**ASSOCIATION OF YOUTH MINISTRY EDUCATORS**

**AYME CONFERENCE FALL 2024**

**Finding Flourishing Through Relationships**

**Kimberly A. Nollan and Arthur L. Satterwhite III**

**Young Life**

**Author Note**

This research was conducted by Young Life’s Research Group in collaboration with Pinkston. Structural Equation Modeling, factor analysis and interpretation was completed by Nancy Scammacca Lewis, Ph.D. Significant appreciation goes to the following contributors to this project:

**Young Life RELATE Project Team:** Lauren Bocci, Tom Combs, Newt Crenshaw, Susan Crenshaw, Gabe Knipp, M.F.A., Kimberly Nollan, Ph.D., MSW, PMP, Aimee Richey, Arthur Satterwhite, III, D.S.L.

**RELATE Advisory Team Members:** Megan Bisell Ph.D., Future of Faith, Chelsea Cannon, Young Life, Michael Cartledge Ph.D. M.Div. MA, Princeton Theological Seminary, Jefferson Lee, Independent Consultant, Tanita Maddox D.Min., Young Life, LaTasha Nesbitt Ph.D., Fuller Youth Institute, Josh Packard Ph.D., Future of Faith, John Plake Ph.D., American Bible Society, Kara Powell Ph.D., Fuller Youth Institute, Emilio Reyes, OneHope, Abigail Russert Ph.D., Princeton Theological Seminary, Michael Sawyer, Young Life, Judy Sweeney, Women Who Love Young Life, Phyllis Washington, Washington Family Foundation

**Pinkston Team:** Heather Cirmo, Brooke Hempell, Alexandra Whitford

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kimberly A. Nollan, Young life, kinollan@sc.younglife.org. The full RELATE report is available at www.relate.younglife.org.

**Abstract**

Much like society at large, the landscape of youth ministry and youth culture in our global context experienced significant change over the last few decades. The RELATE Project, was undertaken to understand the trajectory of adolescent culture. Specifically, the relationships Gen Z has with themselves, with one another, and with faith was explored. Surveying over 7,261 adolescents ages 13-24 in the US, UK, India, Mexico and Eastern Africa, important relationships between the constructs of belonging, self-concept (i.e., identity & agency) close relationships, faith and Flourishing were uncovered. Using structural equation modeling, a model of these relationships, named the RELATE model, was created. It was found that Flourishing (using Harvard’s School of Public Health Flourishing Scale – Adolescent version) is most strongly predicted by self-concept. Further, self-concept is highly correlated with the constructs of belonging and close relationships. While there is a limited correlation between faith and Flourishing, the faith construct is correlated with self-concept, belonging, and close relationships. Through focus groups and discussions with Gen Z aged staff and volunteers, as well as with leading experts in youth ministry and education, practical strategies for youth ministry around how to create spaces of belonging, form close relationships (encountering one another), bolster adolescents’ self-concept and facilitate faith formation (encountering Christ) are identified.

**Finding Flourishing Through Relationships**

As sociologist Jean Twenge explains in her book *Generations*, the modern concept of generations assumes that the personality and attitudes of those born around the same time were shaped more by experiencing generally the same culture as adolescents than their family who raised them. Culture is impacted by technological advances.

The impact of technology on Generation Z (Gen Z) and Gen Alpha is the topic of much research and discussion. They are the first generation to grow up only knowing the world with the possibility of endless information and infinite connectivity of the digital age, which they are constantly processing. (AECF, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz at all, 2021; Parker & Igielnick, 2020; Youth of the Nations, 2019). Being hyper-connected, they quickly become experts in the use of new technologies (such as Artificial Intelligence – AI). Generation Alpha is already using AI to spark creativity and most (44%) use AI for their schoolwork (Springtide, 2024).

Because they are used to using several screens at once and quickly scanning information, their attention span and concentration may be reduced. In a recent survey of 13-year-olds, Springtide (2024) found about 40% spend 3-4 hours per day on their smartphone, 43% say they are addicted to their phone. Almost all (99%) use social media for social connection, knowledge-sharing and creativity. Spending much of the day online, both inside and outside the home, reduces the time for learning, playing, creating and socializing in more traditional ways; this is associated with greater levels of anxiety (Haidt, 2024; Springtide, 2024).

Research shows that more than half feel stressed and anxious (contributors include climate change, finances, health and welfare of self and family, mental health, relationships) (APA report, 2018; Brownlee, 2022; Deloitte Global Talent, 2021; Deloitte, 2022; McKinsey, 2022; Springtide, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a trend towards increasing depression and anxiety among adolescents (WHO, 2022)[[1]](#footnote-1). Others theorize that the rise in time spent engaged with technology (e.g., smartphone use and social media) among teens has made them less happy, depressed, anxious and lonely (Twenge, 2017; Twenge, 2023). These challenges are unlike any faced by older generations.

