

GENERATION ALPHA: DIAPERS, TRAINING WHEELS, AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Sherri Uhrig

ABSTRACT

Marketing researchers have invested their time and study into quantifying the purchasing power of the spending patterns of Millennials and Gen Z. Now they are shifting their focus to the newest big spenders: The Alphas—the children of the Millennials. This new generation is barely out of diapers and most do not even have their permanent teeth, much less a wallet. Yet researchers are targeting the spending power of this new generation. This chapter looks at the effects of Millennial parents, who are entering their prime spending years, to the exciting possibilities the Alpha generation will have on the future of evangelism. Consideration is given to how to reach this amazing generation with the Gospel message, and watch as the Gospel circles our world, at lightning speed, through the technology of the Alphas!

THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

Generation Z, or my preferred term, “the iTech Generation,” has grown up fast! They are still and will continue to change the world! The oldest have started adulthood. Right behind them is the new generation that has the intense focus of market researchers. Gen Z was once called “bellwethers” now the title of “trend setters” belongs to Generation Alpha—the tech-savvy children of the Millennials!

The data and research are still in their infancy regarding Generation Alpha—those born starting in 2010. The oldest has been in school for at least a year and the youngest

are, well, they are being born this very second. Generation Alpha began the same year the Apple iPad debuted! This doesn't foreshadow Generation Alpha's trajectory; this is their reality! “By 2025, which is the year when the youngest Alphas are born, Generation Alpha will account to 2 billion of the global population. And is considered to be the most technological-infused demographic up to date” (Anastasiades 2019). They are the first generation born entirely within the 21st century. Technology is their life!

According to Strauss and Howe (1997, 79), “Your generation isn't like the generation that shaped you, but it has much in common with the generation that shaped the generation that shaped you.” Because this generation is still using the pacifier or just experiencing their first years in school we must first look at the history of previous generations to see where Generation Alpha is headed, and the common thread they share with generations past.

My thesis is that technology shapes us more than any other factor. Technology, throughout the recent generations, has shaped each generation more than specific historical events of that generation. Baby Boomers had Woodstock, Baby Busters were “Latch Key Children,” and Millennials grew up with “9-11 Awareness.” But while historical markers, economic hardships, tragedies, wars, and significant people certainly impact us, but we are shaped and defined by technology. Threading through one generation after another, technology has shaped the way we experience those events more than the events themselves.

According Dr. Rick Chromey (2019) via phone interview,

It's through technology that we experience events and times. Without the printing press (and literacy), we had no idea what happened in the world. Man lived completely local, his life revolved around family. Without a photograph, we'd have only artists renditions of reality. Think van Gogh. The motion picture allowed us to see the world beyond our community. The radio brought that world into our home through entertainment, sports and news. Television made it even more personal adding image to the sounds. The “live broadcast,” thanks to rocket, space, and satellite technology, allowed us to instantly experience life globally. The cell phone flattened communication to anytime and anywhere. The Internet flattened hierarchies in information and authority. It decentralized control. Wikipedia and Google put “truth” at our fingertips. Facebook redefined “friendship.” Twitter created mi-

cro-communication. YouTube made every person a newsperson, film producer and internet personality.

Technology is the “thread” that connects each generation with other generations. Technology has *shaped* who we are as a generation of peoples. Chromey continued (2019), “Without technology, we wouldn’t be AWARE. Without awareness, we wouldn’t CHANGE. Without change, we wouldn’t Grow. And without growth we would have no DEFINITION/SHAPE” (emphasis mine).

The Millennials and Gen Z are “connected at the hip” to their smart devices. Artificial Intelligence, robotics and holograms are being perfected. Furthermore, these two generations are being “watched” at all times. Gen Z was watched from birth by teddy bear babycams and as they grew to school age; by cameras in the classroom to provide for their safety; the Fitbit is informing the Millennials their fitness status and when it’s time to “step it up.” Alexa is practically their best friend and AR (Augmented Reality) is the norm. “Find My Friend” type apps show their friends and families where they are, and, coming soon, what they are doing and why, and maybe even if they are hungry! And don’t forget the watching eye of Facebook!

All of this technology and much more will be gifted to Generation Alpha to fix, tweak, improve, and take to the next level—literally “out of the world”! The designation Generation Alpha falls short of who they are. I like to refer to them as the RoboGen—a much more informative and robust name of who they are and who they will become. They will engage in three primary technologies in their lifetime: holograms, artificial intelligence, and robotics, and they seem destined to be the “super smart” kids! The most educated, the most “self”-taught, and the most secure with technology.

ROBOGEN

Look who the parents of RoboGen are—the Millennials. And as Gen Z moves into parenthood, they also will share parenting of RoboGen. RoboGen is being raised by two generations of tech-savvy parents. As such, they will get much of their parenting advice, medical advice, dinner advice, and faith development advice from online sources.

Destined to be the “smartest” generation, RoboGen faces some serious challenges ahead. Many doctors urge *parents* to keep their toddlers away from handheld devices. Research has revealed that overexposure to online devices, such as iPads and smartphones, can lead to *attention deficit* disorders. The frantic pace of the Internet can

result in the brain’s pruning neuronal tracts to the frontal lobe, an area that regulates emotion (Sowell, Thompson, Tessner, and Toga 2001, 8820). The findings can be alarming. Expect more tantrums due to a lack of self-regulation by toddlers who frequently engage with technology. Take away those devices and, according to Dr. Richard Graham who oversees a technology addiction program, you’ll see the same withdrawal symptoms you would in addicts of alcohol or even heroin. Add longitudinal studies and you can expect depression and bipolar disorder for young people who spent too much time online (Barron 2015). This is serious! Excess screen time, anything more than one hour a day for three- to five-year-olds, is linked to attention deficit disorders, self-regulation issues, depression, and bi-polar disorders.

