



Chapter 1



What Is Artificial Maturity?

California, the Golden State, was home for most of my life. It's probably called the Golden State for a number of reasons—not the least of which was the gold rush, which started on January 24, 1848.

James Wilson Marshall was not on a gold-hunting expedition that icy Monday morning. He and his crew were building a sawmill. Early that day as Marshall inspected the site, he saw flakes of raw yellow imbedded in the smooth granite bedrock. Once word about his discovery got out, people swarmed to California with the hope of getting rich overnight. The infamous gold rush was on.

The part of this story most people forget is the large number of people whose expectations were dashed when they found nothing—or worse, when they discovered iron pyrite, or “fool’s gold,” a naturally occurring mineral that is often mistaken for gold. Many “fools” thought they struck it rich in that rush, only to find out that their “gold” was actually worthless.

In many ways we have another gold rush today. This time, the gold we hunt for is mature teens. By this I mean young people who are mature for their age; kids who experience “authentic maturity,” growing up not merely in one facet of their lives but also physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. This is what parents hope for in their kids. It’s what teachers dream

2 ARTIFICIAL MATURITY

of in their students; it's what coaches look for in their athletes; it's what employers need in their young team members. That maturity is what we saw in many young people a hundred years ago—but, alas, it is rare today. Something in our culture has shifted.

Educators and social scientists are mourning today's generation of kids who have postponed growing up. They lament students' delayed entrance into adulthood. Adolescence, in fact, has been prolonged among millions of teens and young adults. I have lost count of the number of university deans who've told me: "Twenty-six is the new eighteen." In a nationwide survey, young adults agree. When asked what marks the beginning of adult responsibility, their number one response was "having my first child."¹ Interesting. The average age that Americans have their first child is twenty-seven-and-a-half years old. The MacArthur Foundation suggests that adolescence doesn't end until age thirty-four.² Employers, coaches, teachers, and parents are "hunting" for an elusive maturity that, frankly, is hard to find. And what's scarce is valuable. No doubt about it, there's a rush on.

Although authentic maturity is increasingly rare among young people, it does exist. When I find it, I feel like I've found a precious metal. Much more prevalent, however, is an *artificial maturity* brought about by a perfect storm of elements in our culture today. You might call it a new kind of fool's gold. And it has a far more devastating impact than the disappointment that followed the detection of the original fool's gold centuries ago.

Allow me to describe a common scenario. An eight-year-old impresses his parents because he's known his multiplication tables for over a year, and he can download the latest software on his tablet computer. Adults marvel at this little guy. "He certainly is mature for his age, isn't he?" folks remark.

Maybe. Maybe not.

The fact is, he has been exposed to *data* at a very young age—far earlier than in past generations, thanks to the Internet. Consequently, the eight-year-old is cognitively advanced but may not be as developed in, for example, his emotional maturity.

In fact, because of the external stimulation of a screen, his growth may be underdeveloped in other areas of his life. His maturity is both advanced *and* delayed. We fail to recognize the difference, too often mistaking one form of advanced development for overall maturity. That same child, at sixteen years old, may not be able to look an adult in the eye and have a mature conversation. The fool's gold suddenly becomes painfully evident.

Have you ever had this conversation with a teenager?

"Hi, Josh. How are you doing today?"

A long pause. He grunts while gazing at his iPhone. "Uh, fine."

"How's school going?"

Another pause, as Josh sends a text. "Huh?"

I said, "How's school going for you?"

"Uh. OK, I guess."

"What subject do you enjoy the most?"

As Josh realizes you are actually interested, he looks up, but face-to-face conversations are not his specialty.

"Uh, I dunno."

The fool's gold glistens.

The Problem

Herein lies our problem. Because of the ubiquitous technology available on our phones and at our fingertips, we are raising, not Generation Y, but Generation iY. They have grown up online and have been influenced by the "iWorld." In my book *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future*,³ I laid out a diagnosis of this current generation. That book documented research on and explained the various facets of this generation's immediate dilemma. This book provides the prescription. In order to understand and apply the suggested solutions, some background concerning Generation iY will be sprinkled throughout these chapters. For those of you who have read *Generation iY*, the background information will be a review. For those new to this subject, this information will explain why it's so vital to address the issues necessary to transform artificial maturity into authentic maturity.