A review of the literature reveals additional information that help us understand Gen Z and Gen Alpha better:

* They are self-drivers who care about others (AECF, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021)
* They are invested in their communities of identity (Katz et al., 2021).
* They are diverse and strive for diverse friendships and community (AECF, 2020, AECF, 2021; Deloitte, 2022; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; McCrindle, 2022; Springtide, 2024; The Youth of the Nations, 2019).
* Authenticity is very important (Katz et al., 2021).
* They are collaborative and social, exploring consensual models of leadership (Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Parker & Igielnick, 2020).
* They are disillusioned by the past and have a no-nonsense attitude about the present (AECF, 2021; Deloitte, 2021; Francis & Hoeffel, 2018; Katz et al., 2021; Klein, 2022; Parker & Igielnick, 2020; The Youth of the Nations, 2019).
* They use edgy humor in memes to lift their spirits and affirm their communities of belonging. (Katz et al., 2021; Klein, 2022).
* Religion and spirituality are a common part of identity and life. Most (74% of 13-year-olds) identify as at least slightly religious; 66% identify as Christian, 29% say it is unimportant (Springtide, 2024). Of the 46% of 13-year-olds who say that religion is important in their lives, they tend to have higher scores on the Flourishing Scale than those for whom religion is unimportant.

There are many important research studies about worry and anxiety, impacts of technology, and faith, however, there is less research on what and who they really care about; their relationships. We do know that the protective factor of having a positive healthy relationship with an adult can increase adolescent’s abilities to make healthy choices, increase their self-esteem, and promote social and emotional competencies (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [Child Welfare Information Gateway](https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/protective-factors-approaches-child-welfare/)).

With this in mind, The Relate Project sought to explore what defines the adolescent generation relationally, individually, with their families, with their friends, with their communities and with the world. In addition, we wanted to learn about their hopes and goals. We applied our findings to learn how we can help teens and young adults use the positive traits that define their generation – like their enthusiasm for social issues, and their connectedness to the world as a whole – to help them mature into confident, secure adults, eager to make a positive contribution to the world. We discuss how older generations – parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, and faith leaders – can better meet young adults where they are at during this crucial phase of their lives and build stronger relationships.

One of our goals is to move the conversation from anxiety to flourishing and opportunity when it comes to Gen Z and Gen Alpha. What positive traits and aspirations do they have to offer the world based on their unique experiences? How can we invest in adolescents so that they will flourish now and in the future? What is the role of relationships in promoting Flourishing and faith? In addition, a goal was to understand the contributors to Flourishing scores and faith. We hypothesized that those with strong relationships and a sense of belonging would experience higher Flourishing scores.

**Method**

**Sample**

A total of 7,261 adolescents were surveyed, including:

* 1,994 in the United States (U.S.)
* 1,004 in the United Kingdom (UK)
* 1,768 in Mexico
* 997 in India
* 1,498 in Eastern Africa (including 627 in Kenya, 447 in Uganda, 413 in Ethiopia and 11 in Tanzania)

Quotas were set by age, gender, ethnicity and geographic region, and respondents were then weighted by gender, to achieve statistical representation of the population in each country. Additionally, racial minority groups in the U.S. were oversampled and then weighted back to their population proportions in order to allow for deeper analysis of these subgroups. The margin of error on this sample ranges from 2.2% to 3.1% per country.

 The results from the United States sample (1,994) are the focus of this paper. The U.S. sample is comprised of 986 males, 986 females, and 21 who preferred not to say. By age, 407 are ages 13-15, 767 are ages 16-18, and 820 are ages 19-24. As mentioned, we oversampled different ethnicity groups and then weighted them back to reflect the percentages of census demographics of adolescents ages 13-24. There are 380 Asian Americans, 405 Black or African Americans, 363 Hispanic or Latino(a), 916 White, and 128 other respondents in the U.S. sample. By self-identified religion, the U.S. sample included 646 atheist, agnostic or “nones”, 1057 Christians, and 291 people of other faith (e.g., Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Native Spirituality). We also asked about communities they reside in. Our sample includes 596 adolescents living in urban areas or cities, 801 in suburbs, 458 in rural or small towns, and 139 who were not sure how to classify where they live.