RoboGen will be and are advanced in their understanding and savvy navigation of technology, which leads them to be the technology “interrupters” and “helpers” for their parents and grandparents. We have all said something like, “If you want to know something about technology just ask the kids!” This savviness can also make kids more susceptible to the negative aspects readily available through technology, such as pornography addiction and gaming addiction. Surprisingly, the age a child first sees internet pornography is, on average, 11 years of age. Kids don’t have to be looking for pornography; it is programmed to find them.

Thousands of apps target babies! Parents download multiple apps for their technology smart babies! Put a baby in the highchair and give them an iPad it doesn’t take them long to swipe right to engage in a baby game. Looking back at childhood merely 10 years ago shows an alarming transformation of the young with this technology. The RoboGen has *always* had access to swipe the screen with their finger to draw or engage with a game or movie.

EVANGELISM AND THE ROBOGEN

We hear repeatedly that the average attendance in a local church is drastically on the decline globally! What does that mean to the Robogen (Alpha generation) raised by parents of the Millennial generation who consider evangelism relatively unimportant and possibly even wrong. Let’s take a quick look at some percentages that affect evangelism and the RoboGen. We find that 30% of the world’s population is under the age of 15, and 70% of children are born into non-Christian homes. In North America 40 million children have not heard the Gospel, which is horrifying when we realize 85% of all Christians accept

Christ before the age of 14 (Child Evangelism Fellowship 2020). Yet in spite of such dire statistics, never in the history of ministry has there also been such an opportunity to help a whole generation circle the world with the Gospel message, and to do so with lightning speed!

SUMMARIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **RoboGen is all about technology.** They will most likely be somewhat solitary (with their device), causing them to miss out on connecting with real, live people. Plan: Provide opportunities to be relationally connected to caring leaders and other kids. Create an environment in which they are known, valued and experience care.
- **RoboGen communicates via images.** Typing and texting have given way to visual images and voice control. Plan: Don't be afraid to have a tech-free Sabbath School or Children's event! Give RoboGen a break from technology. Bring back games like Connect 4, hopscotch, Legos, art, aquariums, and books. Connect group games and activities to the Bible focus. And use lots of images.
- **RoboGens get bored very quickly.** They will check out in five minutes or less when you're using only verbal communication in your program. Plan: Keep things moving and change what you're doing every five minutes or so. Stay away from the "talking head" that drones on and on.
- **With the rise of ADD in this generation use repetition.** Plan: Use several different modalities, repeating the points you want them to take to heart.

- **Talk their language.** Learn and experience the technology they use.
- **Help RoboGen understand that it's not all about them.** Their culture caters to all their needs and wants. Their life from birth has been splashed all over Facebook. Social media is their stage. Plan: Provide authentic opportunities to serve others and help them see the difference they make. Point them to Jesus!
- **Pray for your own relationship with Jesus.** In this way you can show RoboGen the joy of knowing and loving Jesus!

RoboGen is not going to believe something just because you said so or because they're supposed to. They won't necessarily look to you as an authority since they were born with Google and Wikipedia. As mentors and facilitators of this generation's spiritual growth, we need to be present and come along-side them as they explore their faith, ask difficult questions, and grapple with the complexity of developing a true and authentic faith. We need to be there as they deal with a world that has gone crazy, and sometimes that "crazy" is in their own backyard!

This generation has great potential to be agents of change for the Kingdom! It is our privilege *and* mandate from God to guide them to be "doers of the Word," and to embrace their enthusiasm as they say, like Jesus did when he was twelve years of age, "I must be about my Father's business!"

Sherri Uhrig, MA in Children's and Family Ministries, serves as the North American Division Children's Ministries Director. She lives in Laurel, Maryland with her husband, Bob, who is a bereavement counselor and chaplain.

REFERENCES

- Anastasiades, Tassos. 2019. "Educating Alpha Kids." Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/educating-alpha-kids-dr-tassos-anastasiades/>.
- Barron, Carrie. 2015. "How Technical Devices Influence Children's Brains." Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-creativity-cure/201505/how-technical-devices-influence-childrens-brains>.
- Chromey, Rick. 2019. Phone interview by Sherri Uhrig April 16, 2019.
- Chromey, Rick. 2020. *GenTech: An American Story of Technology, Change, and Who We Really Are (1900-Present)*. New York: Morgan James Publishing.

Fellowship, Child Evangelism. 2020. "Why Did We Create the Illustrated Bible?" Accessed May 5, 2020. <https://www.freeillustratedbible.com/why-we-created-the-illustrated-bible.html>.

Sowell, Elizabeth R, Paul Thompson, Kevin D. Tessner, and Arthur W. Toga. 2001. "Mapping Continued Brain Growth and Gray Matter Density Reduction in Dorsal Frontal Cortex: Inverse Relationships During Postadolescent Brain Maturation." *The Journal of Neuroscience* 21 (December, 2001): 8820. Quoted in Carrie Barron, "How Technical Devices Influence Children's Brains" *Psychology Today*, May 18, 2015.

Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 1996. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584-2069*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 1997. *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*. New York: Broadway Books.