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CATEGORY Culture Group Magazine Article

# Teenagers' Top Priorities

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By **Rick Lawrence**  
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Every year GROUP surveys more Christian teenagers than anyone in the world. That's 4 retweet because we collect a survey from every teenager who attends one of our summer workcamps—about 20,000 Christian kids (groupworkcamps.com). The kids who serve at a workcamp represent a cross-section of their youth group



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Some of them are “core” committed followers of Christ, but most aren't. All of them have decided that helping poor people by donating a week of their summer vacation to refurbish their substandard housing is well worth it—pretty standard teenage behavior in light of today's service-focused culture.

So that explains why it might be relevant and even crucial for youth workers, like you, to weigh what all of these kids are telling us when they fill out their anonymous surveys. And that's even more true with this report, because I narrowed the focus of my questions to two sweeping areas of investigation:

1. What “life priorities” are most important to teenagers today?
2. What “dying needs” are they most interested in getting met?

For the first question, I also asked kids to guess how their parents would wish them to respond—a totally unscientific experiment in comparing their real priorities with the priorities they assume their parents have for them. I've printed the results to the first question in this issue. We'll reveal the results of the second question in the next issue of GROUP (May/June).

In addition, I decided to gather insights and reactions from veteran youth leaders around the country, so I sent these results to the people who serve on our Inside Track team for the Simply Youth Ministry Conference (youthministry.com/conference)—about 250 people from every denomination and geographic area of the U.S. I've snagged the comments that struck me as particularly insightful, along with comments that concisely represent the wider views of those I asked to react to the survey.

If you have something to add to the conversation, send your thoughts to me at [rlawrence@group.com](mailto:rlawrence@group.com).

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If you have something to add to the conversation, send your thoughts to me at [lawrence@group.com](mailto:lawrence@group.com). Last, if you know youth ministry friends who don't subscribe to GROUP (horrors!) who would benefit from the results of this survey, pass it along to them.

### Teenagers' Top Priorities

We asked Christian teenagers to scan a list of 20 "life priorities," then circle the seven priorities that are "most important" to them. Then we asked them to rank their seven choices in order—from one to seven—of how important they are to them. So the lowest numbers indicate the highest importance. Then we asked them to choose priorities, and their importance, as if they were filling out the survey the way their parents wished they'd answer. We've listed these results in descending order, according to the way teenagers answered for themselves. The second column compares their answers, and how they ranked, to the expectations they feel from their parents.

Top Priorities (Description)	Teenagers (Average & Rank)	Parents' Expectations (Average & Rank)
Praying and developing a relationship with God	2.45 (1)	2.43 (1)
Hangout time with parents	3.31 (2)	3.58 (4)
Hangout time with friends	3.45 (3)	4.79 (16)
Hangout time with siblings	3.46 (4)	4.03 (7)
Participation in youth-group activities	3.49 (5)	4.13 (9)
Excelling academically	3.59 (6)	3.04 (2)
Personal Bible study	3.61 (7)	3.35 (3)
Participation in church-wide activities	3.87 (8)	3.93 (5)
Participation in sports	3.9 (9)	4.78 (15)
Serving others by volunteering	4.39 (10)	4.5 (13)
Participation in hobbies, clubs, or extra-curricular interests	4.55 (11)	4.88 (18)
Texting friends and family	4.83 (12)	4.03 (6)
Listening to music	4.84 (13)	4.63 (14)
Earning money through after-school jobs	4.95 (14)	4.81 (17)
Reading books or magazines	5.06 (15)	5.48 (20)
Playing video games	5.11 (16)	4.07 (8)
Talking on the phone to friends or family	5.14 (17)	5.42 (19)
Spending time online	5.31 (18)	4.31 (11)
Watching TV	5.34 (19)	4.26 (10)
Watching movies	5.6 (20)	4.32 (12)

Almost universally the youth workers I asked to react to these survey results were shocked and surprised by the way teenagers ranked their priorities, and the way they represented their parents' priorities. The kids in their groups typically express little interest in "spiritual" pursuits, and are much more interested in texting, sports, video gaming, and other non-church activities. In addition, youth workers were stunned by how high kids rated hangout time with their parents and siblings. Most said their kids express exactly the opposite desire to them. I've highlighted their responses relative to the results that surprised or challenged them most.

### Are They Really That Interested In Spiritual Stuff?

- "Overall, I'm not surprised by the results, with the exception of the number-one priority being 'praying

and developing a relationship with Jesus.’ Maybe it’s just the kids that I work with, but based on our conversations, for many of our students that’s not even on their radar. Depending on the context of the survey, maybe they were just giving the ‘Jesus’ answer.... I know for me, the kids who attend those things are more the ‘core’ group of kids. Even then, I cannot imagine a scenario [where] kids would choose ‘Personal Bible Study’ over ‘Texting Friends and Family.’”

—John Mulholland, Iowa

- “[A] shocker was the fact that the teens listed personal Bible study as more important than time online and texting friends and family. Even though the majority of my youth group are professing Christians, most do not read their Bibles and definitely find texting more appealing than Bible study (especially because I sometimes catch them texting during Bible study).”

—Jonathan Hale, Concord, North Carolina

- “Our teens may share priorities the way they’re listed, but their actions communicate something different. They’re so busy with school, college classes (while in high school), work, sports, and so on—and their parents encourage it— that it seems the first things to get dropped are the items listed as priorities at the top of the list.”

—Mike Hammer, Pennsylvania

- “Mountains of paper and eons of youth group time are spent educating teens on relating to peers (peer pressure, dating, bullying, etc), while we assume the main relationships in their lives (God, parents) will develop without assistance. And then we’re surprised when families become more dysfunctional and teens turn their back on God (or probably, more accurately, ‘forget God’) once they leave home.”

