



GROWING WITH

EVERY PARENT'S GUIDE TO HELPING
TEENAGERS AND YOUNG ADULTS THRIVE
IN THEIR FAITH, FAMILY, AND FUTURE

KARA POWELL AND STEVEN ARGUE



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Powell, Kara Eckmann, 1970– author. | Argue, Steven, author.
Title: Growing with : every parent’s guide to helping teenagers and young adults thrive in their faith, family, and future / Kara Powell and Steven Argue.
Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, [2019] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018030386 | ISBN 9780801019265 (cloth)
Subjects: LCSH: Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Parent and teenager—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Teenagers—Religious life. | Christian education of teenagers.
Classification: LCC BV4529 .P69 2019 | DDC 248.8/45—dc23
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018030386>

ISBN 978-0-8010-9450-7 (ITPE)

Authors are represented by WordServe Literary Group
(www.wordserveliterary.com).

19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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PART 1

GROWING WITH PARENTING

Growing With parenting: *a mutual journey of intentional growth for both ourselves and our children that trusts God to transform us all.*

As parents and caring adults, we often feel the gap between us and our kids widening as they become teenagers and young adults. Maybe it's just that they're growing up. But we fear the gap is also a symptom that we're growing *apart*.

Growing With is an attempt to close this family gap.

Growing With requires new lenses so we can see more clearly the world our teens and twentysomethings encounter. In chapter 1, we explore the new cultural, relational, and sociological landscapes that today's young people navigate. Building on this new understanding of our kids, in chapter 2 we propose three new

paradigms for parenting that take into account what's worked before but provide your family with a better map to move forward.

Once we are equipped with a new understanding of our kids' world and new parenting paradigms, chapters 3–9 will then offer you a menu of practical ideas to grow with your child both now and in the future.

A prayer as you begin your Growing With journey:

Jesus, our kids are growing up and we are growing older. These truths weigh heavily on us, some days more than others. There are moments when it feels like we're growing together and other times when we fear we're growing apart. By your grace, please grant us faith to trust you with our kids as well as courage to grow with them through our parenting. Spark in us a more expansive vision for this journey—a vision not only about who they might become, but also about who we might become.

1. Growing Up Today

How Our Kids' Paths Are Different from Ours

#HowToConfuseAMillennial

Launched recently, this social media hashtag pokes fun at Millennials, meaning those born between 1980 and 2000. The Twitter floodgates opened as users posted their humorous ideas for “How to confuse a Millennial.”

Show them a phone book. #HowToConfuseAMillennial

Turn off their autocorrect. #HowToConfuseAMillennial

Hand them a job application form. #HowToConfuseAMillennial

But then young people turned the tables. Teenagers and young adults shared online what they find confusing, and even condemning, about the choices they face.

Destroy the housing market. Replace grad jobs with unpaid internships. Tell them to buy a house. #HowToConfuseAMillennial

Crash their economy and then condescendingly ask why so many of them are living with their parents. #HowToConfuseAMillennial Tell them to follow their passions! As long as they aren't passionate about art, writing, or anything creative. #HowToConfuseAMillennial Baby Boomers will tweet #HowToConfuseAMillennial then call us to fix their internet problems 30 seconds later.

Ouch.

These #HowToConfuseAMillennial posts highlight pressures that pulsate through our homes, workplaces, churches, and anywhere else those under and over age 30 share life together. The hashtags for iGen, the label for those born after 2000 (including two of the six kids in our two families), are likely to echo these same intergenerational tensions.

Today's teenagers and young adults feel unappreciated, while adults feel like young people are unappreciative.

The younger generation feels belittled; parents often find their children bewildering.

We know. We have been there. We are there. Together with our spouses, Dave and Jen, we each parent three children whom we love more fully than we ever thought possible. Kara's three are now teenagers or college students. Steve's three are a few years ahead of Kara's. Steve's older two daughters are in their early and middle twenties, and his youngest is midway through college. None of our kids are perfect, but we couldn't be prouder of them—foibles and all.

We are crazy about our kids.

And in certain moments, if we are really honest, they drive us crazy. (For the record, we both read this sentence to our kids to make sure they were okay with it. They were, and yes, they feel the same.)

Just last week my (Steve's) oldest daughter (who is also named Kara, not that that's ever confusing) decided that after saving

up money from freelance jobs and securing a job with a steady paycheck in a city without great public transportation, it was time to stop borrowing one of our family cars and instead buy her own used car. After she conducted a month's worth of research to figure out her purchasing priorities, I joined her in

"Millennial" and "iGen"

You've likely seen the term *Millennial* used to describe today's young people. Generational theorists William Strauss and Neil Howe are credited with designating Millennials as those generally born between 1980 and 2000.¹ Like Boomers (those born from 1946 to 1964) and Gen Xers (those born from 1965 to 1980) before them, Millennials are a sociological group who carry certain distinctions influenced by corresponding cultural events (e.g., Millennials were alive during the 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001); significant relationships (with their Gen X parents and Boomer grandparents as well as with more diverse peers than previous generations); and technological shifts (they are the first generation born into the internet age). Now that the Millennial population has reached 83.1 million, they make up over 25 percent of the population and officially outnumber Baby Boomers.²

As Millennials age, increasing numbers of our teenage and young adult children will represent Gen Z, sometimes called iGen. iGen is the post-Millennial generational cohort who grew up embedded in the digital age of the internet and social media, which radically impacts how they communicate, relate with others, and learn.³

1. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000). Other birth year designations for Millennials have been developed, but they tend to overlap heavily with the birth years of 1980–2000.

