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The Generation of the Smartphone

iGen'ers and Their Low Interest in School

by Anisabel Palma

ABSTRACT:

iGen is the generation of those born after 1995. A common characteristic of teen iGen'ers is their lack of interest in school. Many of these kids attend school only because they must, not because school is a place where they are looking forward going each morning. The low interested has been increasing since 2012.. There is a link between iGen teens' behavior including motivation to go to school to their use of technologies around them. In this paper, the author tries to find a response to this change and to offer some hope to those working with teens.

SYNOD:

In a synodal church, the first step is to encounter the other. Pope Francis calls us to become experts in the art of encounter. Encountering young people requires more now than before: we need to encounter them in their electronic devices and listen to them. Even if to be able to listen well we need to learn to read their texts and interpreting their emojis or avatars. After encountering and listening, in the synodality process the Pope calls us to do serious discernment. In our case, it means to be challenged by the reality around the iGen generation; through dialogue help their discernment, to look within with the eyes of the Lord, to see what their heart truly treasures and then they will be ready to make room for God, when God is in our lives, everything else gets in place.



I am the mother of five kids of the iGen generation, those born after 1995. My oldest, Juan, entered high school in 2018. Soon after, he grew more vocal on his dislike for school, followed by a sharp decline in grades. My husband and I wondered the reason for this: was it because of him changing schools? He went from a small school to a school triple the size or was it because most of his former classmates went to advanced classes while he was placed in the regular courses? Was it because he was a Hispanic student in a mostly white high school? Was it because of the new friends? Before the end of the first semester of Juan's freshman year, I reached out to his school counselor. She arranged for a meeting with Juan's teachers, the principal, the social worker, and me; we discussed and planned collaborative teamwork to help Juan succeed at school. The teachers and other staff seemed genuinely interested in supporting Juan's academic success, which brought hope to us parents. In an effort to motivate him, we also made some changes at home like offering incentives for work well done and closely monitoring his progress. My husband and I decided to start graduate school, among other reasons was our desire to set up an example and being role models for him. We really could not find a reason for Juan's lack of interest in school. I certainly thought Juan was a rare case in children his age as he is other ways a healthy very normal boy.

However, a common characteristic of teen iGen'ers is their lack of interest in school. Many of these kids attend school only because they must, not because school is a place where they are looking forward going each morning. According to Jean M. Twenge, "teens' interest in school took a sudden plunge beginning around 2012."¹ Twenge links many changes in iGen teens' behavior including motivation to go to school to their use of technologies around them. Before the end of the year 2012, the number of smartphones in use worldwide had reached one billion.² For Twenge, iGen teens find "little in the classroom to compete with the allure of the ever-tempting smartphone." However, it does not stop there. Twenge adds, "iGen'ers are addicted to their phones and they know it."³ Juan often mentioned students leaving the classroom to watch movies while sitting at the toilet. In addition, Juan shared

1 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*. Atria Books, New York, 2017, 169.

2 Reisinger, Don (October 17, 2012). "Worldwide smartphone user base hits 1 billion". CNet. Retrieved September 20, 2021. <https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/worldwide-smartphone-user-base-hits-1-billion/>.

3 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*. Atria Books, New York, 2017, p. 291.

an anecdote from middle school when a young teacher paused teaching to “defend his troops” as he was notified they were being attacked in Clash of Clans, a popular mobile video game.

iGen’ers’ online experience proves to be more enticing, exciting, rewarding and appealing than what classrooms have to offer; frequently classrooms look depressing, boring, and often iGen’ers find the content of their books is outdated or might not be true⁴ as gamers and influencers in social media challenge it. The boom of the internet and social media has put iGen’ers in contact with online gamers and social media celebrities who have dropped out of school to work on their profitable online ventures, proving with that and boasting loudly that they do not need education to make millions online. There is one example of this trending in the YouTube video “The Most Successful People Explain Why a College Degree is USELESS” by Motivation Madness. Similar videos abound with each having thousands of views. For iGen’ers, learning is less important⁵ than it was for previous generations.

The General Systems Theory could shine a light on what is going on with iGen’ers and their general lack of interest in school. This theory, “originated in the 1940s in the work of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy who initially sought to find a new approach to the study of life or living systems. More broadly, Von Bertalanffy envisioned General System Theory as a way to address the increasing complexity of the world’s problems.”⁶ In 1977, George L. Engel, an American internist and psychiatrist, proposed the Biopsychosocial model grounded in General Systems Theory to address health-related issues. One of the General Systems Theory “central tenets is that the human mind is more than the mere sum of its parts. According to systems theorists, the human mind is a complex weave of physiological, chemical, and mental processes, and thus human beings should be treated as systems in themselves.”⁷ “General systems theory, when applied to human personality and behavior, considers the human system to be an active, open one in

4 Ibid, 171.

5 Ibid, 172.

6 A. Montuori, “Systems Approach,” Editor(s): Mark A. Runco, Steven R. Pritzker, *Encyclopedia of Creativity (Second Edition)*, Academic Press, 2011, 414-421, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-375038-9.00212-0>. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/B9780123750389002120>.