4 ARTIFICIAL MATURITY

In short, the artificial maturity dilemma can be described this way:

1. Children are overexposed to information, far earlier than they're ready.
2. Children are underexposed to real-life experiences far later than they're ready.

This overexposure-underexposure produces artificial maturity. It's a new kind of fool's gold. It looks so real because kids *know* so much, but it's virtual because they have *experienced* so little. Information comes to them easily and readily because of the day we live in. They possess a sort of "Google reflex." The speed at which data reach them has paradoxically slowed down their actual maturity. Fortunately, this is not happening to every young person. Many escape it with the help of good parents and good teachers. But for millions, our culture has done a number on them. It's not their fault. They're victims of the elements in our twenty-first-century world—and we must figure out how to lead them.

The ancient Greeks actually understood the concepts underlying this issue very well. They used two words for our English word "know" in their language: *ginosko* and *oida*. Although both communicated the idea of knowledge, they described two different kinds of knowledge:

1. *Ginosko*—to be aware of; to be informed; to become acquainted with
2. *Oida*—to fully perceive and understand through experience

Obviously *oida* represented a much richer knowledge that comes through practicing life. It's a depth of knowledge that *ginosko* can only imagine. One is more about information. The other refers to an authentic, deeper experience.

Let me illustrate. In 1988 my friend Jeff Robinson pitched for the Detroit Tigers. He was a tall, well-built athlete with a great fastball. Jeff invited me to come see him play from time to time. One evening I stood in the stands watching him warm up in the bullpen before the game. Another fan walked up next to me and began yelling to Jeff: "Hey Robinson! Give me a baseball!" He continued barking out Jeff's statistics that season, hoping his insight and persistence would wear my friend down, until Jeff would ultimately toss a ball over to him. Well, the plan backfired. I saw Jeff smile at me, then stop to grab a ball. He proceeded to walk over to where we were standing. The loudmouth next to me assumed Jeff was finally caving and bringing him a souvenir baseball. But he was wrong. Jeff proceeded to sign the ball and hand it to me, his friend. It was a moment I have savored since that night. You should have seen the look on that fan's face when I, the silent guy standing next to him, walked away with a baseball signed by a major-league player.

Can you see what happened that night? Both of us "knew" Jeff Robinson, but in reality the other guy could only boast that he knew a lot *about* Jeff. I actually *knew* Jeff. It wasn't mere information; it was knowledge through years of relationship and life experience.

Today, because information is so prevalent, our kids assume they have *oida* (experiential knowledge) when they only have *ginosko* (informational knowledge). With an abundance of knowledge, their confidence can soar, but it's based on a virtual foundation. Without experience, it's easier for knowledge to produce judgmental attitudes, bullying, and arrogance. To put it bluntly, it's often head knowledge gained from looking at a screen. Although the knowledge may be accurate, we cannot assume they can achieve any more than the screen itself can achieve with that knowledge. *Ginosko* without *oida* is hollow. This is causing the phenomenon I call artificial maturity. Real maturity isn't happening until well into their adult lives.

The Big Debate

Upon hearing this, parents often ask me any of a number of questions: “But isn’t it just the opposite? Aren’t kids growing up too soon? What about the eleven-year-olds who want to dress in explicit and provocative ways? And what about the thirteen-year-olds who know more than their parents do about using an iPad? Doesn’t this mean adolescence is actually arriving *sooner* and kids are growing up *quicker*?”

The big debate over the last few years among parents and teachers is this very issue: Are kids growing up too fast or too slowly?

The answer is: yes. Both are true.