2. "Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse, Census Bureau Reports," United States Census Bureau, June 2015, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.

3. Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 1–10.

visiting a local used car lot to check out a few options she'd seen online.

Despite all I say and believe about empowering young people, I was nonetheless surprised by how hard it was for me to let her take the steering wheel in this process. From the moment we drove onto the lot, I felt myself going into “Dad mode”—wanting to speak to the agent for her, guiding her to look at cars she didn't care about. Early on, Kara muttered in my direction, “Dad, I've got this,” which was her not-so-subtle cue that I needed to tone down my dad dial a few notches.

I had a host of opinions about the car she should get. I wanted her to have a thousand-airbag, brightly colored behemoth so that all drivers within a mile could see her on the road. She wanted a small, silver economy car that blended in and had the two features most important to her: Bluetooth and a sunroof.

I made a test-drive suggestion; she ignored me.

She pointed out a car; I had to hold my tongue.

I'm certain the agent was amused! In the end, we both got what we wanted. My eldest got the car *she* preferred, and I watched her grow into a woman who knows how to make *her own* thoughtful decisions.

We both grew that day.

Growing With Parenting

Steve's car lot experience with his daughter, along with a host of studies that would fill your nearest library, suggest that as our kids approach and inhabit their third decade of life, they still need us but in different ways.¹ Some of the core principles of our parenting that worked in the preschool and elementary years are just as important now, but others need to be retired and replaced with new parenting imagination and intuition. To grow our relationship with our 13- to 29-year-olds—and to grow *period*—requires a new strategy we call “Growing With parenting.”

We define Growing With parenting as *a mutual journey of intentional growth for both ourselves and our children that trusts God to transform us all.*

Let's unpack this sentence. Growing With parenting is

. . . a mutual journey, meaning a relational odyssey with our kids that changes over time. Though our kids may *move away* as they grow up, it does not mean that we have to *grow apart* from them. We are always the parent and our child is always our child, but we can parent in a way that keeps closing the relational distance between us and our kids and keeps strengthening our relational muscles. That means Growing With parenting

values relationship and responsiveness over tasks and techniques; pursues our kids rather than waiting for them to go first; and accepts the kid we have, not the kid we wish we had.

. . . of intentional growth in that as we watch our kids gain more autonomy and make more decisions on their own, we are not rendered irrelevant (even when we feel so). Instead, our kids need us in crucial new ways. We can address unfamiliar parenting situations with strategic approaches and resources. That means Growing With parenting

works toward solutions rather than only identifying problems; seeks new resources instead of defaulting to old patterns; and catches our kids doing things right rather than only naming the things they do wrong.

. . . for both ourselves and our children, meaning we shift focus from getting our kids to do or change something to how we change *with* our kids. That means Growing With parenting

For additional research and resources to help you embrace and apply our Growing With parenting strategy, please visit fulleryouthinstitute.org/growingwith.

pays attention without obsessively controlling;
considers new relational challenges as opportunities for our
own growth; and
celebrates our parenting wins and admits our parenting fails.

. . . that trusts God to transform us all, so while we can pursue relational, intentional, and personal parenting goals, we acknowledge that there are no parenting formulas. The only sure thing is that God loves our kids and us and has entrusted us to each other. Let's be faithful parents who commit to develop alongside our kids, while trusting God's commitment to transform us all.² Accordingly, Growing With parenting

believes that God is working *in* us as much as *through* us;
nurtures our kids to grow in God's image not ours; and
believes that no parenting situation is a "lost cause," because
with God there's always hope.

Why Do Today's Families Need This New Parenting Posture?

As we highlight the need for Growing With parenting as well as contrasts among generations (like those that emerged on the used car lot), we're often asked, "Why do we need a new parenting strategy now? Hasn't there always been a generation gap?"

Yes. Absolutely. If we turn back the clock 25 years to when I (Kara) was on a used car lot with my mom and stepdad to buy my first used car, my story is not all that different from Steve's. All I cared about was the color (it had to be teal green), while my stepdad looked under the hood and quizzed the salesperson about gas mileage and repair records.

But as scholars, pastors, and parents of young people, part of our advocacy for Growing With parenting stems from our belief that today's generation gap is often wider. This gap—as well as

the innovative parenting bridges required to cross it—became apparent during a recent four-year study conducted by our team at the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary. In the

While there is ongoing debate in the academic and ministry communities about the best terms to describe various age groups before 30, we opt for the following phrases throughout this book:

Teenagers and *adolescents* refer to 13- to 18-year-olds.

Emerging adults and *young adults* indicate 18- to 29-year-olds.¹

The term *emerging adult* was first coined by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, a leading scholar on emerging adults, who identified five main features of the time period between ages 18 and 29:²

1. Identity exploration, meaning young people try out various possibilities—especially in love and work
2. Instability
3. Self-focus
4. Feeling in between, in transition, and neither adolescent nor adult
5. Full of possibilities, with flourishing hopes and unparalleled opportunities for transformation

Young people is an umbrella term that includes everyone from age 13 to 29.

