractured fragments of social media — discrete images, texts, tweets — and fitting those bits into a better understanding of one another (*Smarter Than You Think*, 209–244). For me, it feels weird to connect someone’s online life to their real life when I meet them in person. Teens are more natural at this. Though separated, through screens they connect through this ambient awareness. They learn about one another, digitally, in fragments.

5. They are woke.

Twenge argues that Millennials are, at heart, optimists. iGen’ers, who grew up during The Great Recession, are more pessimistic, more sensitive to social tension, and more compelled to protect anyone they believe to be vulnerable. As we’ve seen, they can act on this woke-ness, too, evidenced in the Parkland rally, the March for Our Lives, the National School Walkout Day, and the #NeverAgain movement. iGen’ers may be homebodies, but they can rally. (Of course, this is not without layers of problems, as teens can get used to push the political agendas of adults, as pointed out in Alan Jacobs’s recent piece, “*Contemporary Children’s Crusades*”). Nevertheless, iGen’ers are socially woke, and this will play a major role in the 2020 election, as it shapes how pastors and parents interact with this generation.

What Challenges Does iGen Face?

By far, the most concerning takeaway from Twenge’s research, and confirmed by others, is the spike in teen depression. Between 2012 and 2015 — in just three years — depression among boys rose 21%, and depression among girls rose 50%. These upticks are reflected in suicide rates. “After declining during the 1990s and stabilizing in the 2000s, the suicide rate for teens has risen again. Forty-six percent more 15- to 19-year-olds committed suicide in 2015 than in 2007, and two and a half times more 12- to 14-year-olds killed themselves” (Twenge, 110).

It is “the paradox of iGen: an optimism and self-confidence online that covers a deep vulnerability, even depression, in real life,” writes Twenge (102), going so far as to say, “It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones” ([source](#)).

Who is iGen? They are woke. They have ambient awareness. They appear confident online. They are never offline. Technology conveniently buffers and brokers their relationships. And technology feeds their

loneliness and the toxic comparison that hollows meaning from their lives. Parents know most of this. They saw these problems long before we had books about iGen.

Twelve Tips for iGen Parents

When talking about teens and screens — or “screenagers” — we need to get concrete. So let me offer twelve practical suggestions to stir into the discussions you’re already having in your churches and homes.

1. Delay social media as long as possible.

Social media poses a dilemma. Journalist Nancy Jo Sales wrote a fascinating (and frightening) book titled: *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*. There she recounts a conversation when one teen girl said to her, “Social media is destroying our lives.” Then Sales asked her, “So why don’t you go offline?” The teen responded, “Because then we would have no life” (Sales, 18). Social media is where teens look for life, and it’s what costs them their lives. We must help our kids see this paradox. Social media, unwisely abused, will cost them something precious.

2. Delay smartphones as long as possible.

Once you introduce your child to a mobile-connected smartphone, with texting and apps like Instagram and Snapchat, parental controls are virtually futile. I’ll offer one example of how this plays out.

Your kids can be exposed to sexualized conversations and nude selfies and you may never know it. Again, in her book, Sales investigates the troubling phenomenon of girls receiving unsolicited nude selfies from boys in texts, often as a first step of showing interest in them. And boys often ask the girls for nudes in return. Obviously, we must warn our kids of this phenomenon before it happens. But there are virtually no parental filters to prevent a nude selfie from arriving on your child’s smartphone via text or Snapchat, even if your child does not ask for them. And 47% of teens use Snapchat, a premiere app to send and receive expiring images and “throwaway selfies.” In the smartphone age, sexting has become “normative” to the teen years. These are potent devices. Resist the pressure to give your kid one. And don’t leave old phones around.

3. Inside the home, take control of the wifi.

In our home the default is to keep wifi off until needed. Many routers allow you to pause service in a home. I’ve been impressed with a device called “The Circle,” which sits beside our router at home, and gives me the power to cut off the wifi entirely, or to a specific device, based on content filters, ratings, time limits, and bedtimes. It breaks a wifi connection between the router and the device or computer. Instead of setting up parental controls on each device, you can control the flow of data to every device. It’s brilliant. In fact, I can pause the wifi at home with my phone — our 2 smartTVs, 3 computers, iPods, iPads — all disconnected from wifi with one button, from here. When a child in our home wants to use the computer, they make a request

and explain why they need it. More can be said here, but it's a small way to help them to bring clear purpose to tech use, all made possible because the wifi is not always on.

