



“Kids these Days”: Understanding, then bridging the gap with emerging generations

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When Editor-in-Chief Norm Taylor asked whether I would be interested in authoring the opening article for this special issue, *Issues Facing our Emerging Generations*, I leapt at the opportunity. Research on the impacts of trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, community violence) in youth was my first research passion, starting with my undergraduate and graduate studies. How did experiencing trauma during development impact how a child perceives situations, regulates emotions and behaviour, or learns how to interact in social situations and interpersonal relationships? My interests over the past 15 years have continued in the realm of trauma, transitioning to cumulative operational stress trauma in public safety personnel. This year’s focus for JCSWB weaves these multiple interests together in addition to other considerations when working with youth and emerging generations.

YOUTH IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING SOCIETY

The world in which youths today and over the past 20 years have grown up appears vastly different than the world in which many readers grew up. Technological changes have been exponential, we are surrounded by a 24/7 news cycle, social media is ubiquitous, there seems to be news of mass shootings in Western societies on a regular basis, we have recently emerged from a global pandemic, youths have lived through or seen their families experience financial recessions and mass job lay-offs, there have been increases in contract work relative to permanent employment, and concerns about housing affordability abound. All of these factors have contributed to relentlessly negative news, at times skewed perception and expectations, and major uncertainty about one’s individual circumstances and our collective global future.

There has been increasing awareness over the past several decades about the potentially long-lasting impacts of adverse childhood experiences and other traumatic experiences on childhood and adolescent development, including biological, neuropsychological, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and social impacts. Equity and inclusiveness in education may be fostered by considering these impacts and tailoring educational and psychological interventions to individual youths. Understanding how an individual young person has come to act in maladaptive ways or engage in illegal activity

and what current individual and contextual factors help to maintain these behaviours is key to addressing cause(s) and target interventions.

Social media and instant access to the worldwide web for many youths has greatly expanded access to vast amounts of knowledge, opportunities to find niche communities welcoming of individual differences, the ability to foster connections with friends and family outside of one’s local community, and the means to learn just about any skill that one is interested in. However, this easy access to all types of material and global communities can also have detrimental and sometimes dangerous impacts. Exposure to carefully curated social media content can foster distorted perceptions and unrealistic standards in comparing ourselves and our circumstances to others. News and social media algorithms work on numbers of views and “clicks,” which can amplify negative news and inundate users with toxic commentary. Predators can target vulnerable individuals financially, physically, emotionally, and sexually. Many individuals find it difficult to limit their internet consumption and delay gratification.

What has been the impact of these massive changes in a relatively short period of time on our youth growing up throughout this era? We are still learning, and the full long-term impacts may not be understood for some time. What is clear however, is that the traditional way of doing things in arenas such as education, treatment, hiring, and employment require significant changes in order to work effectively with our youth and young adults.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many people suddenly working from home for the first time. Since COVID-19 restrictions have begun to lift, many employers have had difficulty recruiting new employees, particularly in front-line positions that offer little or no possibility of remote or hybrid work. Individuals, particularly those of younger generations, appear to have different priorities and motivations from their parents’, and they have learned that they have more options through remote work and upgrading their education and skills online. Emerging generations in particular appear to be motivated by the idea of a healthy work–life balance and what they perceive to be meaningful, fulfilling work. They do not appear to be

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as enticed by pensions, many having seen their parents and other adults laid off after many years of loyal work, shaking their confidence that pensions will be available when they retire 30 years later.

Public safety professions are among those that currently face recruitment challenges, not only due to the aforementioned reasons but, in particular, due to the police-involved death of George Floyd in 2020 and other police-involved incidents that have been amplified in the media. There have been significantly negative perceptions of policing in the last few years, making it less appealing to emerging youth as a career option.

Even when organizations are able to recruit new employees, retention can be a challenge. Transitions between employers and even careers are becoming more common with younger generations. They are entering adulthood with greater awareness and knowledge of emotional and psychological health and expectations of support from their employers. They may expect more values-based leadership and processes. Inclusion and equity are no longer optional. With the increased prevalence of remote or hybrid work, fostering virtual communities within the workplace is a new challenge for many employers.

RESISTANCE IS FUTILE: MEETING YOUTH WHERE THEY ARE AT

This is an exciting time for our emerging generations, with the ability to access knowledge, opportunities, and communities around the globe from the convenience of their homes. Previously taboo topics such as mental health and trauma are widely discussed, including in schools and workplaces. We are understanding more each year about the neuropsychological effects of trauma and we are only just beginning to research the impact of constant technological connectivity on the developing brain. To understand how to support, help develop, recruit, and retain emerging generations is crucial

as major differences in technological skills, communication, and support expectations collide between generations in the workplace. "They don't jump in to help like we used to" and "they're not as resilient as we were" are fairly common refrains in some workplaces.

Understanding the mindset of younger generations is key to adapting to a new type of workforce. Rather than refusing to be team players, are they instead communicating clear boundaries to maintain a work-life balance? Are they actually less resilient or are they communicating more openly about their thoughts and needs? Accepting and understanding the different experiences and thought processes of our emerging generations is a crucial first step in adapting and moving forward. We may not understand how they think. Their expectations and needs might make us uncomfortable. Conflict between generations is a tale as old as time. What helps us to progress is accepting that things are different, that the "old way" is not necessarily the "right way," and that while our experiences may be different, the mindset and experiences of emerging generations are equally valid.

Dr. Carl Rogers had a profound impact on the practice of psychotherapy with his humanistic approach to psychology. He stated that, "the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I change." I would like to offer an adaptation of Dr. Rogers's quote and suggest that, when we accept that our emerging generations may have different mindsets and methods of communicating, then our understanding of and relationships with them can begin to change. Only then can we progress forward together.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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