

Q&A WITH KARA POWELL & BRAD GRIFFIN

3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections



Q: Teenagers can access answers to any of their questions about any information ever known to humankind, simply on their phone. How is the church missing out on reaching these kids, perhaps by asking the wrong questions?

A: Today's teenagers are growing up in families and churches who shy away from some of their deepest questions about faith and meaning. One of the reasons young people are drifting from faith is that churches aren't focused on the questions they care about most. Instead, we're pitching answers to questions that aren't anywhere near their strike zone. We're too often stuck in questions that reflect what happened in the past. Or we are missing what's unfolding in the present. And we are afraid of what's to come in the future. During a recent Fuller Youth Institute summit, the executive director from a national training organization shared about one high school student who yearned, "I wish the church would stop giving me answers to questions I'm not asking." The specific questions that he

and other teenagers most value might be unique to our time, but questions aren't new to God. The question isn't whether faith is big enough to hold young people's questions. We know it is. The question is whether we will take the time to hear and honor them.

Q: Teens have so many tough questions they're looking to answer. As you've studied teenagers who question their faith, what has surprised you?

A: One of our most counterintuitive findings over the years has been the role of doubt in teenagers' spiritual formation. In our research for *Sticky Faith*, 70 percent of former youth group students admitted to having significant questions about faith in high school. Any temptation to panic can be calmed by this interesting research twist: those teenagers with doubts who felt the freedom and had the opportunity to express their questions actually showed *greater faith maturity*. Put more simply, it's not doubt that is toxic to faith—it's silence. Tough questions are most likely to sabotage faith when adults stifle them.

Q: As young people deal with tough questions about life and faith, are there some common symptoms you see in their attitudes and actions?

A: Yes, there are. Though no young person, let alone an entire generation, can be summarized with a few adjectives, we've found these three descriptors helpful in understanding the teenagers around us *today*. Maybe you'll likewise see that the teenagers in your life can often be 1) *anxious* because of external stressors, which easily become internal pressure, 2) *adaptive* as they adjust with creativity and agility to the new needs and opportunities they face, and 3) *diverse* in their ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender identity, values, and worldview.

Q: With so many questions on the minds of teenagers today, what have you identified as the 3 Big Questions that actually drive all the rest?

A: These questions may not live right on the surface, but when we dig deep enough, we can trace their longings at the roots. Almost every question young people are asking ultimately finds its genesis in these 3 big questions: *Who am I? Where do I fit? What difference can I make?* We've created shorthand phrasing to think about and explore these questions: First, *identity*, which means *our view of ourselves*. Then *belonging*, defined as *our connection with others*. Finally, *purpose*, or *our contribution to the world*. While our research focused on young people, these questions cut across all generations. They aren't just *young people* questions; they are *people* questions. They aren't relevant only to adolescents; they are relevant to the two of us. They are to you too. But for young people, the 3 big questions of identity, belonging, and purpose are at a constant, rolling boil.

Q: Why does intentionally listening to young people matter so much?

A: One of the reasons we conducted this research was to help adults like you—and ourselves—move beyond assumptions to truly connect with teenagers. Assumptions keep us at a distance. Assumptions lead to judgment. We judge across generations all the time, and this judgment allows us to comfortably dismiss what we experience as *different* by declaring it *wrong*. Truly listening to young people pushes us past our tendencies to assume and judge. Listening brings us closer. Listening helps us forge a new path across the generational impasse. But we can't stop there. Listening opens us up to the next step. It makes *empathy* possible.

Q: How do you define empathy?

A: We defined empathy in our 2016 *Growing Young* book as "*feeling with young people...sitting on the curb of a young person's life, celebrating their dreams and grieving over their despair.*" Since that time, countless adults have asked us for more help with understanding empathy and putting it into practice. So we'll add to our original description that we practice empathy when we *notice* and *care*. Noticing is reading someone else's emotions. Caring is responding to those emotions with feelings of our own. Taking another's perspective increases our ability to understand them and helps us avoid judgment and stereotypes. It humanizes them as we see reality through their eyes—if only for the moment—rather than "othering" them and holding them at a distance. It steps into their shoes for a few paces on the road. Empathy increases our drive to help others rather than ignore their pain. Empathy isn't just for tragedies and bad days. This is a common misconception; one we've perpetuated ourselves by the way we couch empathy as a response to pain. It *is* that, but it's also so much more. In all days and in the midst of all emotions, empathy pushes past the superficial and creates a safe space for the real story to emerge.

Q: What are a couple of obstacles to empathy?

A: When it comes to relating to young people, we all fall into common traps that short-circuit our attempts at connection. These traps can be grouped in two sets of extremes. It can be easy to assume we have too much or too little in common across generations. Let's start with "When I was your age." This statement rarely precedes an empathetic response. Think about the tone in your voice when those words slide out: critical, judgmental, pejorative. We would do well to remove the phrase from our vocabulary altogether. Why? Here's the truth. We may have been teenagers once, but we've never been "their age." We can remember what it was like to be a teenager, but we've never been teenagers in *their* world. In the second pair of extremes, we either rescue young people from their problems or abandon them to figure things out on their own. We frequently feel like we have advice to give teenagers. That's normal. We have lived longer, experienced more, and gained wisdom from the road. But in the face of a dilemma, if we jump in too quickly with a "what you need to do" suggestion, we risk communicating that a teenager isn't capable of handling problems on their own. We rob them of the value of sorting things out, making decisions, and learning from failure.

Q: How can leaders or parents help point young people to Christ-focused answers to their questions?