1. We intentionally leave an overlap between the end of the teenage stage and the beginning of the emerging adult stage as 18-year-olds often straddle the two. Jeffrey Arnett believes that emerging adulthood and young adulthood are two separate phases, with the former most closely associated with the late teens and early twenties, and the latter a more appropriate label for those in their thirties. Jeffrey J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16–17. Yet the majority of parents and practitioners use the two terms interchangeably. While we appreciate the rationale behind Arnett’s distinction, given the audience of this book is primarily parents and leaders, we use the terms interchangeably.

2. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (May 2000): 469. Some scholars actually prefer the term *extended adolescence* to *emerging adulthood*. We find *extended adolescence* well describes the delay in transition to adulthood, but as a general rule, we will use the more common term of *emerging adulthood*.

For more on churches that are growing young, including a host of free resources proven to help churches like yours, please visit fulleryouthinstitute.org/growingyoung.

midst of so many churches and denominations aging and shrinking, we wanted to study congregations beating these trends. So we surveyed 250 Protestant and Roman Catholic churches that are

“growing young” and pinpointed the six core commitments that make them so appealing and transformative for 15- to 29-year-olds.

During the course of our 10,000 hours of Growing Young research, we immersed ourselves in the last two decades of world-class scholarship on teenagers and young adults. More importantly, we convened focus groups and interviews with over 1,300 people of all generations—including hundreds with teenagers and young adults like your kids as well as with parents like you. To flesh out our understanding of Growing With parenting, we subsequently conducted interviews and focus groups with an additional 79 parents from across the US.

Nominated by church leaders, these parents, who help bring our Growing With parenting definition to life, stem from different geographical regions and denominations, diverse ages and ethnicities, and various marital situations. As you’ll see from their quotes and stories, these moms, dads, stepmoms, and stepdads are far from flawless.³ But they have welcomed you and me to lace up our shoes and trek through the highs and lows of their own family’s Growing With journey.

Why 14 Is the New 24

What we’ve seen in our research and around our own kitchen tables, and what has fueled our commitment to Growing With parenting, is that the young people of today feel like a new breed. Sixth and seventh graders have just barely put away the stuffed animals of their childhood, but their journey toward adulthood has

Our hope with the 79 additional parents we interviewed was to mirror the ethnic and racial diversity of our nation.

Our Interviewees and US Census Data¹

Ethnic category	Percentage of parents interviewed by FYI	Percentage of all US individuals
African American	12.7 percent	13.3 percent
Asian or Pacific Islander	13.9 percent	5.7 percent
Hispanic or Latino	8.9 percent	17.8 percent
White	64.5 percent	76.9 percent

To more specifically address parenting dynamics unique to particular cultures, ethnicities, and races, we have sprinkled sidebars throughout our chapters to help you and others apply our principles and practices to your own context. For more resources addressing the realities of multicultural families and communities, see fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural.

Our commitment to intentionally pay attention to different cultures stems from our growing awareness of our social location. We are both white, highly educated, upper middle-class Protestant Christians. Throughout our research and our ministry, we have been deeply shaped by diverse young people and parents, and we look forward to continuing to learn with and from our brothers and sisters from different social locations.

For more about the research methodologies we followed as we interviewed 79 amazing Growing With parents of teenagers and young adults, see the appendix.

1. The "Percentage of all US individuals" data is derived from the 2016 US census. While our sample underrepresented white and Hispanic/Latino parents, and overrepresented Asian and Pacific Islander families, we are overall fairly pleased with the ethnic diversity of our interviewees. Note that the total of the percentages for US individuals exceeds 100 percent because some individuals are included in multiple categories and because census questions explore both race and ethnicity.

already started. Teenagers today in the US are facing life choices that many of us didn't experience until our midtwenties. Growing With is important because for the teenagers in your family and community, 14 is the new 24.

The onset of puberty, marked by the average age of first menstruation in girls, has dropped three years—from age 16 to somewhere between ages 12 and 13.⁴ While that biological shift is noteworthy, we are more concerned with the cultural and experiential pressures that leave adolescents with too many burdens and too few resources.

MORE TIME-DEMANDING ACTIVITIES AND LESS FAMILY TIME TOGETHER

Often in our formal and informal discussions with youth pastors and parents, we ask them to name the biggest struggle of teenagers. Their number one response? Busyness. By far. In one study, 13- to 17-year-olds were more likely to report feeling “extreme stress” than adults.⁵

Even more appalling is the gap between teenagers' anxiety and parents' recognition of their kids' stress. Approximately 20 percent of teenagers confess that they worry “a great deal” about current and future life events. But only 8 percent of the parents of these same teenagers are aware that their child is experiencing such stress.⁶

Once adolescents obtain their driver's license, today's parents install apps that keep them updated of their child's whereabouts. Such apps may assuage parental fears for their safety but not fears that their teenagers are drifting emotionally.