7 “Systems Theories in Psychology: Definition & Concepts” <https://study.com/academy/lesson/systems-theories-in-psychology-definition-concepts-quiz.html>

which personality develops through interaction with other systems; problems within one system can produce ripple effects in others.”⁸ If we see with the eyes of the General Systems Theory, we would be able to see the relationship between our children, the technological advances, the psychological discoveries, the financial interests of big tech companies and the stories of each one of us how they all interplay to produce, among other things, the widespread low interest in school from iGen’ers.

iGen’ers are the first generation of children born after the internet was made widely available, at least in the United States. The technological advances at the disposal of this generation are countless in all fields of life, that nothing seems impossible for them. They do not imagine a world without more and more technological advances. They are not questioning if this or that would be possible; they only wonder when such thing would be possible. This is contrary to GenXers and Baby Boomers as children, who never thought certain things would be possible like Facebook or even instant messages.

iGen’ers were born, are growing up and living in a digital age that offers all the elements of a very addictive environment with many options readily available at their fingertips. Many have fallen prey to this digital era and are now living with a smartphone in their hands almost 24/7. According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, the essential meaning of addiction is “a strong and harmful need to regularly have something (such as a drug) or do something (such as gamble) and an unusually great interest in something or a need to do or have something.” Definitely, it is evident that iGen’ers suffer of too much attachment to their digital devices, some openly admit that they are addicted to their phones. This attachment and addiction affects students’ ability to focus in school.

From Sacred Scripture we know God’s plan for children includes their parents provide them with a training suited to their character,⁹ parents that give them correction and advice inspired by the Lord.⁹ The Book of Proverbs calls children to follow their parents’ instruction¹⁰, who can share

8 Marmor J. “The relationship between systems theory and community psychiatry,” *Hosp Community Psychiatry*. 1975 Dec;26(12):807-11. doi: 10.1176/ps.26.12.807. PMID: 1205456. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1205456/>.

9 Ephesians 6,4.

10 Proverbs 1,8.

this responsibility with teachers and schools to educate their children. A role model from Sacred Scripture is Timothy, the young pastor who since his childhood grew in wisdom through the instruction of Scripture. The Apostle Paul wrote to him, “Let no one disregard you because you are young, but be an example to all the believers in the way you speak and behave, and in your love, your faith and your purity.” (2 Timothy 3:14–15). This is in stark contrast to students escaping the classroom to watch a movie in the restrooms, “half-sleep or dozing at school.”¹¹

This research shows that what is happening with Juan is not exclusively happening only to him. Sadly, many iGen’ers share a common disinterest in school. The adage “it takes a village to raise a child” is still true, but now in a global scale. Providentially, we can find light and hope in Pope Francis’ call for the whole Church to embark in a synodality process, which he describes as a way of being church together in the road.¹² We must face together the challenge of iGen’ers’ lack of motivation for school. As parents, educators, and students, working in collaboration, we will be able to keep our children safe and thriving in a digital age. Social media and some online activities are a threat to human freedom, which the church defends and protects. Our children should not be navigating alone their journey in a digital era. They need parents willing to get into their lives and do many things together in-person and virtually. Families should discuss at home what is going on with their children and how they use their electronic devices. It is a task of the Church to continue reminding parents of their primary role as educators and sharers of the freedom offered by Jesus in the Gospel. In a synodal church, the first step is to encounter the other. Pope Francis calls us to become experts in the art of encounter.¹³ Encountering young people requires more now than before: we need to encounter them in their electronic devices and listen to them. Even if to be able to listen well we need to learn to read their texts and interpreting their emojis or avatars. After encountering and listening, in the synodality process the Pope calls us to do serious discernment. In our case, it means to be challenged by the reality around the iGen generation; through

11 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*. Atria Books, New York, 2017, p. 169.

12 <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>

13 Pope Francis homily at the Opening of the Synodal Path at St. Peter Basilica. Sunday 10 October 2021.

dialogue help their discernment, to look within with the eyes of the Lord, to see what their heart truly treasures and then they will be ready to make room for God, when God is in our lives, everything else gets in place. The invitation to discern is for everybody. We discern in prayer the direction God wants to lead us. Let us not be afraid to bring to prayer our relationship with social media and the virtual world since these are the new missionary fields awaiting evangelization. In this age, we must have an active online presence if we want to make ourselves accessible to those who spend their lives mostly virtually. We must pray and bring to the Lord our struggles and temptations. The Holy Spirit will guide parenting practices. The same Spirit will give Juan, and all who ask for it, the strength to resist temptation, to learn to be free from electronic devices and use them only as tools to enhance their lives, and not to live under their domination. The Holy Spirit will inspire and guide our actions and efforts in reaching out to young people through social media. Let us be patient and persistent, in time we will see the fruits of our labor as families learn to live in a hyper-technological world while remaining free. There is hope.