4. Outside the home, connect without smartphones.

For ages 6–12, consider something like the Verizon Gizmo watch. The Gizmo is a smartwatch, with speakerphone, that receives and makes calls to a limited number of phone numbers set by the parent. It has a GPS locator built in for the parent to see via an app on the parent's phone.

Parents want phone technology to deliver three things: (1) to call their kids whenever, (2) to be called by their kid whenever, and (3) to know where their kid is via GPS. You don't need a smartphone. The Gizmo offers each of these things, and not much more — which is a good thing. Ask your mobile carrier for the latest options to meet these three criteria. And for ages 13+, consider a flip phone. They are inexpensive, and in many cases you lose GPS, but ask around for a phone with only the features you want. And be prepared for cellular salespeople to look at you like you're an alien. As my wife says, go into the store of your mobile provider and ask the salesman for the “dumbest phone they have.”

5. Stairstep technology over the years.

I think the most common mistake parents make is in assuming that the smartphone is an isolated gadget. It's not. The smartphone is the culmination of all the communications technology a child has been introduced to from birth. To be given a smartphone is a sort of graduation from several steps of technology mapped out beforehand.

Here's how my wife and I outline those steps: Once you take control over the home wifi — that's crucial — then you can begin to introduce technology that your kids can only use inside your home. On paper draw a big box. On the top-left side, write age 0, and on the top-right side, write age 18. Left to right, this is your child's first 18 years with technology. Now, draw stairs diagonally from the bottom-left to the top-right. At some early point, you might introduce a tablet with coloring and educational games. Age 3 maybe. Or 5. Or 8. Whenever. One stair up. Then you introduce a tablet with educational videos, maybe age 6. Next step up. Then at some point you introduce a family computer in the living room for writing projects. Maybe age 10. Step up. Then you will introduce a phone like the Gizmo, or a flip phone. Step up. Then you allow Google searches on the computer, for research. Maybe age 12. Step up. Then perhaps at some point you introduce Facebook or messenger apps to connect with a few select friends, from the computer. Step up. And then comes the capstone, the smartphone — the final step up. Age 15 or 16 or 17 or I would suggest, 18. But you decide.

The advantages to this are twofold:

(1) You can accordion out the steps as needed while also showing your child where the smartphone fits into a digital trajectory you've set for him. As he proves reliable and wise on wifi in the home, he is stepping toward mobile outside the home. It shows him that being faithful in small things leads to faithfulness in big things.

(2) It also reminds parents that once you give a child a smartphone with a mobile data plan, you move from having strong parental control over your child's Internet experience to virtually having none. You can draw a

bold black line between all the steps on the left (wifi at home) and the smartphone on the right (mobile web everywhere). That's a graduation — a major transition.

6. As a blanket rule, for all ages and all devices: Keep screens out of bedrooms.

Or, at the very least for 12 hours, like from between 8pm to 8am. Make a set rule here. No TVs, gaming devices, tablets, laptops, or phones. Break off the endless social demands. Break gaming addictions. Preserve sleep patterns. Make sure all devices are charged overnight in one place, not in a child's room. A simple charging station in mom and dad's room is a good solution.

7. Write a smartphone contract.

When you move to the smartphone, write a contract of expected behaviors, curfews, and family expectations that come along with the phone. Have your child share their login info. And get familiar with the steps necessary to temporarily pause or deactivate the phone. Most carriers make this easy. For parents who made the mistake of introducing a smartphone too soon, as well, it's never too late to set in place a phone contract.

