

Empowering the Next Generation: The Urgency of Teens Alive Today



In recent years, my team and I have witnessed an unprecedented need for spaces that foster open communication, emotional literacy, and congruent choice-making - for everyone, and especially among teenagers. Observing the transformation of adolescence in the face of global upheavals, I've seen how traditional milestones have morphed under the weight of a world in flux.

Since 2019, I've been partnered with an amazing scholarship group that supports over 500 high school graduates in their journey into post-secondary education. I've had the opportunity to work closely with students throughout their undergraduate years in our Relational Leadership and Emotional Agility Program.

With each new cohort of students, I see a unique trajectory in light of the different challenges that they have faced. Many of those completing their undergraduate degree this year only missed the last few months of their high school experience before pandemic restrictions impacted their university years; whereas, many of the students that started university this year began experiencing restrictions in ninth grade and throughout the majority of high school. Correspondingly, the teenagers who are in tenth grade now, will have had a significant social disruption in their preteen years. The divergence in their experiences serves as a stark canvas highlighting the different needs in the social developmental spectrum.

The impact of prolonged social restrictions has reshaped the landscape of adolescent development. Research indicates that peer-to-peer interaction plays a crucial role in social development, yet, for many of today's youth, these opportunities have been markedly reduced and there is a lack of safe spaces for them to truly experiment, iterate, and practice more open interaction. The implications extend beyond typical social awkwardness of defining your own identity and run much deeper - affecting emotional literacy and decision-making skills as numbing and distracting have become a more entrenched norm.

Reflecting on my own experience of extended isolation due to illness during high school, I - as many of you - find parallels with the current generation's challenges. However, the scale and collective nature of their isolated experience amplified the effects on social development and challenges in social-emotional well-being. The result is a wave of young people grappling with a desire for deeper and more engaged communication, but in

an era dominated by digital interactions and greater uncertainty as geopolitical crises and advancements in artificial intelligence shake up the playing field.

This backdrop of isolation and digital dependency has also influenced attitudes towards traditional academic and career paths. Many students express disillusionment with conventional education, questioning its relevance in a rapidly evolving job market. This sentiment underscores the need for alternative avenues of personal growth and skill development that align with the realities of the modern world.

Over the last five years, I've had the privilege of witnessing the amazing resiliency, grit, and brilliance of these young people. They have shown an incredible capacity for adaptation and perseverance. The challenges faced by students globally have underscored the necessity of reimagining ways to foster connection and community.

It's within this context that we find the silver lining – a heightened appreciation for genuine interaction and an excitement for the tools that cultivate it. The enthusiasm among students for spaces and programs that offer these skills is palpable, reflecting a collective desire to move beyond superficial connections.

Now more than ever, it's imperative for communities to come together in support of our youth. By offering teens and young adult the tools we've used to navigate the complexities of modern communication and social interaction, as well as a safe space to experiment, practice, and co-create their own ways of working with these tools and ideas, we empower the next generation to create more meaningful connections and potentially build a more understanding, cohesive society.

As educators and mentors, our role extends beyond academic support or leadership training. My team and I presented with a unique opportunity to nurture spaces that encourage exploration, reflection, and connection. Both in the work I do with post-secondary students across the province and in programs I run in China and at the Haven like Teens Alive, we see individuals come into their own as if stepping forward out of a fog, reclaiming their life as their own.

I'm excited to work with Annika Raithby and Linda Nicholls this summer to offer a supportive environment for teenagers to engage in discussion groups, social activities, private reflection, and embodiment exercises as we invite them to experiment with new ways of connecting, explore their identities, and align their actions with their values.

As we look to the future, the need for programs like Teens Alive has never been more apparent. By supporting the social and emotional development of our youth, we can empower them to face the future with confidence and resilience. In doing so, we not only address the immediate challenges posed by recent global events, but also continue to lay the groundwork for a generation of even more thoughtful, engaged, and adaptable individuals.

By Mackenzie Dickson

Mackenzie is a facilitator, educator, and futurist who loves engaging with groups in exploring both personal-social issues and global complexities. A former Teens Alive alumni, he now facilitates the Teens Alive program with Annika Raithby and Linda Nicholls.