Once a source of love and support, the family has become the vehicle (pun intended) that drives teenagers from one activity to the next. Our good friend and former colleague, Chap Clark, has conducted ethnographic adolescent research on church and school campuses and concluded that parents “have evolved to the point where we believe driving is support, being active is love, and

providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture. We are a culture that has forgotten to be together. We have lost the ability to spend unstructured down time.”⁷ Of course, there are times when the sacrifices we make (e.g., missing out on rest, work, or time with our own friends) are a reflection of our love, but Growing With parents realize that loving our kids often requires something different.

MORE SUPERFICIALLY CONNECTED BUT LESS DEEPLY SUPPORTED

Our kids’ use of devices opens them to new and unfamiliar worldviews and perspectives with just a few taps. When you and I were their age, that same exposure required plane trips or visits to the local public library.

What we needed cars to do, our kids can do on their phones. Without leaving their rooms.

We had to check out encyclopedias. Our kids click on Wikipedia.

We talked with our friends on analog phones, with long cords connected to walls, from inside our homes. Our kids message their friends using apps on smartphones—ever-connected minicomputers—from anywhere.

Our teenagers can’t imagine not being able to google questions about a map and “YouTube” questions about math. While that’s helpful when we don’t know how to help them with their homework, our teenagers’ connections with others expose them to adult waters you and I probably didn’t dive into until college or beyond.

Here are some quick facts to help you understand how your teenager uses digital technology to connect with others:

- Ninety-two percent of teenagers report going online at least once per day. Almost one in four teenagers confess going online “almost constantly.”⁸ This continual access to the world is often an expected—or required—part of the school day and homework load.

- Teens who own a smartphone spend an average of 4.38 hours per day using it.⁹
- Three-quarters (78 percent) of higher-income teens have their own smartphones, compared with 51 percent of lower-income teens.¹⁰
- A majority of teenagers—approximately 71 percent—use multiple social media platforms to stay in touch with friends.¹¹
- The median number of texts a teenager sends and receives per day is 60. That number increases significantly for 15- to 17-year-old girls.¹²

As you pursue Growing With parenting, keep in mind that the devices, apps, and social media platforms used by our relationship-hungry kids have become a double-edged sword—simultaneously making them feel both more connected and more alienated. Pictures and social media posts about Tuesday afternoon ice cream runs and Saturday night parties can make your teenager feel like “everyone else” has more friends and a more exciting life.¹³ Your child posts something humorous or heartfelt and is crushed when no one “likes” or comments on their pictures or words. Technology lets your child put themselves out there, but often their disappointment in feeling excluded or unaffirmed leaves them feeling like a trapeze artist floating through the air, unsure whether a friend ahead will grasp their hand before they fall.

Why 28 Is the New 18

While our kids’ journey toward adolescence has accelerated, the inverse is also true. We need Growing With parenting to help bridge the generation gap between us and our kids because for the typical twentysomething in the US, the process of becoming an adult has slowed down. Way down.

Take Jordan, a smart, put-together 25-year-old at my (Steve's) church who seems to love his life. He's single, sets his own schedule, has good friends, and is trying to live in an urban center with other peers.

From the outside, Jordan's life seems charmed. But in a recent conversation, he confessed that he just lost his job, which made him realize that he does not love his career trajectory. Further, the amount of debt he accrued to get his degree leaves him overwhelmed with school loan payments. With a specialized degree, it's not easy to break into a relatively new field, so Jordan feels vocationally stuck. The competitive job market leaves him few options beyond an hour-long commute, inadequate pay, and slim benefits.

Most adults tell Jordan to "move" or "just get another job," but this feels insensitive. He has worked to develop a meaningful friend group, wants to grow his relationship with his girlfriend, and attends a church he cares about. Moving away for the sake of a better job means Jordan loses almost everything and everyone valuable to him. Like so many of his peers, Jordan feels behind in his life goals and sees little hope of catching up.

Our young adult children typically trend older when they finally achieve many of the markers usually associated with full adulthood. A Growing With parenting posture helps us appreciate and empathize with our kids' extended trek to adulthood.

The median age for first marriage is now five years later than 50 years ago, hovering at around 26.5 for women and 28.7 for men.¹⁴ Only 20 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds were married in 2010, in comparison with 59 percent in 1960.¹⁵ Despite this shift, both young men and young women still feel an "age 30 deadline" by which they hope to find their soul mate and tie the knot.¹⁶

The average age for women bearing their first child is 25 years, almost five years later than women in 1970.¹⁷ The average birthrate has declined steeply in the US, from 3.5 children per woman in 1960 to 2.0 in 2010.¹⁸

Given the uncertainties of today's economic climate and the increased assumption that a college degree is a nearly universal requirement for the middle-class job market, more of our young adult kids are pursuing more higher education. Two-thirds of high school graduates now enter college, a higher proportion than previously in American history. Yet only 28 percent of young adults have secured a four-year college degree by age 25.¹⁹

When they eventually plunge into the workforce, the average young adult holds six different jobs between the ages of 18 to 26. Whether because of job dissatisfaction, better opportunities, or a young person's changing immigration status, two-thirds of these job shifts occur between ages 18 and 22.²⁰

Partly because of our young adults' lengthening career and educational odysseys, they take longer to become financially

Why Are Young Adults Getting Married Later Than Previous Generations?