8. Watch how each child responds to the digital age.

This has been so fascinating for me. My wife and I have three iGen'ers, including two teens, and each of them uses digital media completely differently. I have one kid who will endlessly watch every Dude Perfect video 40 times and waste hours. I have another child who will buy a new music instrument, watch 30 minutes of YouTube, and master the basic chords without any paid lessons. She's done this with the ukulele, then the keyboard, and then the clarinet, and those introductions led to formal training classes. I'm fascinated by YouTube's power to unlock new tactile skills in my kids — and quite frankly, I want my kids to learn from YouTube tutorials as soon as possible, but not until they are ready.

Each child responds differently. Some teens will want social media so that they can follow 5,000 people. Other kids will want social media so that they can follow 5 close friends. Those are radically different uses. Parent each child uniquely based on what you see in them. And when your kids claim unfairness, refer back to the stairsteps, and explain why each child in the home is on different steps in the same progression.

9. Re-center parenting on the affections.

Smartphones do not invent new sins; they simply amplify every extant temptation of life, and manifest those temptations in pixels on HiDef surfaces. Old temptations are given new levels of attraction and addiction and accessibility. Which means that the tension and anxiety parents feel in the pit of their stomachs in the digital age comes from the realization that we are waging an all-out war for the affections of our teenagers. This is

what's so frightening. Parenting has always been a war for our kids' affections, but the digital age exposes our parental laziness more quickly.

If our teens cannot find their highest satisfaction in Christ, they are going to look for it in something else. That message has always been relevant — it just comes like a hammer today because the “something else” is manifested in smartphone addictions. We are not just playing word games, or just saying that Christ is superior on Sunday. We are daily pleading with the Holy Spirit to open the hearts of our teens. They must treasure Christ above every trifle of the digital age or those trifles will overtake them. That's why parenting seems so urgent today.

10. Take up digital discipleship.

It is not enough to isolate a handful of Proverbs and scatter them like general seeds of wise counsel. Discipling teens in the digital age requires all of Scripture planted and cultivated in all of the heart. And this is because we are dealing with all the facets of what the heart wants. This war for the affections in the digital age holds unprecedented new opportunities for discipling teens, *if* we can move from temptation to biblical text to Christ. This is our challenge.

Our parental passivity has been exposed in the digital age. I will not belabor this point, because that's what my book does in taking 12 ways that our phones change us (and de-form us) and then showing us how to be re-formed from Scripture. Once we as parents (and pastors) are humble to self-criticize our own smartphone abuse, then we can turn and help our kids, too. The digital age is scary and exhausting, but it opens up phenomenal new opportunities to disciple teens.

11. As a family, redeem dinners, car rides, and vacations.

Make the dinner table and car rides together and family vacations phone-free zones. I am regularly amazed how the pressures of life get voiced at the dinner table. Unhurried time together, decompressing from the day, is very fruitful. What happened at school? Getting to know my kids happens so often at dinner. This fellowship carries over in more intense ways on family vacations.

12. Keep building the church.

The stats are in: iGen is now the loneliest generation in America — lonelier than the 72+ demographic. Twenge believes smartphones *cause* iGen loneliness. But perhaps it's wiser to look at larger phenomena predating the iPhone.

Surround yourself with enough technology, enough machines, and you'll need nobody else. Get the right gadget, and you can do anything. Dozens of sci-fi novels have already walked out a robot-saturated planet to its furthest consequences and it is pure social isolation (e.g. Asimov's The Naked Sun). But once the tech age has rendered everyone else unnecessary to you, *you* soon discover that *you* have been rendered unnecessary to everyone else.

When no one needs you, we see catastrophic spikes in social loneliness. iGen teens feel this. The elderly feel this. Midlife men feel this. And into this age of increasing isolation and loneliness, social media “offers a rootless remedy for diseases incident to rootless times” (Kass, 95). The smartphone becomes a “painkiller” — promising to solve our loneliness problem, but only cloaking the pain for another moment.

The greatest need of our teens today is not new restrictions and new dumb phones and contracts and limits. Their greatest need is a community of faith where they can thrive in Christ, serve, and be served. They need to find a necessary place as a legitimate part of a healthy church. Keep building faithful families and churches. Listen to teens. Don’t mock them. Don’t laugh at them. Envision them for risk-taking mission — online and offline.