

YOUTH AND SOCIAL ISSUES

LIKE TWO peas in a pod, like hand-in-glove, or perhaps more like fire and dynamite, “youth” and “social issues” often pair in multiple arenas. How appropriate that the 180° Symposium, created by the Center for Youth Evangelism at Andrews University, and sponsored by the Youth and Young Adult Ministries Department of the North American Division, chose the theme: Gen Z and Social Issues: Real. Deal. Heal.

The term “Youth” conjures up a variety of images as well as age ranges. For the purposes of this symposium and book, it primarily refers to the teen years. More narrowly, one could limit this to the high school years. In a broader sense, it could stretch into the college years and may even begin in the pre-teen lead-up to adolescence. Some of these issues could easily carry over to young adults, although it would be in a more nuanced and refined manner since most young adults find themselves navigating a very different stage of life than youth. A teen’s social issue might continue into young adulthood, although it could be already addressed or fade in significance by that time.

CHANGES

As youth “come of age” during their teen years, the changes they experience make them prime candidates for engaging in social issues. Changes impact their individual and interacting physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual realms.

Physically, the onset of puberty includes noticeable differences as primary and secondary sexual characteristics develop and mature. While the reality of puberty is predictable, when or how long it proceeds remains unpredictable—varying from one person to another. This reverberates in social and psychological well-being, or lack thereof. On average, females begin this a couple of years before males. But average might not correctly describe you or your child.

Unfairly, females who reach puberty early often experience the disadvantage of arresting the attention of older males who prize the younger females’ physical traits more than deeper qualities. Conversely, males who reach puberty early usually find it advantageous because they

are given more opportunities and experience increasing strength and power physically, socially, and emotionally. On the flip side, females who reach puberty later many times experience a longer-term advantage because they are more likely to develop other skills and qualities beyond the physical. But males who experience puberty late often feel left behind, stuck in boyhood while everyone else seems to have matured. For teens who have reached puberty, the role of children must be replaced with something more advanced. Social issues provide one forum to prove this.

The physical changes in the brain include the ability to think in new ways, although sound judgment, impulse control, and long-term planning are more likely to develop after their teen years. One obvious characteristic of new brain activity is the renewal of asking “Why?” to just about everything. While two-year-olds ask out of curiosity and to keep an older person’s attention, a teen asks due to a desire to discover or to challenge authority. Because a teen’s brain becomes capable of new ideas, information received earlier can be processed differently. It’s possible that what was spoken to them previously can now be comprehended as though they are hearing it for the very first time. “You never told me that before,” might more accurately be stated, “You may have said that sometime in the past, but this is the first time I understand it.” Social issues can replace the childhood playground with a more adult playground of ideas, debate, and action.

An enlarging sphere of influence takes teens beyond the social circle of their family. The amount of time spent at school dwarfs the hours at home, and certainly the time spent with family members who rarely are home. Additional voices challenge the instilled beliefs and values that caring parents most likely planted deep in the child’s early years. A teen’s peer group might become more dominant than one’s childhood instruction. A new significant adult role model might temporarily replace the font of wisdom previously occupied by a parent. Ironically, a strong family background might provide a foundation of strength from which a teen readily departs because of the confidence already established. After pouring years of instruction and training into their child, parents may seem surprised when their teen feels competent to enter other social spheres beyond the family. When it comes to social issues, a teen might go beyond the perspectives their parents espouse and even the topics broached. A social issue can create a social bond among advocates rallying for

their particular cause, which can lead to increased participation and engaging together in other parts of life as well. The emotional upheaval commonplace among teens stems from radical as well as subtle changes. The capacity of experiencing new emotions and increased intensity turbocharges interactions as well as isolation. Infatuation, life-or-death potency, and varying time periods for emotions enable teens to jump on board as well as jump ship for any given cause. What's hot today may be forgotten, forbidden, or forced aside by tomorrow's social issue. But the emotional fuel might also drive increased engagement and risk for a social issue that strikes a responsive chord.

Teens who grew up on a steady diet of Bible stories and reinforced niceties might set that aside when the radical call of prophets and discipleship gets unpacked in new ways. The familiar story of the death of Jesus might now expose the religious leaders' move to eradicate Christ (John 11:47-50). This could raise questions about the religious establishment today. Elijah's Mount Carmel showdown included a duel of the gods, but also Elijah's massacre of Baal's 450 prophets (2 Kgs 18:22, 40). The stories in the book of Acts inspire young people, but the exploits of the new church came against the established religion of the day. Adults expect teens to maintain the status quo, but the Old Testament prophets repeatedly upset the status quo of their day. Adults might admire the Apostle Paul, but he created riots almost everywhere he went. If teens begin to engage in like manner, would that demonstrate spiritual growth or spiritual decline? If Christ's disciples most likely were in their teens when Jesus called them, why are so many churches today run by old people? If the church isn't a place to discuss social issues, then teens are likely to leave and go to places where they can.