The reason is simple. The time frame of adolescence is actually expanding in both directions. Children desire to enter it as early as eight years old, having been exposed to teen Web sites, social media, reality TV, explicit movies, and unlimited time viewing data that beckon them into the teen mentality. (Some want to get body piercings and tattoos while they’re still in elementary school.) In this sense, they seem to want to grow up too fast. At the same time, young adults linger in adolescence long into their twenties and even thirties. Adolescence is no longer a doorway into adulthood. It is an extended season of life.

Journalist Sharon Jayson from *USA Today* reminds us that at five and six years old, kids are playing with toys and dolls, crafts, and puppet shows. After that, kids skip to a “tween” stage marking early adolescence. They want independence but not responsibility. Parents fear giving kids too much independence because of the unsafe world we live in. They’re torn about such things as letting children ride their bike around the block,⁴ activities an older generation of parents hardly thought twice about. These days parents frequently stay on the phone with their children at all times of day to ensure their safety.

Today’s kids may never know the innocence, exploration, and imagination that we recall from our childhood. Parents rarely let their kids walk to school or use public transportation by themselves, and they schedule their day full with piano, soccer,

ceramics, and math club. A focus on safety is understandable, but it can prevent children from taking calculated risks and learning to fail, both of which help people mature. The activities we provide are great—but they are all monitored for the kids. Consequently, children often don't know what to do with free time. They fail to learn to resolve conflict, think for themselves, or do real-life problem solving.

Sadly, although our intentions are good, we leave kids without the tools to self-regulate. This is why the average college student is in touch with his or her mom or dad *eleven* times a day. Or why 80 percent of students plan to return home after college.⁵ They are unable to be autonomous adults. They usually want the autonomy, but they may not be ready for the responsibility. Once again, they've been overexposed to data but underexposed to real-life experiences. It's all virtual—or artificial—maturity.

Joseph Allen and Claudia Worrell Allen write,

We give our young people too few ways to reach real maturity, and so instead they seek out behaviors that provide the appearance of adulthood without the substance. And if adolescence doesn't actually involve taking on real adultlike tasks and responsibility, if it's become just an extended form of childhood, then of course nine-, ten-, and eleven-year-olds might want to join in the fun. Adolescence has come to be associated with drinking, smoking, having sex, and acquiring material goods, legally or otherwise. These activities provide the veneer of adulthood, but with none of the underlying demands or responsibilities (like holding a real job) that would otherwise make adolescence unreachable for most preteens.⁶

My nineteen-year-old son made an observation today, as he commented on his peers who plan to go into video production. He said, "Dad, I've noticed a lot of kids my age think they are mature. Because they know a lot about a subject, they assume they've mastered it. Then, when you look at their actual work, you realize they aren't mature at all. They've deceived themselves."

This is a microcosm of what's happening all over our nation. The overload of information causes kids to think they are mature. It fosters confidence and often arrogance. In reality, many have low self-awareness. And self-awareness is developed through real-life experiences.

Consider the TV show *American Idol* for a moment. Everyone loves to watch the first two weeks of the season because thousands of kids show up to audition, many of whom don't belong on a stage. Somehow they got the idea they could sing, and only real-life experiences and evaluation can deliver a dose of reality to them. It's often disturbing. TV viewers watch and wonder: *How did you ever get the idea you could sing? Who are your friends?*

I am a parent and an educator. I have two kids of my own and fight the same temptations all parents do to pave the way for our kids. But our well-intentioned efforts have unintended consequences:

- We've been *hovering* over them.
- We've been *monitoring* their lives.
- We've been *structuring* their time and activities.

This leaves kids with lots of confidence—unfounded confidence, because in reality they have little ability to do things for themselves. I've found it eventually creates a gnawing sense of doubt in children that they don't have what it takes to make it in the world following school. They're confident on the outside, but anxious (and often depressed) on the inside. Caring adults meant well, but we provided structure and information too early and real-life experiences too late.

According to a study at Pennsylvania State University, "Younger generations today are grappling with a new social contract, i.e., a change in the ties that bind members of a nation together. In the mid-twentieth century, social markers such as finishing school, getting a job, getting married, and starting a family followed a predictable sequence."⁷ Today, not so much. A shifting job market, an unstable economy, new parenting styles,

and a truckload of other elements have changed what it means to grow up and be independent.