—Brooke Oehme, Iowa

- “I was surprised that the number-one priority for teens was developing a relationship with God and praying. My teens struggle with prayer, and many tell me a relationship with God is hard, confusing, and at times not relevant. If teens want to learn how to develop a relationship with God—and their parents and youth leaders want the same thing—then why aren’t they developing a relationship with God? I have felt for years that pastors and parents should work together—maybe this is what is lacking.”

—Joe Marinich, Ohio

[Editor’s Note: While many are hitting the panic button because of much-publicized dire statistics on the church dropout rate, new research from the Fuller Youth Institute research has uncovered evidence that youth ministry is having more impact than it’s credited for. Fuller’s “College Transition Project” is tracking 400 young people from high school through college, and beyond. Several years after graduating from high school, researchers asked former youth group members: “Since leaving high school, what’s changed about the way you view God?” Of 14 different responses they could choose—from positive to negative—the top three answers were: “I’m closer to God now” and “God is bigger now than before” and “Now I see that God is with me and for me.”]

### **A Shift Toward ‘Hangout Time’**

“I was a little surprised that ‘hangout time’ took three of the top four spots. We’ve noticed this trend in our youth ministry—our kids are more relational than ever before and big, flashy programs that worked in the ‘90s no longer get kids in the door. To kick off a recent series, we showed an Indiana Jones movie clip and then I rappelled down out of the ceiling dressed as Indiana Jones, with themed music in the background (see it at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGXoB0wtgHE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGXoB0wtgHE)). Our kids barely raised an eyebrow. It was as if it were any other night at youth group.

“We have more students sitting around tables playing cards, UNO, ERS, Sorry, and Connect Four than we have playing video games on our plasma screens. We’re working to make a shift away from the big and flashy and trying to create more spaces for them to “hang out,” but we feel we are behind the wave on this shift playing catch-up, rather than riding the front of it.”

—Drew Cope, Pennsylvania

[Editor’s Note: According to a Youth Markets Alert report, some cultural analysts believe today’s tech-savvy brand creators will be tomorrow’s losers. “Kids will have officially surpassed their parents on all technology fronts, so much that they are more willing [and] likely to unplug than their elders,” says ScenarioDNA’s Marie Lena Tupot. Crowbar’s Pete Healy says “luddite” activities such as woodworking and crochet will surge in popularity as young people crave a time-out from the pressures of a global digital environment.]

### **A Hunger for Parent Connections**

- “I was a little surprised to see parents and siblings on the top of the list. If you look at the way the students actually spend their time, it seems little time is actually spent at home with their parents and siblings.”

—Jana Snyder, Pennsylvania

- “Few youth ministries seem to have a strong emphasis on parent ministry—instead, we’re focused on

creating a “youth friendly” program to attract students. If the number-two priority for students is spending time with their parents, why do so many youth ministries separate them at church? Some evaluating questions:

1. What programs do we offer parents of teens?
2. Should we provide opportunities for parents and teens to “hang out”?
3. How are we enabling parents to connect with their teens?
4. What does this result tell us about including parents as adult volunteers in our youth ministries?”

—Tony Clyde, Arkansas

• “So many of our young people are crying out to all the world on their Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, while Mom and Dad have no clue that their child is hurting. I think it puts a lot of emphasis on getting back to the dinner table—to find time NO MATTER WHAT to have a family dinner. We need to help our families see the importance of opening the lines of communication with their teens, especially now when kids can barricade themselves in their rooms and can hide their true hurts while playing endless hours of Call of Duty or World of Warcraft.

—Nate Taylor, Ohio

• “I believe this generation is doing a lot of raising itself, with both parents working outside of the home and many times bringing work home with them. I believe kids today are seeking the attention of their parents and want dearly to be loved and given boundaries, discipline, and support. Even in our TV commercials the old games are showing up again, encouraging family values and family time. I also think it’s due to this lack of time spent together that kids today are uncertain of how to pray or build a relationship with Christ.”

—Hannah Burkle, Iowa

• “I was especially surprised to see that teens list their relationship with parents as second.... I still think we make the mistake of assuming our teens do not care about that particular relationship. Yet I’ve found that among my teens that graduate from the youth ministry and STICK with church, the most common denominator is a great relationship with parents who have modeled the value of church and faith. Deep down, teens want a good, healthy relationship with their parents—but I’m surprised to see how strong that desire is felt by them.”

—Bill Clark, Kentucky

[Editor’s Note: One in four teenagers and young adults (14-24) have shared their passwords to Internet sites with someone else—but they most often choose a friend (54%) rather than a parent (mom=43%, dad=23%). Maybe that’s because half of them say they realize what they post could be “a source of embarrassment or conflict.”]

### What About Texting?

• “Kids think their parents think texting and video games are a lot more important to them than they actually are. I think it’s safe to say that those two activities are simply that: activities. However, because parents are misunderstand the role that these activities play in their child’s life, they’re viewed by parents in a negative way (or so their teenagers think!).”

—Heather Cox, Virginia

• “I think parents have the idea that texting is a huge priority for youth, when it more accurately reflects a teen’s need to spend time with their friends. Technology is a means to this end, not the end itself. I had an acquaintance tell me once that she got to know her nephew quite well by constantly texting, but it was difficult for them to communicate verbally, pointing to a potential decrease in verbal conversational proficiency among youth.”

—Aaron M. Schellhas, Illinois

[Editor’s Note: According to a new report by ExactTarget, the number of older teenagers (15-17) who say texting is their “primary form of written communication” with friends has doubled between 2008 and 2009 (21% vs. 43%). Email comes in second (18%), followed by instant messaging (10%).]

### Name:

Rick Lawrence

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