In answering the question of why young adults seem to meander toward marriage, practical theologians David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling highlight two types of reasons, the first of which are "objective" and represent broad sociocultural changes such as:¹

- More education is now required to secure preferred jobs, which delays the financial security generally desired before marriage.
- Women have more educational and career opportunities, so they may feel less dependent on marriage for financial and social status.
- While the biological clock is a reality, reproductive technology opens options for later childbearing not possible for previous generations.
- The widespread availability of birth control and the cultural tolerance for premarital sex means individu-

independent. In comparison with fifty years ago, parents today provide 11 percent more financial help to young adult children.²¹ Forty percent of young adults in their twenties move back home with their parents at least once.²² In some cases, twentysomethings are pouring their paychecks into their extended family, which provides needed help for their parents, grandparents, and siblings but also prohibits them from saving or investing.

As a result of these shifts, sociologists monitoring the five key “adult” events of leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children report a dip in the number of 30-year-olds who have attained all five of these markers. In 1960, more than two-thirds of young adults could check all five of these boxes. In 2000, this was true of less than half of females and less than a third of males.²³

als feel freer to engage in a sexual relationship prior to marriage.

In addition, Setran and Kiesling point to more “subjective” individual reasons, including:

- Many young adults have grown up in the shadow of divorce and shy away from lasting commitments before investing extra time to ensure the relationship will work.
- Some would rather explore, travel, experience life on their own, and develop a strong personal identity instead of getting married.
- Many young adults do not see marriage as part of the pathway to adult maturity, but rather as the endpoint of that pathway—a relationship to enter once their individual accomplishments are complete. This makes marriage the ultimate “merit badge” when the time is right—which is likely “not right now.”

1. David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 166.

In fact, today's young adults choose different markers to define adulthood. According to Arnett, they believe adulthood arrives when they are able to accept responsibility for their actions, make independent decisions, and become financially stable.²⁴

It's just that those three markers are occurring later and later. Growing With parenting helps us journey with our kids, not judge them, especially when our 28-year-olds sometimes seem like 18-year-olds.

Are Today's Young People as Entitled as They're Labeled?

No, they aren't. We wince when we see young people characterized as entitled simply because they are taking longer to achieve our cultural markers of adulthood. Having said that, today's teenagers and young adults have logged experiences that make them more prone to attitudes and actions that can be easily misperceived.

Current teenagers and emerging adults are not as loyal to employers as previous generations, in part because they have seen their parents and peers experience layoffs and the pensions of older generations evaporate.²⁵ In addition, despite being told they will get a well-paying job after college, it's often the youngest in our society who are hardest hit during our nation's economic downturns. Fearful and financially strapped young adults are quick to jump ship to new (and hopefully more secure) job possibilities when they emerge.²⁶ What might look flighty may actually be a reasoned response to a new employment reality.

In addition, our culture promises this generation instant results. They can take online classes, binge-watch Netflix when they want, and receive online orders in less than 24 hours.

Your kids are also used to giving feedback on Yelp and posting about themselves and others on social media, instilling a sometimes-inflated sense of others' interest in their opinions.²⁷

They've also come to expect that things will generally go their way. Holding up the mirror to examine our own parenting, we

see today's young people are used to their parents stepping in to change the rules in their favor. If teachers are too strict, supervisors are unfair, or coaches are blind to their talent, many (especially middle- and upper-class) parents, stepparents, and grandparents have inserted themselves to fix what was “wrong.”²⁸

Add this together and we end up with a current generation that approaches vocational and other major choices more like dating relationships they can exit when desired.²⁹ On the surface this may seem like entitlement or disloyalty, but often underneath hide the foundations of parenting strategies and cultural expectations that previous generations have instilled and passed on.

Why 30 Can't Be the New 20

Given the earlier starting line and later finish line in the journey toward adulthood, it's tempting for twentysomethings to conclude that it's acceptable—and maybe desirable—to drift from job to job and relationship to relationship. Meg Jay, a clinical psychologist specializing in adult development and twentysomethings, recalls being told by one of her clients that the twenties were supposed to be “the time of her life.” After all, this young person quipped, “30 is the new 20.”³⁰

What's at risk when young people begin to see 30 as the new 20?

Having watched far too many young adults roam romantically and vocationally, Jay warns that as young adults approach age 30, “a spotty resume that used to reflect twentysomething freedom suddenly seems suspect and embarrassing. A good first date leads not so much to romantic fantasies about ‘The One’ as to calculations about the soonest possible time marriage and a baby might happen.”³¹

Far from being a decade to coast, the twenties are a developmental sweet spot not to be wasted. Growing With parents grasp that while kids can make important decisions and even change their trajectory after age 30, the twenties are an important inflection

point for investment as young adults make some of their most significant choices about life, love, work, and worldview. Your twentysomething young adult will benefit from preparation, a plan, and people who nudge them toward God’s best for them not only now but also for decades to come. This third decade in life is a time not just to drift toward adulthood but instead to take deliberate, intentional steps toward specific adult-like goals.