**Instrument**

The literature review was used to help identify survey questions about Generation Z. Topics and questions in the survey examined adolescents’ relationships (especially the adults they trust and talk to, but also friends, and how they connect), their sense of belonging, their identity, sense of agency, what is important to them, motivation to make a difference in the world, and their faith backgrounds and beliefs. The survey also included Harvard’s [Human Flourishing Scale](https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/) for adolescents. The reliability for the Human Flourishing Scale was found to be in two separate samples reliability is alpha=0.89 for the flourish measure; and alpha=0.86 for the secure flourish measure.

**Design**

The survey was administered by Qualtrics, an online panel provider, using a recruitment strategy guided by these quotas in July and August 2023. Participants were recruited from online consumer research panels; therefore, all respondents had access to technology, most commonly a smartphone. To improve data quality, all identifiable phony and inattentive responses were deleted from the resulting dataset.

Subsequent focus groups (n = 60) explored the quantitative findings in further depth to understand the “why” and “how” behind the “what” of the survey data. Two focus groups for all countries except Mexico (one focus group) and the US (5 focus groups, n = 36) were conducted of 2-6 participants each. A structured interview script was used to ask participants the same questions. Focus groups were 75-90 minutes in duration. Participants were either volunteer leaders or staff with Young Life. The majority of participants were Gen Z age. Our focus group research helped explain contextual cues for ratings in the survey and identify practical applications of research findings.

Data analysis included cross-tabular and correlational data analysis as well as factor analysis and structural equation modeling to reveal latent data constructs and interrelationships between them.

**Results**

The complete report of The RELATE Project can be found at [www.relate.younglife.org](http://www.relate.younglife.org). This paper focuses on research findings based on the U.S. sample and the constructs of the RELATE Model; the connections between flourishing, faith, self-concept (identity and agency), belonging and close relationships.

**The RELATE Model Summary**

 Using factor analysis and Structural Equation Modeling of survey responses, 5 constructs emerged: Flourishing, self-concept (identity and agency), belonging, close relationships and faith. Self-concept is defined as identity (what I think about myself) and agency (my belief I can make a positive difference). Self-concept strongly and directly predicts flourishing — a multi-pronged measure of physical, mental and social health as well as life satisfaction, purpose and character, developed by researchers at Harvard University. While positive self-concept has the strongest effect on flourishing, quality close relationships (having people you can talk about things that really matter and depend on) and a sense of belonging (being able to be yourself with friends and family) bolster self-concept.

Additionally, “faith,” defined by adolescents’ view of and connection to God, while smaller, is positively correlated with all three constructs of belonging, close relationships and self-concept. Faith does not have a direct impact on flourishing but indirectly affects flourishing by improving one’s self-concept, sense of belonging and close relationships.

Figure 1. The RELATE Model



**Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modeling Summary**

 In order to define latent constructs for use in structural equation models, items from the RELATE Project Survey measuring flourishing, positive self-concept, belonging, and close relationships were first subjected to exploratory factor analysis to define potential items measuring each construct and then validated using confirmatory factor models. After finalizing the measurement model for each construct, structural equation models were fit to determine the relations between the constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis results indicated that the latent constructions of Belonging, Close Relationships, and Positive Self-Concept are measured by sets of items on the RELATE Project survey. These latent constructs are suitable for use in structural equation models. Lastly, the invariance of the measurement model and the final structural equation model across respondents from different countries and regions was tested.

The variables “I am content with my friendships and relationships,” and “I have people in my life I can talk to about things that really matter,” were removed and combined with two other relationships-oriented questions to form the construct “Close Relationships.” Additionally, the questions “My family has enough money to live a truly decent life,” and “How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?” were used in separate statistical exploration of stress factors. This change was made to facilitate modeling the influence of having close relationships on other aspects of flourishing by modeling close relationships as a separate latent construct.

Several versions of a structural equation model (SEM) were tested to determine how best to represent the relations between Belonging, Close Relationships, Faith, Positive Self-Concept, and Flourishing. These models sought to predict Flourishing as an outcome of the inter-relations between the other latent constructs as well as direct relations with Flourishing. The final model determined to best represent the data from the RELATE Project survey is shown in the figure below. In this figure, covarying relations are represented by blue two-way arrows and predictive relations are represented by green one-way arrows. The construct of Flourish was defined in this model without the relationship items. These items were included in the Close Relationships factor instead. This model predicted 82% of the variance in Flourishing. Model fit was good (CFI = .95, RMSEA = .055, SRMR = .036).

.100

.830

.779

.613

.710

.227

.216

.134

.298

This model depicts the inter-relations between Faith, Belonging, Close Relationships, and Positive Self-Concept. As mentioned, the strongest inter-relations are between Belonging, Close Relationships, and Positive Self-Concept. Increases in any of these constructs leads to increases in the others. For example, as youth experience a sense of Belonging, their Positive Self-Concept and the quality and number of Close Relationships increase.

