

# Ready or Not...

## Here Come Gen Z



A look at the generation about to hit high schools, workplaces and society-at-large

By Michael McQueen

We've heard a lot about Gen Y in recent years, however there is another generation looming on the horizon. They are the children currently filling our kindergartens, primary/elementary schools and day care centres. Their name? Generation Z.

Although this group born from 1999 to the present day may still be too young to profile with any great certainty, the early signs indicate 7 characteristics that are emerging:

### 1. Tech Savvy

Gen Zs have only known a world where instant connectivity is the norm – a generation who in their short lives have had unprecedented access to and understanding of technology and instant gratification. Consider the fact that most Gen Zs have never seen a camera that requires film much less had to wait for photos to be developed!

Gen Z's exposure to technology is starting early with one recent study indicating that almost two thirds of babies under the age of one are spending an average of one hour and twenty minutes in front of a TV or computer screen each day.<sup>i</sup> Many toddlers know their way around an iPhone by age 2 and even have apps on a parent's device that have been downloaded specifically for them to play with.

Resulting from this trend, childhood has become a largely indoor experience for the Zs. For much of this generation only a small fraction of free time is spent playing outdoors. Entertainment, play and social interaction increasingly revolve around televisions, computers and video games with Gen Z currently dedicating 27% of their waking hours to screen time.<sup>ii</sup> As a worrying confirmation of this trend, Richard Louv in his book *Last Child in the Woods* points to a 50% decline in recent years of children aged nine to twelve spending time in outdoor activities (hiking, walking, fishing, beach play).<sup>iii</sup> Highlighting this trend, a recent study conducted by market research firm *Knowledge Networks/SRI* revealed that 61% of Gen Zs have televisions in their rooms, 35% have video games and 14% have a DVD player. Of those who have a television in their room 75% report multitasking with other media while watching TV.<sup>iv</sup>

Australian social researcher Mark McCrindle describes the Zs as a generation 'who have only known a wireless, hyperlinked, user-generated world where they are only ever a few clicks away from any piece of knowledge.'<sup>v</sup>

While such access to information may be a very positive thing, a British report that was cited in *The Daily Telegraph* in March 2008 found that a frighteningly large number of under-16-year-olds spend more than 20 hours per week on the internet. Worryingly, they also found that 57% of children have seen online pornography, most of it accidentally in the form of pop-up ads.

Much of this exposure to technology and media from a young age leads on to the second characteristic researchers are witnessing in Generation Z – a lowering of the age of innocence and a premature maturity.

## 2. Prematurely mature

Zs are exposed to more, experience more, and experiment more at a younger age, than previous generations. Added to the societal influences shaping this, physiological and environmental factors also have a role to play. Today, puberty hits boys and girls one to two years earlier than it did thirty years ago.<sup>vi</sup>

Physiology aside, popular culture and media saturation are undoubtedly the key causal factors in a lowering of the age of innocence in Gen Z. As sociology professor Tony Campolo puts it, we have a generation of children who “know too much too soon.”<sup>vii</sup> This young group are the most marketed-to generation of children the world has ever seen and it is estimated they are exposed to between 30,000-40,000 TV commercials each year.<sup>viii</sup>

Of great concern is the fact that body image is becoming an issue of increasing concern for both boys and girls in early *primary school* rather than early high school. Parenting expert Michael Grose points to startling research by author and beauty stylist Gregory Landsman which found that children as young as six reportedly disliked their bodies and found themselves unattractive.<sup>ix</sup>

Leading Australian demographer Hugh Mackay highlighted Gen Z’s premature maturity in an editorial he wrote for *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 12 January, 2008. Speaking of the fact that children’s parties are becoming quasi-adolescent affairs, he described the growth of the Adolescent Childhood (AC) syndrome. This syndrome is one that Mackay suggests is reflected in the curious desire of parents to hasten their children’s development toward adulthood by encouraging them to act like mini-adults. Looking at how this trend relates directly to raising girls, Mackay argues that the machinery of modern marketing has encouraged parents to buy their daughters clothes, shoes, cosmetics, dolls and music designed to ‘create the illusion of a precocious, premature sexuality’.<sup>x</sup>

While we are only seeing early signs of the impact of this trend on childhood development, it will be interesting to see how Gen Z approaches adolescence when so much of the sense of discovery, innocence and curiosity associated with this stage of life in past eras has been lost.

## 3. Pampered

Gen Z are growing up with fewer siblings than children of previous generations. Census data indicates that around 60% of families with Gen Z children have two kids or less and currently the average family has just 3.2 members including the parents.<sup>xi</sup>

As a result of shrinking family sizes, attention, affection and money are being lavished on this young generation like none before. There are early indications of a self-centred individualism among Gen Z that eclipses anything we have seen in Gen Y.

It should be no great surprise when concepts such as compromise, team playing and sharing are seen as foreign to Gen Z. After all, many of them have been treated like mum or dad’s little prince or princess since birth.

