“This Week in Teen Culture”

January 19, 2022

Three Things This Week

1

Substitute Dad

What it is: A school district in Texas is inviting parents to apply to become substitute teachers in their children’s schools, temporarily forgoing other requirements (such as college credits).

Why it could be coming to a school near you: As we wrote last week, many school districts have had no choice but to return to remote learning for the time being due to staffing shortages caused by the Omicron variant. While the logistics of keeping schools open continue to grow more and more complicated, the youth mental health crisis of the past two years indicates that institutional and parental support appear to be more important than ever. In that regard, getting parents back into school buildings—even in the form of “guest teachers”—sounds like a great idea. Just do yourself a favor and let your teen vet your outfit for the day before you show up front and center in their homeroom.

2

The Post-Malone Effect

What it is: Many were outraged this week after podcaster Joe Rogan interviewed Dr. Robert Malone, a virologist and immunologist whose work has centered on mRNA technologies such as those used in the COVID-19 vaccines. Malone deemed current fixations on the virus and its vaccines a “mass formation psychosis” (translation: mass hysteria).

Why it’s not so simple: Rogan’s freewheeling, relaxed interviews with celebrities and experts of all stripes often span three hours or more. Regardless of how you feel about his interviews, Rogan is masterful at getting guests to feel at ease and get candid. It’s

this signature style that's appealing for teens who are, like Rogan, naturally curious. Malone's interview comes on the heels of several others Rogan has had of late with controversial, vaccine-mandate-resistant figures. Some people might call these podcast offerings a "counternarrative," while others might see them as promoting conspiracy theories. A petition to ban Rogan from spreading further "vaccine misinformation" has now been signed by nearly 300 scientists and doctors, but that's not exactly going to deter people from listening to and sharing Malone's interview. The popularity of Malone's sentiments runs counter to narratives shared on news outlets such as the Associated Press and CNN. For Gen Z, it really might feel as if there are two completely opposed versions of "truth" about the virus—and that figuring out which one to follow is a matter of politics rather than science.

3

Celebri-sons

What it is: Teens don't necessarily regard their favorite celebrities as heartthrobs or role models; instead, many refer to their favorite famous males as their "sons."
Why it makes sense: Perhaps this is the natural progression from the "untouchable" celebrity to the more casual, parasocial relationship that Gen Z has with famous people. As Mashable (*language)* explains, referring to a celebrity as a son or daughter indicates a desire to nurture. When a young person says Tom Holland is their *son*, they aren't only remarking on how cute he is, they're also saying they want to protect him from the world and ensure only the best for him. One might even make the argument that male celebs who are non-threatening and earnest are more likely to be embraced by Gen Z than your standard reimagined cowboy stereotype. (See also: Harry Styles, Timothée Chalamet, and other guys with nail polish brands).

Slang of the Week

OOMF: "one of my friends" or "one of my followers" on TikTok; meant to call someone out without naming them directly. (Ex: "OOMF has no boundaries in my DMs, and they ask me the most personal questions.")

Translation: Substitute Dad

Teaching in 2022 is no joke, and we pray for any parents in Texas who might decide to offer help. Ironically, this picture of mothers and fathers stepping in to teach (albeit in less than ideal circumstances) feels symbolic of a core belief we have at Axis—that by the end of the schooling years, it is the *parents* of Generation Alpha who will have made the greatest impact on who these kids turn out to be. This is especially true when it comes to passing on our faith.

Austin Jewish Academy is (obviously) not a Christian school, but the point about the impact of parents still stands. Schoolteachers, youth pastors, grandparents and other caring adults all play significant roles in the formation of Gen Alpha. Ultimately, however, none of these come close to the degree of influence parents have.

Christian Smith, arguably a key sociologist on faith formation in the rising generation, puts it this way: "The good news is that, among all possible influences, parents exert far and away the greatest influence on their children's religious outcomes. Stated differently, the bad news is that nearly all human responsibility for the religious trajectories of children's lives falls on their parents' shoulders. The empirical evidence is clear."

Of course, most of us aren't going to become substitute teachers in our child's classroom—so one question might be, when exactly are we supposed to find time to have these kinds of conversations? Many families are already utterly overloaded, so what exactly should be dropped from the to-do list?

Deuteronomy 6:7 gives us the answer. Regarding the ways of God, it says, "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." In other words, when you have down time, talk; when you're on the go, talk. Whatever else you're doing, *build conversation into it.* It almost sounds too simple, but Deuteronomy 6 says that this is how we pass on the legacy of faith to the next generation.

Instead of discussion questions this week, here are three reflection questions for parents or other caring adults:

- How can I be intentional this week to start a conversation about faith?
- Do I really know where my kids are in their spiritual journey?
- How am I modeling faith to my kids?