Positive Self-Concept was the strongest predictor of Flourishing, with Belonging and Close Relationships having a weaker predictive relation with Flourishing. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is considerable shared variance between Positive Self-Concept, Belonging and Close Relationships. This shared variance contributes to the strong relationship between Positive Self-Concept and Flourishing.

Faith, as defined based on adolescents’ self-report of their view of God, has weaker relations to these constructs, but is positive correlated with all three. Faith did not predict Flourishing directly (the coefficient was not found to be different from zero). However, it did influence Flourishing indirectly through its relations with belonging, close relationships and positive self-concept. The tables below show the final Structural Equation Model loadings and coefficients.

**Final SEM Loadings and Coefficients**

***Measurement Model***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Positive Self-Concept | Loading |
| I am proud of something I’ve accomplished. | .707 |
| I believe I am worthy of being loved. | .736 |
| I like myself. | .672 |
| I believe I can make a difference in others’ lives. | .474 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Flourishing | Loading |
| In general, I consider myself a happy person. | .754  |
| Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days? | .738  |
| In general, how would you rate your physical health? | .645  |
| How would you rate your overall mental health? | .746  |
| Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile? | .811  |
| I am doing things now that will help me achieve my goals in life. | .681  |
| I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations. | .609  |
| I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later. | .549  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Belonging | Loading |
| I feel like I belong when I’m with my family. | .645 |
| I feel like I belong when I’m with my friends. | .589 |
| I can be fully myself with my friends. | .476 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Close Relationships | Loading |
| There are people in my life who I love very much. | .587 |
| I’m content with my friendships and relationships. | .715 |
| I have people I can talk to about things that really matter. | .768 |
| Number of confidants | .412 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Faith | Loading |
| I am important to God.  | .914 |
| My faith in God is important in my life.  | .946 |
| I have a relationship with God.  | .917 |

***Structural Regression Model***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Covariance with Positive Self-Concept | Coeff. |
| Close Relationships | .613  |
| Belonging | .779 |
| Faith | .298 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Covariance with Faith | Coeff. |
| Close Relationships | .134  |
| Belonging | .216 |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Covariance with Belonging | Coeff. |
| Close Relationships | .710  |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Predicting Flourishing | Coeff. |
| Close Relationships | .227  |
| Belonging | .100 |
| Positive Self-Concept | .830 |

**RELATE Model Constructs of the United States Sample**

***Self-Concept***

In this study, we found that the idea of “self-concept” was best expressed as a combination of four factors: *I like myself, I believe I am worthy of being loved, I am proud of something I’ve accomplished,* and *I believe I can make a difference in others’ lives.* These factors represent both identity (self-perception) and agency (belief one can impact their world and their situation).

The majority of Gen Z (80%) say, “I like myself,” – and only 10% disagree. There is a dip in self-ratings among teens ages 16 – 18, and in fact on most survey items those ages 16-18 had the lowest scores. Gen Z rated themselves 7.1 out of 10 for feeling worthy of love. About half (54%) of respondents strongly agree they are worthy of being loved, leaving 46% unsure or not feeling worthy of being loved.​ Atheists, agnostics and nones are most vulnerable, rating their worth of love at 6.5 out of 10. Rural youth are close behind at 6.7.​

Gen Z largely believes they can make an impact. Four in 10 (42%) strongly agree and a similar amount (38%) somewhat agree they can make a difference in others' lives. ​ This confidence is strongest for people of faith, those in cities, and for Black and White youth.​ Pride in their accomplishments is 7.4 out of 10 for Gen Z, with young teens being most proud (7.9). The sense of agency is lowest in atheist, agnostic and “nones.”

About half of U.S. Gen Z respondents indicate they “have been involved with an initiative to address issues of justice or suffering.” The top causes they are personally concerned about (for themselves and their community) are mental health; health, diseases or medical issues; personal safety; climate change; pollution; and having enough job opportunities. Globally and nationally (compared to local community), health and medical and personal safety rise in importance, as well as concerns about war and job opportunities. ​Two of the most common issues of concern for the world as a whole are hunger, or reliable food sources, and housing or homelessness. These are issues that teens and young adults might not see in their neighborhood, but they follow news and social media coverage of these issues and consider them important priorities for their country or globally.

In an open-ended question, Gen Z respondents described themselves as “Kind, Loving, Good, Caring, and a Friend”. These adjectives represent the importance they place on relationships and being a good neighbor.