Growing With in Faith, Family, and World: Three Dynamic Verbs

As you’ve gathered by now, the need for us to learn and grow with our children has emerged in large part because their twenty-first-century expedition is different than ours was at their age. On the one hand, our kids’ sophistication has accelerated and it seems like they are getting older earlier; but on the other hand, they feel less mature as the typical markers of adulthood are now delayed. In the midst of this jumble of both hurry and waiting, Growing With parenting integrates our children’s developmental shifts into a cohesive family strategy that brings out the best both in us and in our kids.

As we work toward a mutual journey of intentional growth that trusts God to transform us all, we need to pay special attention to three key areas of our child’s exploration: *family*, *faith*, and *future*.³² In all three areas, they need us to learn from parenting strategies that have worked for us when they were younger while simultaneously adjusting those strategies to the contours of their current trail.

Because Growing With parenting is an evolving pilgrimage, our research and experiences compel us to suggest three verbs that reflect the primary goal in a child’s trek with family, faith, and the future. We call these “dynamic verbs” because a young person’s experience of them is constantly changing, so we have to keep paying attention and keep responding with agility. Since these

three dynamic verbs—*withing*, *faithing*, and *adulthooding*—comprise the essence of the Growing With parenting strategy we showcase in the rest of this book, we conclude this chapter with illustrative stories of three different families, each learning to grow with their children.

Withing: A New Relational Support

By *withing*, we mean *a family's growth in supporting each other as children grow more independent*. At any life stage, we are either growing or stagnating. In any family's journey, we are relationally either growing together or growing apart. Activities done on behalf of our kids or near our kids do not necessarily mean connection. As we will dive into further in chapters 3 and 4, Growing With seeks more.

Nineteen-year-old TJ and his parents, Cedric and Kimberly, are a Growing With family seeking more. They have been active in a Growing Young church (included in our research) since TJ was a toddler. Six years ago, Cedric, who is a football coach, wanted his middle school son to play a sport. It didn't have to be football; Cedric just wanted TJ to stay active. So TJ chose golf.

While not the sport Cedric envisioned for his son, it quickly became obvious to TJ's family that TJ had a knack for golf. And he loved it. Both in middle school and high school, TJ played as much golf as his homework schedule allowed. TJ's hard work paid off with multiple regional and state championships. TJ's parents were at every tournament, cheering him on.

Thanks to his golf prowess, TJ was recruited by 12 major universities during his senior year in high school. Even though Cedric and Kimberly cared deeply about TJ's success in college and beyond, they knew they faced a parental fork in the road. While they both had strong opinions and wanted God's best for TJ, they recognized that college was a life-orienting decision they could not and should not make on his behalf. As they later explained to

us, “Our guiding principle was that we weren’t going to make the decision *for* him, but we wanted to walk *with* him.”

Kimberly asked TJ to make a list of questions to investigate at each school. As he got answers to those questions, TJ crossed six schools off the list where playing golf would preclude him from exploring his interest in debate and his passion for playing guitar.

With four months left to make his college decision, TJ visited the remaining six schools. Cedric and Kimberly accompanied him on some of the trips when they felt like they needed to see and taste a particular college’s culture. They wanted to experience the military flavor of Annapolis. They wanted to imagine with their son how his ethnicity might affect his college experience. As a biracial teenager growing up in a multicultural urban neighborhood, TJ quickly realized that he felt most at home on ethnically diverse college campuses.

Whether or not they were at each campus with TJ, Cedric and Kimberly helped TJ list what he liked and disliked about each college. Oriented by their conviction that this was TJ’s decision to make, they never told him what they thought he should do. Instead, in the spirit of Growing With, they helped him pinpoint the aspects of each college that matched his emerging vision for his life.

One evening TJ came into the living room and announced that he had just emailed coaches at two of the schools to withdraw himself from their recruitment pool—without first talking to Cedric and Kimberly. Kimberly’s first internal reaction was, “Oh no, you didn’t talk to us about this first.” But within a few moments, as she later recalled, “I knew I needed to put my money where my mouth was and support him as he figured this out himself.”

In the end, TJ narrowed down his choice to two great—but very different—schools. With two days left before the NCAA deadline, he chose a small private college close to home that would give him plenty of time to pursue debate and leading worship in addition to playing golf.

Cedric and Kimberly could have tried to make TJ's decision *for* him. Instead, they wisely chose to journey *with* him. Not once did his parents tell him what they thought he should do; the decision was his to make.

Faithing: A New Spiritual Openness

We tend to think of *faith* as a noun. We assume faith is something we have. That's true, but theologically faith is also a verb; it is something we exercise so that it continues to grow. By *faithing*, we mean *a child's growth in owning and embodying their own journey with God as they encounter new experiences and information.*³³

For some of our adolescents, those early encounters with new experiences and information initially cause their faith to cool. As we will further explore in chapters 5 and 6, Growing With parents who hope that their teenagers' transition into the next life stage will bring about more encouraging faith news often end up disappointed. Whether it's because college-age young adults want to party, they are differentiating from the family and faith cultures of their adolescence, or they simply stayed up too late the night before, being involved in a faith community often feels counter to a young person's quest for autonomy. As Christian Smith, a sociologist and lead researcher for the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), describes, college-aged adults "aren't asking their parents for a weekly allowance anymore, so why should they keep going to their church or keep practicing their faith in the same old way?"³⁴

While there are some indicators (and finger crossing) that young adults will find their way back to church, the migration often doesn't happen until after they get married or have children of their own. Given the trend toward emerging adults waiting longer to become spouses and/or parents, this means that their church attendance gap could be 10 years or more.³⁵ The absence of religious input during the period when young people are making crucial life decisions may significantly impact their future spiritual trajectories.³⁶

In the midst of our kids' faithing highs and lows, our faith as parents also continues to evolve and grow. This was certainly the case with the McKay family. College was not in 17-year-old Colin McKay's plans. Instead, he had set his sights on becoming a microbrewer.