I recently met with a twenty-two-year-old named Darren. He asked to meet with me, but wasn't exactly sure what he wanted. Even though he'd always projected confidence in my previous interactions with him, he seemed melancholy on the day of our meeting. As I probed into what was going on, I uncovered symptoms I see in many young people today: a love-hate relationship with his parents; a façade of confidence on the outside, masking a ton of self-doubt on the inside; and complete ambiguity about what direction he should take in his life. He was well-informed but ill-prepared for adult life, which left him paralyzed and depressed about the future.

Premature information without practical application can be dangerous. It can also diminish incentive in young people to seek out experience and grow. In a recent interview with Colonel Randy Allen, an officer who has trained U.S. Air Force pilots for over twenty-five years, I gained some insight into our challenge. He summarized it by saying, "Kids today possess knowledge without context." Then he added, "And that can be dangerous. Minimally, many stop hungering for genuine reality, risk, and uncertainty, being satisfied with a virtual reality." They become stimulated but not focused. As Herbert Simon once said, "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."

Four Areas to Measure

Let's examine how we actually ought to measure what it means to "grow up" and mature. When educators evaluate a child's maturation, they generally measure four aspects:

1. **Biological**—the physical growth of the young person
2. **Cognitive**—the intellectual growth of the young person
3. **Social**—the interactive growth of the young person
4. **Emotional**—the intrapersonal growth of the young person

Of the tens of thousands of students I interact with each year, most are advanced in the first three areas but postponed in the fourth. Their bodies are growing up faster, their minds are filled with information, their social connections are immense, but their emotional intelligence has been stunted. In the emotional sphere we see an incredible inconsistency. These students are both advanced in their maturity *and* postponed at the same time.

Adults are apparently at a loss as to what to do about this. The reason? For the first time in history, young people do not need an adult (teacher, parent, or leader) to get information. It can be found everywhere. It may be inaccurate. It may be damaging. And it may come far too early for their emotions to handle it. I once heard sociology professor Tony Campolo say, “I don’t think we live in a generation of bad kids, but a generation of kids who know too much too soon”—a sentiment I wholeheartedly embrace.

So What Are We to Do?

Determining what we must do to respond to this syndrome is the topic of this book. First and foremost, these two questions will be addressed: How can we better teach, parent, coach, and manage Generation iY? and What can be done to foster authentic maturity as young people graduate and enter their various careers?

Let me whet your appetite and offer some of my initial thoughts to spark your own. If you work with young adults—whether you’re a parent, employer, coach, or teacher—I suggest the following ideas to begin transforming their fool’s gold into genuine gold.

1. **Provide autonomy and responsibility simultaneously.** I believe the two concepts of autonomy and responsibility are “twins” that should be given in proportion to one another. When a child wants autonomy, be sure there is proportionate responsibility given too. Either without the other stunts growth. For example, the car keys should be loaned with the

responsibility to fill up the gas tank or to make a curfew. The first doesn't come without the second. What if every independent act were coupled with an interdependent act? Chapter Four will examine this in more detail.

2. **Provide information and accountability simultaneously.**

Information should not be given to children without a required corresponding application. For instance, when a student learns something, maturity demands that he or she ask: What action should be taken in response to this knowledge? There is far more information than application today, and this produces consumers, not contributors. Employers should use this as a gauge for their staff. What if each bit of data were followed by an accountability question? Chapters Four and Eight will address the need for and value of these elements.

3. **Provide experiences to accompany their technology-savvy lifestyles.** Because kids are inundated with messages each day on screens, plan face-to-face experiences through which they can interact with people from other generations—perhaps on a field trip or at a social gathering. People skills and social savvy must be intentionally cultivated. Three-dimensional “face time” must at least match two-dimensional “screen time.” In other words, what if the number of hours kids spent with adults of all ages equaled the number of hours they spent in front of a screen? We'll take an additional look at this approach in Chapter Five.