***Close Relationships***

The vast majority of Gen Z say, “There are people in my life who I love very much,” with 73% providing a rating of 8, 9, or 10 out of 10. Girls are slightly more likely to report having loved ones (77% vs. boys at 70%). There is a dip in the percentage of teens who say they have loved ones, among ages 16-18. Similarly, adolescents’ sense of contentment with their friendships and relationships was rated on average 7.4 out of 10 and 58% confidently agreeing, also dropping around age 16 and recovering in their twenties. Gen Z reports an average of 7.5 out of 10 for contentment with their friends and relations. Contentment drops with age, from 7.9 to 7.5 (69% ages 13-15, 58% ages 16-18, to 58% ages 19-24 are very content).​

Most Gen Z respondents report that they have people they can talk to about things that really matter (average 7.7 out of 10, 62% agree), and this holds relatively steady across ages (67% ages 13-15 agree to 60% ages 19-24 agree). ​On average, Gen Z has just over 8 close relationships. This number grows with age as their network expands.

As young adults age, mothers continue to remain strong confidants, while the role of siblings and fathers diminishes slightly. Spouses/partners, roommates, and co-workers become more prominent confidants as adolescents mature. Roughly two-thirds of teens and young adults report their mother or their spouse/partner as their primary trusted confidant, far surpassing any other trusted adult. About half of the sample population turn to their father or sibling(s) to talk about important matters, followed by roommates and faith leaders (20-25% indicating them). For non-White racial groups, siblings and extended family members are more influential; for White teens, parents and grandparents are most important, while coaches and religious leaders are also higher than average.​

***Belonging***

More than three quarters (79%) of Gen Z feels a sense of belonging in their family.  ​Feeling a sense of belonging in one's family drops with age and is also lower for atheist / agnostic / nones and teens in rural areas. ​The same amount - 79% of Gen Z - feels like they belong with their friends. This remains fairly stable across age, ethnicity, and geography.​ Even though Gen Z feels a high sense of belonging with their friends (79% agree), not all feel like they can be fully themselves with their friends (38% strongly agree).​ Gen Z's sense of belonging is lower at school than with family or friends (55% agree). Non-religious youth and those outside of cities feel less like they belong at school. ​Gen Z's sense of belonging is also lower at work than with family or friends (65% agree). About 2/3 (65%) of Gen Z feel like they belong in their faith community (when relevant). Belonging in the faith community drops off between ages 13-15 (48% strongly agree) and ages 19-24 (only 32% strongly agree).​

***Flourishing***

The Human Flourishing Scale is an excellent indicator of both absolute and relative well-being. Gen Z in the US rated their happiness an average 6.9 out of 10 – highest in early teen years, with a dip at ages 16-18 and recovering in their early 20s.​ Life satisfaction is one of the lowest rated Flourishing measures for Gen Z in the U.S. (6.3 out of 10). This measure also drops in the mid-teens and stays lower (6.0 for 19-24-year-olds).​ Adolescents rate their physical health 6.8 out of 10.​ Mental health is the lowest rated Flourishing measures for Gen Z in the U.S. (5.9 out of 10). It dips around age 16 to 5.7 from 6.5.​ Gen Z  rates what they are doing now is contributing to their future success an average 7.1 out of 10.​ Gen Z rate themselves 6.7, and this is consistent across age and ethnicity, in promoting good in all circumstances.​ In delayed gratification, Gen Z rate themselves 6.8, again consistent across age and ethnicity.​ Pride in their accomplishments is 7.4 out of 10 for Gen Z, with young teens being most proud (7.9).

***Faith***

The data show a correlation between adolescents having a faith in God (often nurtured by their family but owned as their own) and having a higher sense of belonging as well as positive self-concept, both of which contribute to greater flourishing scores. When faced with a personal problem, adolescents in the agnostic, atheist, and “no faith” demographic are less likely to seek help from their families, likely connected to their lower sense of belonging with their family, as mentioned earlier. This dynamic of familial withdrawal is further evidence of vulnerability among non-religious adolescents as they approach young adulthood, and it calls for adults and mentors outside their families to offer support and guidance.

One quarter (24%) of Gen Z comes from families that do not practice any religious faith. Of those who consider themselves atheist, agnostic or none, one-third (33%) come from families who practice a religious faith.​ Of those with a religious background, nearly two-thirds follow the faith tradition of their family, but 38% do not necessarily. This may mean that they are part of a different denomination or branch of the same faith, or that they are questioning the religion of their family of origin.​ Among Gen Z Christians, most say their faith is important (58% definitely true), and they know they are important to God (65% definitely true). However, only half (49%) definitely have a relationship with God.​

While the majority of Gen Z feel pretty certain they have someone they can go to with spiritual questions or doubts, 40% are unsure or know they don't. Access to spiritual guides diminishes with age.​ Just over half (52%) of atheists, agnostics and nones cannot identify someone to help with spiritual questions, and as many as one-third of Christians (34%) and those of other faiths (33%) have the same challenge.​