One comprehensive study of the faith of over 2,000 young people, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), identified the dominant, de facto religious belief system of teenagers today as *moralistic therapeutic deism*.

It is *moralistic*, meaning that religious young people equate faith with being a good, moral person (often this boils down to "being nice").

It is *therapeutic*, meaning that faith becomes a mechanism to feel better about oneself.

And it is *deistic*, meaning that God exists but is not involved in human affairs with any regularity.¹

Teenagers are not devising this lackluster faith on their own. They are not *substituting* moralistic therapeutic deism for the messages they hear and the modeling they see in churches and families. Instead, they are *mimicking* the tame faith that permeates their faith communities and homes. Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean, a frequent advisor for FYI's research and a member of the NSYR research team, concludes,

Who can blame churches, really, for earnestly ladling this stew into teenagers, filling them with an agreeable porridge about the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies? We have convinced ourselves that this is the gospel, but in fact it is much closer to another mess of potage, an unacknowledged but widely held religious outlook among American teenagers that is primarily dedicated, not to loving God, but to avoiding interpersonal friction.²

1. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–65.

2. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 10.

While his mom and stepdad, Deanne and Ray, had a hard time imagining microbrewing as a career, they tried to hold their tongues. They were glad they did so, because eight years later, the midtwenties version of Colin was recognized in his field for his diverse creations and unique flavors.

While Colin's career was soaring, his faith was not. Though he had been raised in the church, Colin told his mom and stepdad that he was now agnostic. As devout Christians, Deanne and Ray tried to be patient with their son's journey, but that patience turned to panic when Colin started dating Mindy, a young woman who made it very clear that she was an atheist.

Desperate for help, Deanne and Ray sought advice from others in their church. Some in their congregation admonished them to "cut off" their son. Others challenged them to "take a stand for Jesus" by evangelizing Mindy. Still others said their son would return to Christ if they would simply pray more.

None of this well-intended counsel sat right with Deanne and Ray, so they chose to keep loving their son and welcomed Mindy into their occasional family gatherings. After a few months, Mindy pulled Deanne aside and with tears in her eyes said, "I don't understand why you welcome me the way you do. I've told you I'm an atheist, yet you show me so much kindness. Thank you."

Now 27, Colin is still brewing beer and still dating Mindy. While Deanne and Ray remain authentic in their faith and Colin and Mindy still keep faith largely at bay, they all seem to be experiencing a more profound sense of grace and love.

While Deanne and Ray wish—and pray—that Colin and Mindy would reorient their lives toward Jesus, they cherish their relationship with these two young adults and the sparks of openness to faith that flicker in them here and there. Instead of Colin and Mindy distancing themselves from God and family, they have been drawn to the faithing of Colin's parents who, admittedly, are still figuring it out as they go.

Adulthood: A New Capacity to Shape the World

The verb *adulthood*, with origins traced back as far as 2008 on Twitter (usually as a hashtag), captures the ups and downs a young person experiences as they do the hard work of growing up. By *adulthood*, we mean *a child's growth in agency as they embrace opportunities to shape the world around them.*

Our daughter, Krista, gave me (Kara) and my husband a front-row seat to her adulthood process when she started high school. Midway through her eighth-grade year, she and I met with her new high school counselor to choose her classes. When it was time to specify her foreign language requirement, Spanish was the obvious option. While she didn't think she was very good at foreign languages like Spanish, Krista already had a few years of Spanish under her belt from middle school. We live in Southern California. More and more of our neighbors locally, nationally, and globally speak Spanish. I took AP Spanish in high school. My husband and I met on a mission trip to Mexico. Krista's older brother loves Spanish. In short, this was an easy choice.

Until a few weeks later when she started taking American Sign Language (ASL) during her last quarter of eighth grade. She came home every day and enthusiastically showed us what she had learned that day in ASL. She never did that in Spanish (or any other class for that matter).

She watched videos online to learn more signs—working ahead of the rest of the class. (For the record, she never did that in any other classes either.)

With high school still a few months off, Krista asked if she could replace Spanish with ASL. Dave and I told her we wanted to think about it for a few days. That night in our bedroom, it took only a few minutes for Dave and me to make a decision that seemed pretty simple to us—Spanish offered our eighth grader more future job prospects, more opportunities for conversation

and to build relationships in our neighborhood and church, and was more likely to be used by God in cross-cultural friendships.

Krista decided to convince us to change our minds. She decided to take some first steps toward adulting.