4. **Provide community service opportunities to balance their self-service time.** Let's face it, any of us can live in a world that's all about “me.” Children may interact with others and still be almost completely self-absorbed. We must furnish a balance of community service time during which they are generously giving away their time and energy to others. This fosters a mature perspective. What if regular service or sacrifice hours accompanied

isolated, self-absorbed hours for both adults and kids? We will reflect more deeply on this idea in Chapter Six.

Maturity happens when balance happens. Equivalent doses of the previous four elements will foster good perspective and wise decision making. This approach also produces adults who are valuable contributors to society.

In this book we'll examine how to lead the kids under our noses into genuine maturity. I hope to equip you to equip them. The intended outcome? To build healthy leaders. We must enable them, first, to lead themselves well, then to influence others in a positive way.

What's Your Plan?

What do you plan to do to balance your kids' lives with both *ginosko* (information) and *oida* (wisdom that comes through experience)?

Stop and reflect for a moment. "Generations ago, fourteen-year-olds used to drive, seventeen-year-olds led armies, and even average teens contributed labor and income that helped keep their families afloat. While facing other problems, those teens displayed adultlike maturity far more quickly than today's, who are remarkably well kept, but cut off from most of the responsibility, challenge, and growth-producing feedback of the adult world."⁸ Even younger children embraced meaningful work that helped them mature. A hundred years ago, twelve-year-olds were reading and discussing Cicero, and kids as young as four contributed to the family chores. More was expected of them, and adults discovered it was in them to meet their appropriate responsibilities as members of the family.

Students born after 1990 are a different breed, due to the world we built for them. This generation is the product of our making;

in short, *we* created the fool's gold. *We* must now transform this artificial maturity into authentic maturity. I believe that if we are successful, these kids will be worth their weight . . . in gold.

First, however, we need to understand the dilemma we face. There are questions we must address before we proceed. How did we get into this place? Can we prevent artificial maturity? Are there dangers to avoid? These are helpful questions. Just as a good doctor must first diagnose the patient's condition before prescribing anything for it, let's take some time and discover how we got here in the first place.

Chapter in a Nutshell

- Artificial maturity can stem from an overexposure to information (too early) and an underexposure to genuine experience (too late).
- Kids need both *ginosko* (knowledge through information) and *oida* (knowledge through experience).
- Adolescence is expanding on both sides; kids are entering into it sooner than in the past and remaining in it well into their twenties.
- As caring adults, we must balance our distribution of experiences as we lead kids.

Talk It Over

1. Name some examples of when you have seen kids exposed to too much information too early, and underexposed to real-life experiences.
2. How did we get into this place? Can we prevent artificial maturity?

Exercises for Maturing Kids

Beginning with my children in the eleventh grade, they must sit down and watch me pay bills online. We discuss the money coming in and the money going out. We use real-life examples when the “unexpected” comes up to ensure that they think about prioritization and consequences to their decisions. In addition, at the age of nine my sons began cleaning the kitchen each night and their rooms weekly, and they washed their clothes. When they were in high school, I also exposed them to cooking for themselves. It is important that our children can take care of themselves—cooking, cleaning, laundry, and finances.

—VICKI HAMILTON

When one of our kids needed punishment for breaking the rules, instead of grounding them or taking things away from them such as TV or phone, I would make them read the newspaper. After reading the newspaper, I would ask them questions about articles in the paper; they never knew which article the question would be from, so they had to read the whole paper.

—JUDY PERKINS BROWN

Both our teenage boys are required to take their mom on a date before they will be allowed to go out on a one-on-one date with a girl they like. The requirement is that they make it a real date. They pick Mom up at the door . . . they open her car door for her . . . they buy dinner, or whatever the activity is. It’s a date. Only after they do that successfully can they go out with someone else. Interestingly . . . our oldest son put this off, unsure if we were serious. So the time came when he wanted to go on a date with a girl that he liked—and we reminded him that he had to take his mom out first. He was a little put out by it . . . but he did it; he passed the test and got our blessing to go on his first “real” date.

—TODD NETTLETON