**Discussion**

The goal of The RELATE Project was to learn about the relationships Gen Z has with others, with God, and with themselves. We also wanted to learn about what contributes to higher Flourishing scores and faith. We hypothesized that those with strong relationships and a sense of belonging would experience higher Flourishing scores. Our findings support this hypothesis, though not in the way we anticipated. We found a construct we call Self-Concept (identity and agency) directly and strongly predict Flourishing scores. We found that while Close Relationships and Belonging are statistically predictive of higher Flourishing scores, the strength of relationship was lower. Additionally, Self-Concept, Close Relationships, and Belonging are each strongly correlated with each other. As Close Relationships and Belonging increase, so does Self-Concept, which leads to an increase in Flourishing scores. Further, we found that while faith was not predicative of Flourishing scores, faith is statistically correlated with Self-Concept, Belonging and Close Relationships.

The RELATE Project findings support other research projects which demonstrate the value and protective factor of adolescents having healthy, supportive relationships with peers, family and non-family adults.

**Generalizability**

Obtaining a sample that is representative of the adolescent population based on gender and ethnicity (ages 13-24) in the United States, United Kingdom, India, Mexico and Eastern Africa, our results are generalizable in those countries. Limits to generalizability include small samples sizes in proportion to the countries surveyed and the possibility that some words lost meaning in translation from English, affecting our results.

**Implications for Practice**

Like every generation before them, this cohort is experiencing the natural transitions of going from childhood to adulthood and moving from what is usually an emotionally and physically secure environment (home, school, community) to independence in new and less familiar places and social networks, but in a world in which they can be overwhelmed with more digital access than their minds can process. Those between the ages of 16-18, are especially vulnerable to loneliness, a sense of loss with changing relationships, feeling less like they belong, and wishing relationships were more satisfying.

This transition period is, at best, a time of uncertainty and, at worst, one in which adolescents can develop anxiety, self-doubt, loneliness, or unhealthy coping behaviors. Adolescents need adults in their lives – family and non-family – who will lean in during this period and help them navigate unfamiliar territory and build their social fabric and resilience. So, what does it take to come alongside an adolescent during this phase of emotional and social change? Using the RELATE Model and its components, we examine how to do so.

***Close Relationships***

 Of the three pillars of flourishing, close relationships are the easiest to affect, which will impact self-concept and flourishing and faith. To build a trusting relationship, consistency and reliability, as well as curiosity about them and authenticity are important.

Relationships matter. One of the most important protective factors is fostering healthy relationships – with family, peers, and non-family adults or mentors. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services[3] Child Welfare Information Gateway, “protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, and the larger society that mitigate risk and promote the healthy development and well-being of children, youth, and families.” Protective factors can increase teens’ abilities to make healthy choices, increase their self-esteem, and promote social and emotional competencies.

**Listening**

The most important building block for relationships with Gen Z is really listening to them. Before offering advice, be curious and ask questions. Sometimes it takes a few rounds of questions to uncover matters of the heart and what is weighing on someone. Questions and statements like “what else,” “tell me more,” “go on,” “how did you come to believe that?” show you care and are listening. This builds trust and relationship. Ask about what they are thinking about, listening to, thoughts about the future, what they worry about. Young people are much more comfortable talking about mental health than older generations. Avoiding the topic creates distance. For Gen Z, mental health does not mean psychological disorders. They talk about mental health in a holistic sense, incorporating emotional health, their outlook on life, relational interactions and experiences from the day. Talking about mental health is a full and well-rounded conversation. A place to start is by asking “how would you rate your mental health right now?” This starts the conversation from a place of empathy and authenticity.

**Collaboration**

Part of the work of becoming an adult is taking on more responsibility and expressing agency. As mentioned, between the ages of 16-18, the presence of a trusted adult dips, which coincides with more freedom (e.g., getting your driver’s license), taking on more adult roles, and separating from one’s family. As adolescents reach their 20s, they tend to open up more about topics of faith, finances, and relationships and begin to seek guidance and want to talk about these areas. For example, one college-age focus group member mentioned asking their Young Life leader for tips on how to manage money and create a budget. Gen Z wants to learn from older adults, but in a collaborative, not lecture, format. Listening, again, is part of being collaborators, rather than advice givers.