## 4. Empowered

While empowerment is typically a very positive thing, the way in which Gen Z are being empowered from a very young age is resulting in some unintended and challenging consequences.

No longer are they simply toddlers or children – young Gen Zs are called ‘little people’. It is almost as if children are now simply seen as miniature versions of adults. As such, they are expected to have the same level of discernment, self-control and capacity for reasoning that was previously not expected until an individual’s late teens or early twenties.



Prof. Jean Twenge picks up on this trend in her book *Generation Me*. Highlighting how parents begin asking children their preferences even before the child can answer, Prof. Twenge contrasts modern parenting approaches with those adopted in past eras. She points to the trend of parents who would never dream of making every single decision for their child without first asking what the child wants – a far cry from the ‘be seen and not heard’ days where children fitted in around the parent’s lives and not vice versa. Twenge argues that this results in children coming to believe that *their* wants are the most important.”<sup>xii</sup>

To look at how this empowerment plays out in everyday life, consider the example of a mother instructing her three year old daughter to clean up her toys and place them back in the box at the end of playtime. Twenty years ago, the mother may have instructed her daughter to do so with the warning that failure to comply would result in a smack. Today however with smacking such a societal taboo, the pressure on mum now is to ask her daughter how she would *feel* about putting her toys back in the box and then outlining 20 alternative courses of action from which the child is to choose the one that suits her best!

Indeed, Gen Z are being raised in an era where they have more power and more choices than children in previous generations did. It waits to be seen how this will impact on their approach to notions of responsibility, deference and submission as they move into adolescence and beyond.

## 5. Risk averse

For older generations risk is seen as directly related to return – nothing ventured, nothing gained. Builders and Boomers were taught to manage risk, ‘hedge their bets’ and ‘go out on a limb’ in order to achieve and grow.

The adventurous, inquisitive and pioneering spirit of previous generations has paved the way for many of the inventions and discoveries that we now take for granted. Throwing caution to the wind and overcoming a seemingly insurmountable challenge had an attraction for older generations.

Builders and Boomers grew up in a time when cots were painted with lead-based paint and nobody knew any better. Children stayed out playing all day completely out of contact with their parents and knew when it was time to head home because the street lights came on.

Accidents were simply that. No-one was to blame and they were just a part of life. If you fell over in the street you actually hoped no-one saw it – having witnesses was the last thing you wanted! There was never any question of who was responsible for taking risks – naturally it was the individual taking them.

In contrast, Generation Z has grown up in an era where risk has become unacceptable and ‘throwing caution to the wind’ is akin to negligence.

These days, risk seems too frightening a proposition for many young people. After all, it could lead to failure, danger, disappointment and harm. Fear is a powerful driving force in our modern age – fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of terrorists, fear of neighbours – but, most of all, fear of being sued.

The pace at which Australian society has adopted the litigious mind-set of our American counterparts has profoundly shaped Generation Z’s aversion to risk. Accidents are no longer just accidents. Someone is always to blame – and it can’t be me!

Rather than being seen as a necessary part of living in the real world, risk has become public enemy number one.

In a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney University Health Sciences Professor, Anita Bundy, argued that safety-first measures have all but killed off the fun of today’s playgrounds. She said:

*You need things where kids can be safe but where there is a bit of perceived risk – they shouldn’t be able to fall on their head easily, but it can’t be so safe that they are bored to tears.*<sup>xiii</sup>

With such a focus on shielding Gen Z from risk, it is reasonable to wonder how this will affect their approach to innovation, adventure and entrepreneurialism as they grow older. Furthermore, how will this group's personal development and sense of identity be shaped by a world where they never have to experience risk, pain, disappointment or failure? After all, we learn best by challenging physical boundaries, taking risks and experiencing a certain degree of pain. As American author Lenore Skenazy so rightly attests, kids who aren't allowed to take any risks turn out to be *less* safe than those who do!<sup>xiv</sup>



Gen Z's aversion to academic risk is also highlighted by primary school teachers who often talk of the reluctance among this generation to put their hand up in class to answer questions. Whereas Gen Y tended to exhibit a bold self-assurance and confidence in their younger years, Gen Z seem acutely afraid of being wrong – failure, it seems, is not an option for this group.

## 6. Protected

While it may be nothing new for older generations to wax lyrical that “today's kids have it too easy”, there is a strong and growing sense of worry amongst many grandparents that their Gen Z grandchildren are being raised as ‘cotton wool kids.’ This sentiment seems to extend into the general community as well with almost two thirds of respondents in a recent parenting survey indicating that they believe today's kids are over-protected.<sup>xv</sup>

Indeed, Gen Z are being raised in an environment where they are being guarded and protected by their largely Gen X parents. Ironically, whereas Gen X were raised with unprecedented levels of freedom, they themselves are the infamous ‘helicopter parents.’