A: Empathizing with today's teenagers is the first step to helping them answer their big questions of identity, belonging, and purpose. The next step is to ask: If these are the biggest questions, what does the good news of Jesus Christ say in response? Young people need new plotlines, new mantras to say to themselves over and over about who they are, where they fit, and what difference they can make. These new Christ-centered stories can replace teenagers' incomplete or toxic narratives, empowering them to live out more freeing answers to their most pressing questions. We believe this is the heart of discipleship.

Q: Let's dive into the 3 Big Questions. When seeking to answer the question *Who am I?*, what makes it difficult for young people to define their identity?

A: Our identity is *our view of ourselves*. All too often teenagers find that being "themselves" feels inches—or sometimes miles—beyond their reach. In part, this is because being yourself is too low of a bar. They seek a loftier goal; they want to be their "*best selves*." In addition, often a teenager's self (best or otherwise) is actually a mixture of several selves. While being "yourself" implies a singular self, the average teenager is constantly shuffling through multiple identities—trying to figure out which of their "selves" to play at that moment. Who they are in the neighborhood or at home is different from who they are at school or at their after-school job. All those are different from who they are at church. Furthermore, "being yourself" is tricky because young people are rarely the sole source of their identities. The identity of every teenager you know is partly formed by the collective influence of family members, friends, and other adult authority figures.

Q: How are young people seeking to find an identity through social media?

A: In this era of heavy social media use, many teenagers think about—and feel pressure to work on—their brand. The only extracurricular hobby shared by all students we interviewed was social media. Not everyone we interviewed did their homework every day, but everyone was daily viewing, sharing, and liking. While teenagers certainly have cared about image in the past, our social media age affords young people unique access to the technology that allows them to, in essence, *advertise* themselves. Teenagers believe that with the right brand identity, anyone

(including them) can become “internet famous.” And every moment is a broadcast opportunity. Even when it maybe shouldn’t be. That’s how many of these teenagers have been treated by their parents since they were born. Kids’ parents and guardians were on social media posting their quips and mistakes, awards and injuries, all before they could choose the moment or edit the look. No wonder they feel the desire to self-curate today.

Q: What is a Christ-centered answer to helping teenagers let go of the lies that they should be defined by others, they don’t measure up, and they are no more than their personal brand?

A: Through our research, we landed on one theologically rich word that helps young people say a stronger everyday “Yes” to Jesus: *Enough*. In an era that fears and often expects scarcity, Jesus offers abundance. And through that abundance, we’re enough because of Jesus. Jesus makes what we have, and who we are, enough. He turns our not-enough into enough. Our potential to change from not-enough to enough lies in our being created in God’s image. We humans are the only part of creation made in the image of God, which instills in us a special potential relationship not just with God but with one another. Together, we celebrate and call out the ENOUGH-ness Jesus offers.

Q: Why is the concept of belonging so important to teenagers?

A: Belonging is *our connection with others*. It’s how we feel like we fit in with groups of people. We might say we “belong” when we’re with those who really know, understand, and accept us for who we are. Belonging is one of the great spiritual hungers of our day. We are a society marked by loneliness and disconnection. We have so many reasons for telling people they don’t belong—because of their personality, neighborhood, income, race, ethnicity, immigration status, or disability. We have friends and followers and fans on social media, but these connections often only remind us who *isn’t* following us or where we *don’t* belong. We want to belong so badly that we will go to great lengths—even hiding or changing parts of our identity or pursuing a false sense of purpose—to feel it. For teenagers in particular, “Where do I fit?” usually leads among the 3 big questions. They’re desperate to belong. As with identity, teenagers are figuring belonging out as they go. It has a temporary nature to it because young people’s lives are in motion. They must constantly negotiate where they fit. Much of the time, young people qualify “I belong” with “for now.” We all long for a more permanent sense of belonging—one that isn’t qualified by whether we feel safe enough to be ourselves, we share the right things, or we’re needed.

Q: What part does the faith community play to help young people feel like they belong?

A: We need to keep reminding young people, “God is with you and with us, no matter what.” Relationship is *who God is*—Father, Son, and Spirit connected as one—and we’re created to be in community with God and with others through Jesus. We are not alone, and we don’t have to earn love, acceptance, or our place in the body of Christ. We belong to God and one another. We are family.

Q: How important is it that young people uncover a sense of purpose?

A: Our purpose is *our contribution to the world*. Like a compass pointing north, purpose provides each of us—at any age—life direction. Despite the value of this orientation, it’s estimated that four out of ten Americans have not yet discovered a satisfying life purpose. Our understanding of our purpose evolves over our lifetime, with adolescence and young adulthood often being seasons of escalating clarity. Sometimes that clarity comes from resolving the tension of seeing unlimited

roads to the future while simultaneously feeling pressured to follow specific lanes prescribed to help one “get into a good college” or “find the right job.” Other times increased certainty comes as young people finally figure out what they are good at, after years of knowing only what they aren’t. Regardless of age or the degree of clarity, purpose unites two (sometimes divergent) interests—what’s worthwhile *to us* as well as what’s consequential for the world *around us*. Put simply, purpose is meaningful both for us and beyond us.

Q: Beyond their own personal story, how does God’s story invite and equip young people to deeper purpose?

A: God says our lives have meaning because we are part of a bigger story—the story of God. Our lives and the things we do matter, not because we perform for others’ expectations, rules, or scripts but because our stories help advance the greater story of God through Jesus Christ. Our lives don’t become meaningful because we’re helping others. Or following the right rules. Or making our own choices to pursue “the good life.” Our best answer to the question “What difference can I make?” is that our lives matter because we are part of the ongoing plot of what God has done, is doing, and will do in our world. Our best personal narratives come from embedding our stories in the ultimate narrative of God’s story.

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