**Being In Person**

The majority (55%) of Gen Z indicates that they prefer to meet face to face with friends. Gen Z welcomes and pursues relationship and community. The focus groups revealed that they would like relationships with people in older generations, but often feel judged or misunderstood so they don’t initiate. Over and over focus group respondents told us how much they appreciated being invited into people’s homes for a meal and having a conversation – about anything. The fact that another adult cares to spend time with them and ask them anything about themselves is enough to make them feel they are valued. This is especially true for young adults in college or early in their careers – being in someone’s home, sharing a meal creates a comfortable space where people can be themselves and get to know one another. In addition, face to face time is also a great way to combat the loneliness and anxiety experienced by Gen Z. They want older adults to be curious about them, without judgment.

**Be Yourself**

In focus groups, we learned that Gen Z doesn’t expect older generations to “get it.” They really want other adults to show up as themselves, to be authentic. Admit you don’t understand the experience of Gen Z today, nor even speak the language. They are navigating social media comparison and pressure, constantly receiving the message of “you are not enough.” Starting with “when I was your age” disregards the unique experience of this generation and can unintentionally demean when we are trying to connect. When we listen to Gen Z — really listen — we learn to see them. And when we see Gen Z, we can begin to identify where our knowledge intersects with their questions, experiences, and lives. Start with them, not us. Again, ask questions and listen.

Practically for churches and ministries and other organizations, consider your ratio of volunteers to adolescents that allows for both (1) quantity of time to build trusting mentoring relationships and (2) quality in depth of mentoring relationship. Adolescents need intentional adults, who have a capacity for depth with a few kids, and can be taught to mentor.

***Belonging***

**Ask**

How can we create spaces where kids feel safe to be themselves? A starting to point to creating spaces of belonging is to simply ask the Gen Zers in your life, ministry, community, what would make them feel like they belong and what makes them feel like they don’t belong. To create spaces of belonging we need to let go of our agenda to change people or their behaviors. Providing tech free spaces may also help contribute to belonging. Rather than interacting with our devices, when we interact with one another we see more of our commonalities and shared humanity.

**Notice**

Part of creating spaces where adolescents can be who they “really” are is to look for cues that might make them feel out of place. This can show up in very tangible ways like clothing choices, foods served, music played or conversation topics that they don’t relate to. We can also ask youth to assess whether they are creating a space where others feel like they belong and be on the lookout for those cues that might make it harder for someone to be themselves.

***Self-Concept: Identity***

**Messaging**

Adolescents, like all of us are made in the image of God (imago Dei) who loves them. That alone, makes them worthy of love. Learning ways to communicate that truth is critical. The fact that over 40% of our Gen Z sample expressed that they aren’t sure they are worthy of being loved means we should examine our messaging, and the ways we communicate that messaging. In ministry, we need to evaluate how we are communicating worthy of being loved in our large group gatherings, small groups and discipleship gatherings, at camp, during shared adventures or serving together.

Teens and young adults are feeling a lot of pressure and anxiety about being special. We need to help them understand that this is not about what they achieve; their value is not solely in what they can do or how they stand out. How can we help them see themselves as they are uniquely made? Are we speaking life-giving affirmation into kids? In addition, point out the good you see in them. Not just praising them for something they did but what that reveals about who they are. Some examples of this include: “You always have an encouraging word for your friends; you really make people feel good about themselves.” “You really put a lot of work into planning this event; people can really count on you.” “That is a unique hobby you have developed; you are a tenacious learner.”

Reframing what is good about kids helps them see that they have inherent value and relieves the pressure to perform. Wondering if they are enough to be loved and valued sets Gen Z on the defensive, in fear of being rejected.

***Self-Concept: Agency***

If there’s one thing Gen Zers have in common, it’s a desire for purpose. Half of all Gen Zers say they are looking for something to help them live a better life. This desire for purpose increases with age. Generation Z is finding identity in what they can accomplish or what they do. And the culture all around them affirms this. They want to be defined by their talents – talents that help them stand out from the crowd and could lead to more success. But what happens to their self-worth when someone else outshines their talent or when their role or career changes? They’re likely to experience an existential crisis. To better guide their identity development, help them answer these questions: Where does your gift come from, and how can you honor the source of that gift? How can your talent be used for the benefit of others?

This allows Gen Z to engage with their empathetic nature by providing a vehicle to reflect and serve outwardly and not inwardly. This view also helps them extend value to others instead of fixating on themselves and creating pressure to achieve.

***Faith***

Gen Zers who believe in God feel a greater sense of belonging in general, and a more positive view of themselves, and experience less stress. For those who don’t they might be feeling especially isolated or disconnected. They might be longing for more, and not sure how to go about it. Creating judgement free spaces where we can explore together questions like “am I important to God? Is God important to me? What role does faith play in my life?”