She prepared a presentation about sign language for Dave and me—accompanied by a multimedia show she designed on her laptop—expounding on the top 10 reasons she should take ASL.

She called the admissions offices at not one but two colleges she was interested in attending to see if taking ASL would affect her acceptance.

In her 14 years, she had never done extra work to try to change our minds. So we prayed, did our own research, talked to other parents and her teacher, and worked through some of our control issues as well as our pseudo-obsession with this decision. We eventually granted her permission to substitute ASL for Spanish.

Three years later, part of me still wishes she was taking Spanish. In many ways, Spanish is the “safer” choice for her future. Letting her choose sign language was a Growing With baby step for Dave and me in letting go of the reins of control and letting her race forward.

All-In Parenting

These three Growing With verbs remind us and our kids that we are all in-process, and as parents, we must keep reimagining our roles. More specifically:

While *withing* is about our relationship with our children, we generally take the lead in laying the relational bridges that keep us connected. Our role focuses on building new ways to connect with them as they (and we) grow older.

While both we and our children are *faithing*, we are more likely than they are to keep our radar tuned to both our and their faith journeys. Our role is to engage them creatively as they explore

their faith journeys while recognizing that our own journeys must unfold as well.

While our children are the primary ones in the family who are *adulthooding*, it's usually up to us to thoughtfully respond to the relational and vocational challenges they encounter. Our role thus shifts, requiring us to be more patient, less controlling, and more attentive to their values.

We think of this interplay of withing, faithing, and adulthooding as a journey that you take with your child along a Growing With path.



We will add more details to this path in chapter 2, but for now, note that it is not a linear path. It is not a completely clear or straight path. Like navigating a complex trail or a city subway system, there are curves, stops, and at times confusing intersections that require help and support. As you know from parenting thus far, every day with your child is an (often unpredictable) adventure—one that keeps you on your toes and wondering what to do next.

So while this book offers all sorts of ideas and suggestions for your child, we offer even more for you as the parent. Parenting in this stage isn't about meeting your kid halfway. Parenting is more about being all-in.

Our Prayer-Filled Hope for You and Your Family

Name any error that could be made in trying to journey with your kids' withing, faithing, and adulthooding. The two of us have probably made any error you can think of. And we've felt the struggles and tensions that seem almost inherent in parenting today.

We know the feelings of peer pressure that emerge as parents compare their kids' achievements and watch their kids compete for coveted slots on the court, in the classroom, in the concert hall, and eventually maybe on the college campus.

We know how it feels to be bombarded by articles, books, and posts that remind us that we aren't giving our kids enough attention and one-on-one time. Or maybe too much attention and too much one-on-one time.

We have felt the force of the unreachable standard that tells us we're not preparing our teenagers and young adults for future tech jobs. Simultaneously, we are also accused of allowing them to become addicted to technology.

We have aspired to raise strong and compassionate girls and boys in the midst of the plethora of voices that caution us not to make them too masculine or feminine.

We have wrestled with the tension of pushing our kids too hard while preparing them for a competitive world.

We have encountered the excitement and lament of navigating a world that fails to see what we see in our kids while still demanding so much from them.

In the midst of these tensions and contradictions we navigate, here is our invitation for all of us parents: Let's be honest with ourselves. Let's admit that we are not perfect. Let's accept that we are not meant to be perfect. And neither are our kids.

Our hope-filled prayer is that this book helps you avoid the outright lie that it's too late to adjust your parenting. That the ship has sailed. That you've missed the boat. (And any other nautical phrases that make you feel anchored—get it?—to parenting-as-you've-always-done-it.)

To swap metaphors, as your child hits adolescence and young adulthood, the ruts of your family's routines and patterns are deeper than when your child was younger. It takes more energy to exit those ruts and forge a new *Growing With* path.

But both of us are optimistic that you can forge that path.

Our optimism for you and your Growing With parenting is fueled by how we've seen the God of the universe change families and young people alike.

Like the 28-year-old pastor's daughter who wanted nothing to do with faith or church during college who is now blogging about how Jesus has changed her life.

Or the 23-year-old who chose drugs over relationship with his parents but has now done an about-face and is taking baby steps toward home.

Or the 17-year-old who used to "hate" her dad and stepmom but now seems to tolerate—and sometimes even enjoy—them.

But forging new paths means we need to forge a new parenting strategy. As Albert Einstein reportedly claimed, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."³⁷ So in the rest of this book, we continue to dream with you about a Growing With parenting method that helps your teenagers and emerging adults grow with God, your family, and our world. And that helps you do the same.

Practical Questions to Grow With My Child

WITHING
FAITHING
ADULTING



1. If you are a parent of a teenager, how does your child's experience confirm that 14 is the new 24? What in your child's life counters this saying?
2. If you are a parent of a twentysomething, how does your child's life confirm that 28 is the new 18? How, if at all, is your child perhaps also embracing the myth that 30 is the new 20?
3. Which of the three Growing With dynamic verbs—withering, faithing, and adulting—is easiest for you to embrace?
4. Which of the three Growing With verbs is toughest for you and your child to embody? What makes it difficult for you?
5. What do you hope happens in your family as a result of reading this book? How about in your own attitudes or behaviors?

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