---

8 PREMIUM INSIGHTS

A broader look at the world that teens inhabit. Skim our summary or click the links to read more. Engage your teens in conversation about their world.

They said it best:

"Don't waste life constantly reacting, constantly defending yourself and trying to talk people into a different view of you. People are overwrought and need targets for their stress and anger and a cover for their fear. Have compassion. Live your vapor-short life faithfully before God." — Beth Moore

Pop Culture

Film/TV/Streaming

1. **FYI:** Actress Zendaya issued a trigger warning for her own show before its second season premiere earlier this week. In an Instagram post, Zendaya wrote that this season of *Euphoria* wouldn't be for everyone, and even cautioned fans against watching if they didn't "feel comfortable." *Euphoria* deals extensively with themes of depression, teen addiction, and sexuality. Even though it's a show *about* teens, it's probably not *for* teens; at least, not every teen. It was a surprisingly self-aware move for Zendaya to basically take ell her followers that they don't have to watch her performance in the show in order to be her true fan.

2. **FYI:** Gen Z loves Adam Sandler. Yes, you read that right. In a survey of 10,000 teens conducted last fall, the *Happy Gilmore* actor was named as the favorite celebrity. Sandler's resurgence in popularity may be due, in part, to his movies streaming on Netflix. In fact, Sandler's 2011 rom-com with Jennifer Aniston, *Just Go With It,* is

currently the second most-watched movie on Netflix. It's possible that Sandler's silly-guy persona holds up better than more cynical and "sophisticated" comedians. It's also possible that these movies are simply great for putting on as background noise.

3. **FYI:** Put some of the most popular TikTokers in one house and document them as they try to navigate fame and fortune in Los Angeles and you get… *Hype House*, now streaming on Netflix. Two members of the cast have already come forward to say that the plotlines were "fabricated," and early online reviews refer to *Hype House* as "sad." It seems like *Hype House* is likely to pass by as a blip on the radar for even the biggest fans of its individual cast members.

Trending/Memes

4. **FYI:** A TikTok star named Axel Webber did not get into Juilliard last Monday. For tens of thousands of teens following along on his journey to try to be a star, this was not acceptable. Fans of Webber flooded Juilliard's Google rankings with negative reviews, and #JusticeforAxel began to trend. Some more cynical TikTok sleuths began to dig into Webber's past, convinced that his quest to be accepted into the prestigious arts academy was simply an elaborate viral stunt. Whatever the case, a source points out to the *New York Times* that in the age of social media, it is Webber who has the upper hand going forward, not institutions like Juilliard.

Music

5 . **FYI:** The Weeknd has released his fifth studio album, *Dawn FM*, to glowing reviews. The loosely conceptual album takes on a theological framework, according to the artist himself, who describes the listening experience as a pop album in purgatory. The album offers voiceover work by Jim Carrey and excerpts of poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke, and it fits the "retrowave" (read: microwaved 1980s) style that's become The Weeknd's signature. Unfortunately, The Weeknd's nihilistic understanding of the world hasn't evolved, even as he pushes his musical boundaries. Lyrics on *Dawn FM* indicate a desire to establish real connection, as well as a growing dread when contemplating what may lie beyond this life.

General Observations

6. **FYI:** A survey of 1,000 pastors offers insight into what church ministry may look like in 2022. Many say that they are concerned about finding leaders and volunteers to step up within their congregations. But the number one issue that those surveyed said they were dealing with was apathy and lack of commitment from church attendees. While every congregation faces different and specific obstacles, it would seem that the last few years have been challenging in terms of getting people passionate about ministry, service, and church attendance.

7. **FYI:** What would Jesus do? Ask you a question, probably. In a beautiful piece entitled "Why Jesus Never Stopped Asking Questions," Peter Wehner lays out the power and consistency in Jesus' typical manner of speaking. In all of his recorded teachings, Jesus was more likely to ask a question or tell a story than to give a direct answer, even when pressed. Jesus saw the value in provoking curiosity, and also used his questions as a way of winnowing out those who weren't sincerely interested in grappling with their personal standing with God. Using questions as a way of sharing the Gospel, even within our own homes, is a way of following Christ's own example.

Conversation starter:

8. Is cigarette smoking making a comeback? For years, cigarette sales have been in decline. But once the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were first put into place in 2020, that trend stopped. Some people started smoking again, and some took up the habit for the first time. Young people are fully aware of the health risks of smoking, but many believe they can smoke without forming a habit. Since smoking is strongly linked to cancer and heart disease, it's important not to assume that teens are saying no.

Is smoking really having a resurgence in popularity, or is it just a statistical illusion? How is cigarette smoking viewed amongst Gen Z, in particular, your teens' friend group? Is it possible to simply smoke as a way to relax without becoming addicted to cigarettes?