**Limitations and Future Research**

As mentioned, a limitation to this research is the smaller sample size compared with the country populations. Attempts to mitigate this limitation include trying to match the sample proportions to the country populations in terms of gender, ethnicity (where applicable) and religion. Future research is needed to better understand the covariance of belonging, close relationships and self-concept. These constructs are unique and understanding their unique relationships with faith and Flourishing is important. They also are strongly correlated with one another. While stress and resilience were included in phase I of the RELATE Project, future research could include more survey items to measure these constructs to understand the role of these and other mitigating circumstances on faith and Flourishing and relationships. The role of social media/time spent online, and emerging AI is needed to understand impact on all the RELATE Model constructs. Replication of this research, including more countries would help confirm the generalizability of findings.

**Conclusion**

The RELATE Project, was undertaken to better understand Gen Z and upcoming Generation Alpha. Specifically, the relationships Gen Z has with themselves, with one another, and with faith was explored. The RELATE Model revealed that Flourishing is strongly predicted by Self-Concept. Further, Self-Concept is highly correlated with the constructs of Belonging and Close Relationships. Faith was found to be correlated with Self-Concept, Belonging, and Close Relationships. Using these findings, practical strategies for working with adolescents around forming close relationships (encountering one another), bolstering adolescents’ self-concept, creating spaces of belonging, and facilitating faith formation (encountering Christ) are identified. Essential to all these strategies is listening, being curious and collaborating with Gen Z.

**References**

Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), (2021). What are the Core Characteristics of Generation Z? https://aec.org/blog/what-are-the-core-characteristics-of-generation-z.

Annie E. Casey Foundation, (2020). What is Generation Alpha? https://aec.org/blog/what-is-generation-alpha.

Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021). Generation Z and Mental Health. https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-mental-health.

Brownlee, D. (2022). 82% of Employed Gen Zers Want Mental Health Days, Study Finds. Forbes, 05/09/2022.

Bethune, S. (2019). Gen Z More Likely to Report Mental Health Concerns. American Psychological Association. https://www.apa.org/.

Carter, C. M. (2021). The Complete Guide to Generation Alpha, The Children of Millennials. Forbes.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020). *Protective Factors Approaches in Child Welfare.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Deloitte (2021). Millennials and Generation Z: Making Mental Health at Work a Priority. Deloitte Global Talent.

Deloitte (2022). Striving for Balance, Advocating for Change: The Deloitte Global 2022 Gen Z and Millennial Survey. Deloitte, Touche, Tohmatsu Limited. Seattle.

Francis, T. & Hoefel, F. (2018). True Gen: Generation Z and its Implications for Companies. McKinsey & Company.

Haidt, J. (2024). *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin Press: New York.

Horowitz, J. M & Graf, N. (2019) Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers. PEW Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/.

Human Flourishing Program, at Harvard University, Program Website:<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>

Iberdrola, (2022). What Does Alpha Generation Mean? The First Digital Native Generation. https://www.iberdrola.com/talent/alpha-generation.

Katz, R., Ogilvie, S., Shaw, J., & Woodhead, L. (2021). *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a digital Age.* University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Klein, Jessica (2022). Are Gen Z more pragmatic about love and sex? BBC, 10.4.2022; https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220104-are-gen-z-more-pragmatic-about-love-and-sex?

McCrindle (2022). Understanding Generation Alpha. Generationalpha.com

McCrindle, M. & Fell, A. (2022). *Generation Alpha: Understanding our Children and Helping them Thrive*. Genearationalpha.com. Hachette: Australia.

McKinsey & Company (2022). Addressing the Unprecedented Behavioral-Health Challenges Facing Generation Z. McKinsey & Company.

Parker, K. & Igielnick, R. (2020). On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What we Know About Gen Z So Far. McKinsey & Company.

Pinkster, J. (2020). Oh No, They’ve Come Up With Another Generation Label. How much do members of “Generation Alpha,” or any generation, really have in common? The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/02/generation-after-ge/>.

Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The Brief Resilience Scale: Assessing the Ability to Bounce Back*.* International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 15(3), 194-200.

Springtide Research Institute, July 2024, Thirteen. Springtideresearch.org.

The Youth of the Nations, (2019). Global Trends Among Gen Z: Examining the Lifestyles, Attitudes, and Digital Behaviors of Gen Z. Global Web Index.

Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. Atria Books: New York.

Twenge, J. M. (2023). *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents – and What They Mean for America’s Future.* Atria Books: New York.

VanderWeele, T. J. (2017). On the Promotion of Human Flourishing. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, U.S.A., 31:8148-8156.

World Health Organization (March 2, 2022). COVID-10 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.

1. World Health Organization (March 2, 2022). COVID-10 pandemic triggers 25% increase in prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)