

## ***The Probability of Accepting Christ Is Highest Among Kids Under 14***

(Ventura, CA) Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...for the kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14, NIV) His words are being fulfilled in American society according to new data from the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California. The company’s nationwide surveys have determined the probability of people accepting Christ as their savior in relation to a person’s age. The data show that if a person does not accept Jesus Christ as savior before the age of 14, the likelihood of ever doing so is slim.

Based on a nationwide representative sampling of more than 4200 young people and adults, the survey data show that people from ages 5 through 13 have a 32% probability of accepting Christ as their savior. Young people from the ages of 14 through 18 have just a 4% likelihood of doing so, while adults (ages 19 through death) have only a 6% probability of making that choice.

While this information is consistent with other Barna studies over the years that have shown that a large majority of Christians accept Jesus Christ as their savior before they reach the age of 18, this is the first study that has calculated people’s probability of accepting Christ at different life stages. The data also challenge the widely-held belief that the teenage years are prime years for evangelistic activity.

The study points out that children and adolescents are most impacted evangelistically by family members, peers and their youth group (e.g. Sunday school, mid-week faith-based youth activities). In fact, the years prior to age 12 are when a majority of children make their decision as to whether or not they will follow Christ.

The data were analyzed by George Barna, president of the firm that conducted the research. He indicated that the information must be carefully interpreted. “The statistics are eye-opening because they show how little evangelistic impact we are having in America upon teenagers and adults. However, that does not mean that teenagers and adults cannot be reached with the gospel. It simply challenges the approaches currently used to reach those individuals. Consider that churches spend the bulk of their evangelism-specific resources on adults, largely through events and collateral materials. However, the most effective evangelistic strategies tend to be intensely relational and are less frequently emphasized by churches. It could well be that if churches upgraded their evangelistic strategies and reallocated their resources, the probability of teenagers and adults embracing Christ as their savior would rise.”

The study clearly notes, however, that the greatest evangelistic window currently available is among young children, which led Barna to discuss other possibilities for churches to consider.

Among the potential shifts mentioned were:

- refocusing teen ministries from an evangelistic thrust to a discipleship emphasis;
- better preparing parents for family-based evangelism;
- investing greater resources for child and adolescent ministry;
- establishing closer partnerships between churches and parachurch ministries geared to child evangelism;
- implementing more effective evangelistic strategies among teenagers;
- and encouraging and equipping young people who have accepted Christ as their savior to share their faith with peers.

Barna also mentioned that his firm’s research “has consistently shown that between the ages of 18 and 24 we lose a very large percentage of young people who had been regulars at church. Recognizing the phases of faith maturity that kids go through and developing the content of our ministry to kids in light of those stages might improve the ability of churches to retain young people, rather than to have to win them back once they enter parenthood.”

## **Survey Methodology**

The research was based upon three separate surveys among adults, each involving more than 1000 interviews, plus two separate surveys among people 18 and under, both involving over 600 youths. The estimated sampling error for each of the adult surveys is  $\pm 3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The estimated sampling error for each of the youth surveys is  $\pm 4$  percentage points at the 95% confidence interval. The aggregate database for this research thus includes more than 4200 completed interviews, providing data with an estimated sampling error of less than two percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

Accepting Jesus Christ as one's savior was determined by asking survey respondents if they have ever made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today. If they indicated they had done so, then they were asked a follow-up question regarding what would happen to them after they died physically. Among the seven options provided was "when I die I will go to Heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my savior." Respondents who selected that option from the seven alternatives were included in the category of those who have accepted Christ as their savior.

All of the interviews were conducted from the Barna Research Group telephone interviewing facility. People in the 48 continental states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of interviews coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. adult population. Multiple callbacks were used to increase the probability of including a reliable distribution of respondents. The Barna Research Group, Ltd. is an independent marketing research company located in Ventura, California. Since 1984 it has been studying cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. This research was funded solely by Barna Research as part of its regular tracking of attitudes, values and behavior. Future data releases of this nature may be obtained for free by subscribing to The Barna Update, a free bi-weekly e-mailing of new data drawn from Barna Research Group studies. To subscribe, enter your e-mail address in the Barna Update subscription field.