

Every Teenager Figuring Out Faith Asks These 3 Questions

"I've been slowly reflecting more on what it means to be a Christian, and I feel like I still don't know where exactly I fit into everything. I feel like I'm still trying to figure out my faith."

When a teenager in your life is struggling to figure out their faith, it can be scary. For them ... and for us. Whether you're a parent, mentor or leader, young people's questions can raise all kinds of anxiety.

The good news is that young people want to know how God is relevant to them. The bad news is that for many teenagers, their answer is "not much."

For over 15 years, we have been trying to answer questions about young people's faith through our research at the Fuller Youth Institute. Multiple studies indicate that about half of young people who have been involved in a church or youth ministry will drift from God and the church after high school. None of us want to imagine the teenagers we care about most leaving their faith behind in adulthood—but for far too many, it's far too real.

Our latest quest to understand young people's faith included surveys and focus groups with over 2,200 teenagers as well as in-depth multi-session interviews with 27 diverse youth group high school students nationwide. In one of these interviews, our interviewer asked a Midwestern high schooler, "How would you say your faith has shaped your sense of identity?"

There was a long pause before the student answered, "Not like a huge amount, but my faith like shapes part of who I am, I guess ... It's a big part of my life, but it's not my whole life, I guess."

Today's teenagers can access almost any information. They can instantaneously receive scores of possible answers to just about anything. But they're also 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 we 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.

Too often we're stuck in questions that reflect what happened in the past, or missing what's unfolding in the present, or afraid of what's to come in the future.

As one high school student yearned to his leader, "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. In the Gospels, Jesus was asked nearly 200 questions. That's remarkable, but what's even more remarkable is that Jesus Himself asked over 300.

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—and walk with them toward finding better answers.

What's more toxic than tough questions?

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% of former youth group students admitted to having significant questions about faith in high school.

But 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.

The 3 Big Questions That Drive the Rest

While many questions are on the minds of today's teenagers, we've unearthed the three primary questions undergirding all the rest. These queries 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 ask ultimately finds its genesis in these three big questions:

Who am I? The question of identity.

Where do I fit? The question of belonging.

What difference can I make? The question of purpose.

Of course, these aren't just young people questions; they are people questions. They aren't relevant only to adolescents; they are relevant to all of us. But for young people, the three big questions of identity, belonging and purpose are at a constant, rolling boil.

We wrote *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager* to help you and any adult who cares about young people walk with them while they're trying to "figure out" life and faith. Keeping identity, belonging and purpose at the forefront of your mind can help you have better connections and conversations with teenagers and point them toward faithful answers.

The journey starts with deciding we won't be afraid of the questions anymore.

Adapted with permission from Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, 3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021). {eo}