

Gen Z: here they come, ready or not

Annalise Walliker, youth affairs reporter , Herald-Sun, 25 February 2008

THEY may come at the end of the alphabet, but they'll soon be at the forefront of tackling the most complex problems our world has ever faced.

They're Generation Z, born from 1995 onwards, the latest generation made up of today's babies and children.

This year sees two important milestones for the Zs because the oldest of the generation are becoming teenagers and this year's prep students will be the graduating class of 2020, the year now the focus of the Rudd Government's summit.

But, even though some Gen Z children have not been born yet, experts can predict their key traits by understanding their childhood and the challenges they face.

Gen Z had easily adapted to the challenges of the modern world -- including technology, terrorism and climate change -- said Sarah Cornish, former editor of magazine Total Girl.

"They have never known a life without the internet, let alone computers, and many don't know a world without mobile phones," she said.

"Most are also born post-September 11 and some of our readers are concerned about terrorism, and they are much more environmentally aware than previous generations."

When the Herald Sun interviewed seven Gen Z students from Reservoir's Merrilands College, ranging in age from eight to 13, almost all identified global warming and climate change as the world's biggest issue.

When asked about terrorism most could recall the September 11 attacks, despite being only very young when they happened.

"They blow up everything like the Twin Towers. People had to jump off the building otherwise they'd get a face full of fire," Royce, 12, said.

Technology is just another toy to play with for many of the children.

"I use the internet a lot, I have a PlayStation 2, a Nintendo DS and a mobile phone. They're all pink," Brittany, 10, said.

But the result was we might be raising a generation of little adults where the age of seven was the new 17, child psychologist Andrew Fuller said.

"We're seeing an erosion of childhood," he said.

"Kids aren't allowed to be kids for very long and they're made into little consumers at a very young age.

"They've grown up in a world which is focused on achievement and outcome, and some are suffering anxiety about what they do when they finish school already."

But this adult mindset meant Gen Z would become the most educated generation ever, social analyst David Chalke said.

"They will have more degrees, certificates and more diplomas than any other generation preceding them . . . and being forced to grow up younger will make them more street-smart," he said.

Gen Zs also faced an ageing population and a lack of water, electricity and housing, Mr Chalke said.

“The likelihood is they may never buy a house,” he said.

KPMG demographer Bernard Salt disagrees, but admits houses may not become affordable until Gen Zs reach mid-adulthood. “. . . when the Baby Boomers start to die off, the housing market could well be flooded with sales,” he said.

The looming recession would be a culture shock for the Zs, who experienced unprecedented prosperity during their childhood, Mr Salt said.

“After 16 years of economic prosperity, the probability is Zs will have experienced perhaps quite significant economic turmoil before they get to adulthood,” he said.

“That’s going to . . . make them a little more measured, reserved and conservative.”

Social researcher Mark **McCrindle** believes the future is in better hands than ever.

“Zs will make great strides to deal with these challenges because it’s really left fingerprints on them from the youngest years and will inform their life choices,” he said.

Just don’t expect a revolution. “Zs are a more sophisticated generation who will use technology and their own small networks and innovations to make a difference.”

GEN Z STUDENTS FROM MERRILANDS COLLEGE SPEAK OUT

Chad, 13

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I might be a builder and build houses because I like building stuff

What gadgets do you use?

An iPod and PS2, but I want a PS3 and heaps of games like car and motorbike games. I’m not into MySpace

What are the world’s biggest problems?

Climate change and global warming, but we can’t do anything to fix it or stop it

What do you know about terrorists?

I’m not afraid of them. They make people feel bad and shoot them. I see it on the TV

Selena, 12

(Royce’s twin)

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Something that involves writing, but I don’t know really. I haven’t decided

What gadgets do you use?

I don’t have an iPod or a phone, I don’t think I need them. But on the internet I like celebrity websites with the latest updates.

What are the world's biggest problems?

Global warming and climate change, when the ice melts and there will be earthquakes and floods and tidal waves

What do you know about terrorists?

I don't want to go to other countries because I'm scared of terrorists bombing everyone. Italy would be safe but I wouldn't go to the US

Royce, 12

(Selena's twin)

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I want to play cricket part-time and become a lawyer, because you can fight for people and the money's good

What gadgets do you use?

I'm over them. When I was six my dad bought me an Xbox but then last year I didn't like them very much and I wanted to play more cricket. But I'm saving for an iPod

What are the world's biggest problems?

Global warming and climate change. My sister watches television for six hours in her room after school, so I'd tell her to go to bed to save energy

What do you know about terrorists?

They blow up everything like the twin towers. People had to jump off the building otherwise they'd get a face full of fire. That wasn't good

Fakaoho, 11

What do you want to be when you grow up?

An accountant, because I love maths and numbers and you'd get to meet new people every day

What gadgets do you use?

I use the internet to look up stuff for school and projects and stuff, and I use the online maths computer tutor.

What are the world's biggest problems?

Global warming and racial harassment of people, especially by bullies. It's not something anyone can fix, but I'd want to stop bullies

What do you know about terrorists?

They do bad things. It worries me because I could be hurt one day, but I think Australia's safe because we haven't bombed anyone else's country

Brittany, 10

What do you want to be when you grow up?

A veterinarian because I love animals and it's good pay so I have more money for my family.

What gadgets do you use?

I have a PS2, a Nintendo DS and a mobile phone. They're all pink. I want a pink iPod and a new pink phone because my one is secondhand

What are the world's biggest problems?

Global warming, animal cruelty and teenagers having car accidents from drink driving. You can help the others, but there's nothing you can do to stop teens drinking

What do you know about terrorists?

It would be bad if they blew up Australia because it would be hard to find somewhere else to live

Hajar, 9

What do you want to be when you grow up?

I might want to be a primary school teacher. I've always liked teaching

What gadgets do you use?

I don't have a computer at home, but we have a PS and I want to get a DS

What are the world's biggest problems?

Global warming, because the sun gets too hot around the ice and it can destroy homes for the ice creatures

What do you know about terrorists?

They do bad things in other countries because they don't like that country. I worry about it because it's dangerous, but I'm not scared for my family

*Merrilands College is in Reservoir

GEN Z 1995-NOW

Little adults, very mature socially and technologically, they inherit the world's toughest challenges. Will be the most street-smart and book-smart generation yet

DAKOTA FANNING

KODI SMIT-McPHEE

1980-1994 GEN Y

Confident and fickle, lack respect for authority, tech-savvy, big spenders, fame-obsessed, value urban tribes above family but still live at home into adulthood

COREY

BRITNEY

GEN X 1965-1979

The so-called "slacker generation" who used humour to cover a lack of optimism, turned into sharp entrepreneurs, now mollycoddle their kids due to guilt they can't spend enough time with them

ANGELINA JOLIE

ROVE

1946-1964 BABY BOOMERS

The idealistic and self-indulgent sex, drugs and rock'n' roll hippies, still long for freedom in their adulthood, want to spend all their kids inheritance

MADONNA

BILL CLINTON