

WORTHY OF LOVE AND READY TO CHANGE THE WORLD

47% of Gen Zers believe adversity makes them stronger



Camp has always been a place where kids and teenagers can explore the love of God. But what if they don't feel worthy of love? What if their life experience before camp has planted feelings of unworthiness so deep that what was always done at camp isn't as effective as it once was? And how do you empower your young staff members to let campers know they're worthy of love when your cabin leaders or program teams are struggling to embrace that fact for themselves? ▶

Recent research from Young Life's RELATE project suggests older teens and young adults in Gen Z feel less worthy of being loved than younger Gen Zers. There's a lot to learn from these statistics.

I've been in hundreds of camp environments all over the world, and I believe in the power of camp. I think camp has all the right ingredients to unlock a sense of worth and belonging in someone, but we might need to update the recipe when the kids we're trying to reach are telling us what they're missing.

What We're Learning

According to Young Life, the RELATE project surveyed more than 7,000 adolescents (ages 13 to 24) in the U.S., United Kingdom, Mexico and Eastern Africa. Most alarmingly, the study revealed that almost half of all Gen Zers surveyed in the U.S. don't feel confident that they are worthy of being loved. Between the ages of 16 and 18, the scores drop even more.

Another finding revealed that Gen Z feels less connected as they get older, with fewer than six in 10 young adults 18 and over saying they have at least one older adult who cares about them. The good news is, Gen Z said their mother or their spouse/partner is their primary trusted relationship. These are the people Gen Z will go to when they need to talk or need help.

This generation worries about a lot of things. Some have even referred to Gen Z as the anxious generation. The future is their biggest source of worry, but not just their personal future. They worry about the future of the world (and they have 24/7 access to what is happening globally in the palm of their hands).

According to Young Life, about half of the teens and young adults surveyed said that adversity makes them stronger or motivates them to change something in their lives. But about one-quarter of those surveyed say adversity makes it hard for them to function.

An encouraging finding in the study showed that about 80% of Gen Z believe they can make a difference in the lives of others. They are confident they can make an impact on the world. ▶

Almost half of all Gen Zers surveyed in the U.S. don't feel confident that they are worthy of being loved.



Worthy of Love

Our program staff is in the process of rewriting some of our training pieces. We came across a list of keywords and definitions our staff can use to identify our campers. Words and/or phrases like, "You are strong," "You are clever," "You are determined." By providing this list of 80 words and phrases, we can help a cabin leader show campers that they are being listened to and watched. How great would it be if every cabin leader was able to identify the best trait of each camper and share that with them? It would take the feeling of, "Wow, you listened to me," to the next level of, "Wow, you know who I am."

—James Rock, camp director of Trout Lake (Pine Hill, Minnesota)

"I believe I am worthy of being loved."

Africa



U.S.



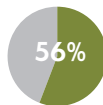
U.K.



Mexico



India



■ Gen Z who are confident = 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

Source: Young Life's RELATE project



Adversity

Camp, by its design and nature, creates many physical, emotional and spiritual challenges. By using intentional debriefs of what we call object lessons (planned challenges) and teachable moments (unplanned challenges), we can help campers and staff learn from and grow through challenges.

—Michael Perry, executive director at SpringHill Camps (Ewart, Michigan)

How would you describe the impact of adversity on you today?

	Africa	U.S.	U.K.	Mexico	India
Makes me stronger	49%	47%	36%	53%	54%
Motivates me to make a change in my life	51%	42%	39%	47%	53%
Motivates me to make the world a better place	41%	31%	25%	20%	30%
Makes it hard for me to function sometimes	25%	31%	29%	20%	25%
I don't like to think about it, so I avoid it	15%	24%	23%	12%	15%
I withdraw from others	17%	20%	22%	12%	13%

Source: Young Life's RELATE project

I believe Christian camping is uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of Gen Z and equip them to grow and flourish.

What We Can Do

As a youth pastor since 2001 and a parent of two teenagers, I have encountered some of these findings daily. I'm sure you have, too.

Fortunately, I believe Christian camping is uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of Gen Z and equip them to grow and flourish. Camp is a catalytic space for building deep connection, showing love and shining the spotlight on the gifts God has given campers and young staff to go into the world and make a difference.

As you think about meeting the needs of your Gen Z campers and staff, here are some suggestions based on what the research has shown us.

Building Connections

The way we host conversations, play games and set up discussions should create safety and connection. One way to create a connection with cabin counselors and campers right away would be to record video introductions of the staff members and share those with parents before their child arrives at camp.

Once at camp, storytelling is a great way to ignite a spark of connection. It's a sacred thing to feel heard by someone else. As part of your program, stories can be written, told, illustrated or mapped out on a timeline. Storytelling gives campers a chance to share at their own pace and begin at a starting point that feels comfortable for them. You can also organize interactive workshops or creative activities like art, music or outdoor adventures that encourage self-expression and foster connection naturally.

Another way to help campers feel heard is to create a way for them to ask questions anonymously, giving campers a space to voice their concerns and curiosities without so much pressure to have a direct conversation.

Engage parents in your quest to build connections with their children. It might be helpful to ask a question during registration that gives parents an opportunity to speak on behalf of their teenager. Asking, "What's something important you want us to know about your teenager?" offers your camp staff helpful insight and a potential avenue to start building a connection. After camp, a staff member can share with parents, "Here's something I learned about your teenager while they were at camp," and share character traits, strengths and other positive observations that can help communicate intentional care and facilitate greater connection.

