

CHAPTER 23

Understanding Generation Z

Precepting the generation that is reshaping nursing

The majority of new graduate nurses entering the workforce today are members of Generation Z — born between 1997 and 2012. Understanding who they are, how they learn, and what they need from a preceptor is not generational trivia. It is the clinical intelligence that helps you build the relationship that makes orientation effective.

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NOTE

Important caveat: Generational characteristics describe broad patterns, not individuals. Treat these frameworks as context, not assumptions. Your Day-One Background Assessment (Chapter 1) always takes precedence over any generational generalization.

Who Is Generation Z?

A 2024 cross-sectional study published in BMC Nursing identified Gen Z nurses as driven by meaningful work, highly collaborative, and strongly preference-oriented toward workplaces that demonstrate psychological safety, feedback transparency, and work-life integration. A Nurse Leader systematic review (2024) confirmed that Gen Z is the most digitally native generation in history — they do not know a world without the internet — and that this shapes how they learn, communicate, and relate to authority.

Characteristic	Description	Precepting Implication	Common Mistake
Characteristic	Description	What It Means for Precepting	Common Preceptor Mistake
Digital nativity	Grew up with instant access to information; expects technology to work; default to looking things up rather than memorizing	They will use their phone to verify clinical information. This is not laziness — it is professional practice. Model it as a safety behavior.	Treating phone/tablet reference use as a lack of knowledge or commitment
Feedback transparency	Expects ongoing, specific, real-time feedback — not just formal evaluations	The SIGN debrief every shift is not extra; for Gen Z it is the minimum expected feedback cadence	Providing only end-of-orientation evaluations and calling that 'feedback'
Meaning and purpose	Highly motivated by work that feels purposeful; leaves roles that feel pointless	Connect every skill and task to its patient impact: 'We do this because it prevents X for your patient'	Teaching procedures as checklists without explaining why they matter clinically or humanly
Work-life integration	Strongly values personal time and boundaries; more likely to disengage when boundaries are ignored	Model healthy work-life integration yourself. If you text them on days off, model what they should normalize.	Expecting availability outside scheduled hours; modeling or rewarding overwork
Collaborative	Prefers learning with	Introduce them to peer	Structuring orientation as an

learning	peers, not from authority alone; values team-based approaches	mentors early; consider learning partnerships with other new grads	entirely solo experience with only the preceptor as teacher
Skepticism of hierarchy	More likely to question 'because we've always done it this way' than previous generations	Welcome the question. 'Why do we do it this way?' is evidence-based practice orientation, not disrespect	Responding to questions about rationale with authority rather than evidence

How Gen Z Learns Best

A 2024 study in the Journal of Nursing Research identified five core learning environment preferences in Gen Z nurses: environmental support, interprofessional collaboration, career aspiration visibility, resistance to structural barriers, and recognition of generational challenges. Practical implications:

- Active learning over passive observation — they absorb more from doing and discussing than watching
- Short, frequent feedback cycles — they prefer micro-feedback after each significant clinical event over long end-of-shift summaries
- Technology integration — leverage simulation review videos, point-of-care apps, and clinical decision support tools in your teaching
- Visible career pathway — they want to know: where does this role lead? What does excellent nursing look like in Year 3?
- Peer learning — pair new Gen Z nurses with slightly more senior colleagues for informal mentoring alongside formal precepting

Adapting Your Precepting for Gen Z

🔧 PRACTICAL TOOL: Gen Z Orientation Adaptations — Practical Changes

FEEDBACK FREQUENCY: Use micro-feedback after every significant clinical event, not just end-of-shift. Gen Z needs the shorter feedback loop.

TRANSPARENCY: At the start of every shift, name the learning goal explicitly. 'Here is what I want us to work on today and why.' Gen Z engages more when they understand the purpose.

TECHNOLOGY AS ALLY: When they look something up on their phone, make it a teaching moment: 'What did you find? How does that align with what we're seeing in this patient?' Don't prohibit reference use — teach evidence-based reference use.

CONNECT TO MEANING: After every significant patient interaction, close with: 'What you just did mattered because...' The meaning connection is not optional for this generation — it's fuel.

MENTORSHIP NETWORK: Don't be their only support. Introduce them to at least two other nurses who are slightly senior and willing to be informal mentors. Gen Z learns in community.

CHALLENGE THE PROCESS WITH THEM: When they ask 'why do we do it this way?', engage the question seriously. Research it together if you don't know. This models lifelong learning and builds trust.

When Generational Friction Occurs

The most common friction point between preceptors and Gen Z new grads is around questions of authority and hierarchy. A Gen Z nurse who asks 'why?' about a protocol is not being disrespectful — they are applying the evidence-based practice orientation they were taught. A preceptor who experienced hierarchy as non-

negotiable may experience this as a challenge to their authority. Understanding the difference prevents unnecessary conflict.

Gen Z Behavior	The Clinical Reasoning Behind It
Gen Z behavior that feels like resistance	The clinical reasoning behind it
'Why do we do it this way?'	EBP orientation: they were trained to question practice. This is a strength, not defiance.
Looking up information mid-conversation	Verification over memorization: taught to look up rather than rely on memory in high-stakes situations.
Wanting to know the schedule in advance	Planning orientation: high value on structure and predictability, not inflexibility.
Asking about career pathways in Week 2	Purpose orientation: need to see the meaning arc of the role. Answer this question directly.
Discomfort with being watched continuously	Autonomy development: Gen Z develops confidence faster when given structured independence, not surveillance.

➡ REFLECTION

How old are you compared to your current orientee? What generational characteristics might be creating friction — or opportunity — in your relationship?

When your orientee asks 'why do we do it this way?', what is your honest first internal reaction? What do you want it to be?