HERE WE GO AGAIN

Parents can easily be taken by surprise when their teens embrace a social issue. Reminiscing on their own adolescence from bygone years, some are lulled into thinking, "I've done this before, and I was pretty good at presenting my perspective." The surprise comes when parents might find themselves on the opposite side of the table from where they were in their own teen years. The parents have become part of "the establishment" rather than challenging the establishment.

The more teens have engaged in dialogues on social issues and become familiar with them, the more adept they are at pushing for change. While adults might recall an organized movement from yesteryear, today's connected

young people can form a flash mob in minutes and join forces with valuable assets immediately through their phone/device. All of this can take some adults, especially parents, by surprise.

Youth leaders might be up to speed on dealing with youth issues. In fact sometimes it's the youth leaders who activate the teens' involvement in social issues. This could create an adversarial relationship between parents and their teens, with the youth leaders tipping the scale for the teens to take the upper hand against their parents. This might feed a teen's drive for identity and independence. It might lead the youth leader to feel spiritually triumphant. But it can also disenfranchise the parents. It would be far better to work together, drawing in parents to the teen and youth leader and the social action cause. It would be a waste of energy and influence to make parents the cause rather than the social issue itself. Parents who choose not to engage with the same passion as their teen can still be aware and knowledgeable on the topic. Keeping them in the loop is far better than keeping them out of that loop.

WHOSE SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Social issues might pit certain people with others, even if the issue isn't the people themselves. Those who identify with a cause sometimes fuse themselves to the cause and make it very personal. It could be very personal, such as if a close friend or relative was recently shot and killed by the police, or if that person is part of the police force. When things escalate, nuances and varying shades disappear and everything seems to come down to a dualistic choice: Are you for it or against it? Your response could yield immediate friends and enemies.

On the other hand, you might find yourself side-by-side with people you might not have thought you'd ever share commonality. But for this particular social issue, you do think alike, and so you work together in ways you never have previously. Surprise! And then you might be surprised when you find yourselves on opposite sides when it comes to a different social issue. Politicians live in this type of scenario all the time.

When Jesus warned the crowds about following religious traditions that actually run contrary to Scripture, his disciples came to him and provided what they considered to be helpful feedback. "Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?" (Matt 15:12 NLT). Christ's response, no doubt, shocked them. "Ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind

person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch” (Matt. 15:13 NLT). That really forced the issue. Should Christ’s Jewish disciples be on Christ’s side or on the side of the Jewish religious leaders? It had come to the point they had to choose their side.

As a person’s identification with a cause or social issue increases, their personal investment and identity fuse them to their cause. This increases the emotional investment and expression. Those who seek to dialogue in thoughtful discourse or the clash of ideas need to be aware that this can be much more than an intellectual debate. Increase your understanding and even your empathy by discovering the connection between the person and the social issue. Why does this matter to them? How long have they been involved? What is their history? What are their hopes? What are their fears? Who or what has resisted or stopped them? How much have you listened? Are you able to separate the person (and yourself) from the issue? Are they able to do the same?

When you disagree, does that mean things are over, or does that mean they will continue? A continuation can be either an on-going war or increased understanding. Listening to the words and what is behind the words make a difference. Courage to state your beliefs and convictions may drive them deeper internally. But are you able to ever change your understanding or your opinion? Can you be respectful when you disagree? Are you able to communicate that? Paraphrasing another person’s ideas, without framing them in condemning ways, demonstrates listening skills often lacking in issue-oriented discussions. Sometimes seeking agreement on a different topic can broaden your perspective while increasing your interaction in positive ways.

Ask yourself, “Will I ever change?”

Ask yourself, “Will people who see it differently ever change?”

While you might not know the answer to either of these questions, know that the answer to both is, “Sometimes,” but not a simple “Yes” or “No.”

KEYS TO CAPITALIZE ON SOCIAL ISSUES

Because young people often gravitate to social issues, those involved with them should expect to do so with them. These issues matter. The teens matter. You matter. Bring them all together and you have plenty of reasons to invest in social issues.

When young people get involved in social issues, the adult’s role should move to empower them rather than resist them. This might force the adult to make some personal changes in their habits or lifestyle. It will probably be inconvenient. You’ll have to re-think your own position or understanding.

Support the young people engaging in the social issues by providing listening ears, responsive coaching, and even helpful pushback before they get it from others who aren’t supportive of them. Practice dialogue. Demonstrate respect. Participate in prayer. Plan for action. Regroup and improve. Learn and live. Apologize and forgive. Take a stand.

Often engagement in social issues leads to lots of words, but little action. Great debaters might take center stage as they show their prowess, but those who carry out the actions the words describe make the difference that truly matters. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, those who listen and do are wise; those who listen but fail to do are fools (Matt 5:24-27).

CONCLUSION

Young people and social issues—expect them to go together. Encourage it. Be part of it. You’ll be making a difference in God’s kingdom for the young people and for the cause in which they engage.