While the parents of Gen Z may be very fearful for the safety of their children, the data indicates that such anxiety is largely unfounded. Despite the fact that 80% of parents report being afraid for their children's safety (particularly outdoors or in public)<sup>xvi</sup> current rates of violent crime against young people have actually fallen to below 1975 levels.<sup>xvii</sup>

On top of going to great lengths to protect their children's safety, wellbeing and self esteem, there is a growing trend amongst the parents of Gen Z to shield children from the consequences, negative emotions and the realities of life.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in the behaviour of over-zealous parents who come to the rescue and defence of children at the first hint of disciplinary measures being taken at school. I have heard countless stories from teachers of students messaging parents when their teacher sends them from the room, removes a privilege or dares to give a detention. Before the end of the lesson, parents have arrived at the school ready for a fight: *‘It couldn't be my son; my daughter would never do that; you must have been mistaken’* and the list goes on. Is it any wonder that teachers recently rated dealing with parents as their number one professional headache.<sup>xviii</sup>

Indicative of how out of control this parental compulsion to shield children from consequences is becoming, one principal recently reported two separate instances in the past year of parents arriving at school accompanied by the family lawyer in order to defend their child against disciplinary measures taken by the teacher. While it is tempting to dismiss such cases as unique and exceptional, one recent survey found that 20% of school principals spend five to ten hours per week writing reports or having meetings simply in order to avoid litigation.<sup>xix</sup>

In addition to shielding their children from consequences, many Gen X parents also feel compelled to protect their Gen Z children from negative emotions in life too. This is evidenced by the modern version of the childhood party game ‘pass the parcel’ where every child now gets a prize to prevent disappointment. Then there are the parents who purchase in-car DVD players so their children don't experience the dull ache of boredom during car trips.

While protection and nurture are perfectly natural parental instincts, there is a real possibility that Gen Z are being shielded from the consequences of their actions and the realities of life to the detriment of their character development and resiliency.

Perhaps we need to work toward a better balance between letting our children experience the negative aspects of life and overprotecting them. To this end, I think American politician Ivy Baker Priest offers a healthy perspective on parenting:

*My father had always said that there are four things a child needs – plenty of love, nourishing food, regular sleep, and lots of soap and water – and after those, what they need most is some intelligent neglect.*

Despite some of the more concerning trends emerging in Gen Z, there is certainly a lot to be excited about with this group too! Early signs are that Gen Z are an incredibly switched on group of youngsters who are technologically adept, environmentally aware and supremely confident.

It bears repeating that Gen Z is probably still too young to profile or describe in a definitive way. However, the characteristics of this new generation will undoubtedly be marked by the unique societal climate of their upbringing.

Recently watching an elderly Builder interacting with his Gen Z great-grandchild highlighted for me just how dramatically things have changed in one century. If you thought Gen Y were different, wait till Generation Z start making their presence felt!

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<sup>i</sup> Tapscott, D, 2009, *Grown Up Digital*, McGraw Hill, New York, p. 239.

<sup>ii</sup> McCrindle, M 2009, *The ABC of XYZ*, UNSW Press, Australia p. 81.

<sup>iii</sup> Louv, R 2005, *Last Child in the Woods*, Algonquin Books, North Carolina, p. 34.

<sup>iv</sup> LeClaire, J 2006, 'Kids and Tech: How Much Is Too Much?' *TechNewsWorld*, 9 June.

<sup>v</sup> McCrindle, M 2009, *The ABC of XYZ*, UNSW Press, Australia, p. 66.

<sup>vi</sup> Elmore, T 2010, *Generation iY*, Poet Gardener, Atlanta, p. 63..

<sup>vii</sup> Elmore, T 2010, *Generation iY*, Poet Gardener, Atlanta, p. 63

<sup>viii</sup> McCrindle, M 2009, *The ABC of XYZ*, UNSW Press, Australia, p. 83.

<sup>ix</sup> Grose, M 2005, *XYZ: The New Rules of Generational Warfare*, Random House, Australia, p. 38.

<sup>x</sup> MacKay, H 2008, 'Kids' parties, teeny-raunch and other adult pursuits.' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January.

<sup>xi</sup> Tapscott, D, 2009, *Grown Up Digital*, McGraw Hill, New York, p. 224.

<sup>xii</sup> Twenge, J 2006, *Generation Me*, Free Press, New York, p. 75.

<sup>xiii</sup> Masters, C 2007, 'Boring playgrounds deprive kids.' *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 June.

<sup>xiv</sup> Skenazy, L 2009, *Free Range Kids*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p. xiii.

<sup>xv</sup> McCrindle, M 2009, *The ABC of XYZ*, UNSW Press, Australia, p. 87.

<sup>xvi</sup> Tapscott, D, 2009, *Grown Up Digital*, McGraw Hill, New York, p. 222.

<sup>xvii</sup> Louv, R 2005, *Last Child in the Woods*, Algonquin Books, North Carolina, p. 127.

<sup>xviii</sup> Elmore, T 2010, *Generation iY*, Poet Gardener, Atlanta, p. 95.

<sup>xix</sup> Skenazy, L 2009, *Free Range Kids*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, p. 45.



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