If your young staff are feeling disconnected, consider developing regular check-ins and opportunities for feedback to make sure they are in a good place physically, emotionally and spiritually. I recommend designing time before, during and after camp for leaders to cultivate their relationships with God and others. ►

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Showing Worth

Camp gives us a few days to reinforce a love that might feel foreign to a kid in a world that is weighing in on their worth with every grade, experience and achievement (or lack thereof). One way to create an atmosphere that fosters feelings of worth is to create moments where teenagers can hear what their group (leaders or peers) appreciate about them.

One of the most powerful camp experiences I've had was during a nightly routine where everyone in the camp took time to write "care cards." Every camper had their own envelope, and anyone could give them a note pointing out something good they noticed in them that day. Leaders made sure to write reflections, affirmations and encouragements to their assigned campers each day, making sure no one was missed. At the end of camp, everyone left with dozens of reasons why they are loved.

I love the ministry of a memento. Something as simple as a bracelet, a painted rock or stick from camp can be a reminder of the experience at camp and reinforce the message that they are loved wholly, and don't have to do anything special to earn it. ►

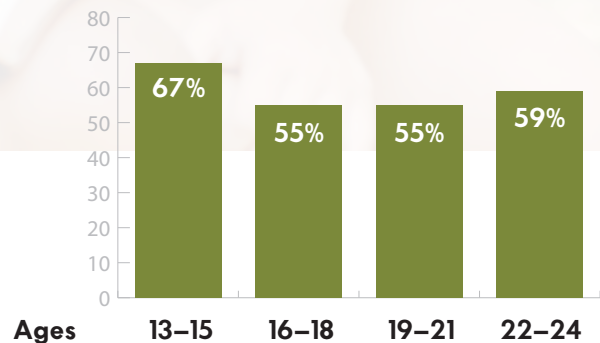


Feeling Connected

Most of our summer staff fall into this category, as most start out between the ages of 18 to 21. We have a heightened sensitivity to their need for intentional community that can be lacking at this stage of life. We provide community groups, teams and partners to do their jobs alongside, staff events and access to leadership. Even with all these things in place, it is still an evident need for those in this age group, no matter how many resources and opportunities are in place.

—Linda Paulk, executive director of Sky Ranch Camps (Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma)

“I am content with my *friendships and relationships.*”



■ Strongly agree — rated 8, 9 or 10 out of 10

Source: Young Life's RELATE project

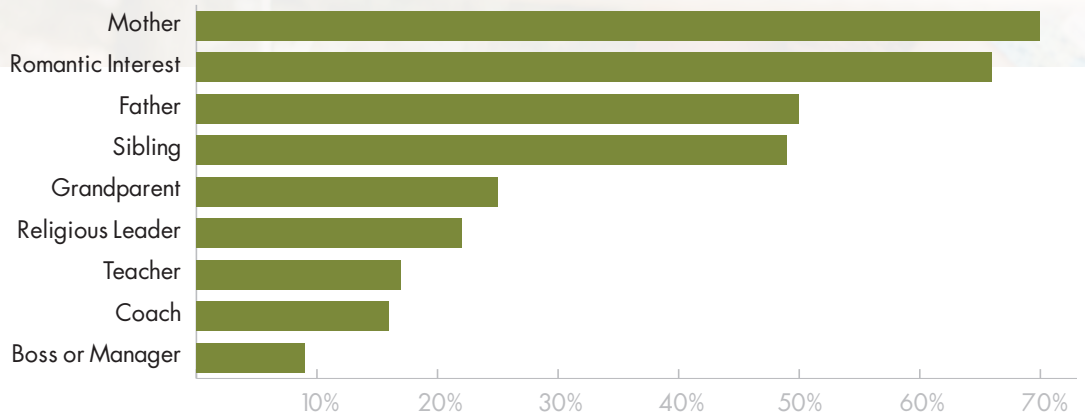


Trusted Relationships

Back in the day, we created an “away from home” experience for campers, purposely doing as little communication as possible with parents. We now recognize that parents are a key connection for our campers and that spiritual conversations at home are pivotal. We focus on how we can help campers bring the camp experience home. We want to help parents talk through what happened at camp on their car ride home, so we’re providing parents with questions to ask their camper to help facilitate this.

—James Rock, camp director of Trout Lake (Pine Hill, Minnesota)

“These are the people I can talk to about *things that really matter.*”



Source: Young Life's RELATE project

Engage parents in your quest to build connections with their children.

Empowering Campers and Staff

We create places where young people feel freer to be themselves by giving them room to breathe, ask questions and make decisions for themselves. When I was leading a youth ministry with hundreds of middle schoolers attending weekly, I never knew who would be in the room or at what phase they were on their faith journey. There was always someone new, someone curious, someone not sure about who or what they could trust.

That's when I started using "prayer spaces" to offer space for anyone who needed unstructured time to explore their questions, doubts and relationships. When I gave young teens the option to choose how they spent their time, I saw them light up, explore, wonder and connect with God in profoundly unique ways.

At camp, there are so many opportunities for "choose your own adventure" activities, where you can empower campers to explore their questions and make their own decisions in a safe environment.

Beyond the camp experience, if you want a teenager or young adult to believe they can make a difference in their world, show them the difference they're already making and invite them to take another step. The experiences that create potential in the difference makers start with naming the good that's already there.

You can share with young people these truths: God made you. God loves you. God designed your life uniquely and for a purpose. Look at what you've been through; look what you've done with the highs and lows. Look at how you grew.

Camp is the best place to wonder about the difference our lives can make. Start by noticing what's good about the Gen Zers around you, listen to their ideas and then brainstorm next steps together.

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There's a lot more to learn from the Young Life RELATE project. You can go to relate.younglife.org to download the full report. Special thanks to Kimberly A. Nollan, Gabe Knipp and Arthur L. Satterwhite, III from Young Life for their help with this article. ■



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