



A Parent's Guide to
**CONSPIRACY
THEORIES**

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"The emotional appeal of a conspiracy theory is in its simplicity. It explains away complex phenomena, accounts for chance and accidents, offers the believer the satisfying sense of having special, privileged access to the truth."

— Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ What are conspiracy theories?
- ✓ Why do conspiracy theories matter?
- ✓ Are conspiracy theories dangerous?
- ✓ How can we combat the fear that comes with conspiracy theories?
- ✓ How can we encourage discernment and love in our teens?

A Secret Wrapped in a Mystery

All of our most powerful government figures are [lizard people](#). A secret cult [called the Illuminati](#) controls the careers of everyone from Beyoncé to Leonardo DiCaprio. And as for the [moon landing](#)? No more than a very convincing movie set, some actors, and a script written by Stanley Kubrick himself.

These are some of the most famous conspiracy theories in internet history. All of them come with their own form of evidence, from a viral video of Al Roker seemingly “[glitching out](#)” on live TV—proving his status as a government-operated robot—to the very real [Freemasons](#) society, whose secrecy was elevated to legend when the film *National Treasure* suggested that they wrote a treasure map on the back of the Declaration of Independence (which Nicolas Cage [then set out to steal](#)). For the most part, these conspiracy theories exist in the public mind as a joke, something to bring up in lighthearted discussion and argue about without taking them seriously.

That said, though they may sound silly, many popular conspiracy theories come from fairly dark places on the internet, alongside other theories whose subject matter is nothing to laugh at. Most importantly, even something meant in good fun can still have real life consequences, and what may have started as a joke can have a real, harmful impact on people’s lives. That’s why it’s important to understand the way conspiracy theories are talked about on the internet and the place they hold in teen culture.

Whether your teen has only heard of one or two in passing or is deep into Reddit and 4chan threads dedicated to finding ever more evidence, we as parents and caring adults have an opportunity to step into this space and encourage our teens towards critical thinking, awareness of what voices they listen to, and love for those around them.

What are conspiracy theories?

A lot of things happen in our world that don't make sense. Natural disasters, national and global tragedies, wars, riots, and injustice can all feel hopeless when stacked up on top of each other. Add to that the uncomfortable fact that many decisions which affect our daily lives truly are made behind closed doors or presented to the public in ways which can feel intended to confuse and misdirect. Sometimes agendas that seem to come from nowhere and be supported by no-one sweep the culture through the platforms of a few celebrities or online influencers. In all the chaos, it makes sense that people would look for an explanation for it all. In this way conspiracy theories are born.

The [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) says this about conspiracy theories:

Conspiracy theories increase in prevalence in periods of widespread anxiety, uncertainty, or hardship, as during wars and economic depressions and in the aftermath of natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, and pandemics... conspiratorial thinking is driven by a strong human desire to make sense of social forces that are self-relevant, important, and threatening. The content of conspiracy theories is emotionally laden and its alleged discovery can be gratifying. The evidentiary standards for corroborating conspiracy theories are typically weak, and they are usually resistant to falsification. The survivability of conspiracy theories may be aided by psychological biases and by distrust of official sources.

In other words, conspiracy theories survive and gain traction because they give people both the satisfaction and peace of mind gained by feeling like they've sorted everything out, that they've unlocked the key to understanding the chaos. They thrive because the "evidence" is soft, and the very belief in a cover-up makes a lack of evidence feel like part of the conspiracy.

There are two patterns of thinking that give conspiracy theories a place to lodge in people's minds. The first is called [apophenia](#), which refers to the perception of significant connections and patterns in things which are objectively unrelated to one another. Apophenia creates a web of meaning out of coincidence, attributing random occurrences to intentional actions. This kind of thinking commonly creates a foundation for belief in the paranormal, superstition, and, of course, conspiracy theories. The second pattern is [confirmation bias](#), which is the tendency of people to commit to their beliefs and see evidence for them everywhere regardless of evidence that they're wrong. People exhibiting confirmation bias tend to immediately favor any information which supports

their belief, no matter how flimsy, and dismiss anything that contradicts their belief, regardless of how well-substantiated it might be.

Between the desire to make sense of the senseless, the ability to see meaningful connections where there likely aren't any, and the tendency to dismiss anything that might disprove those connections, it's obvious why people latch onto conspiracy theories. Many of us may have some pet conspiracy theory that we subscribe to with varying levels of seriousness, whether it's something outrageous—like the idea that Avril Lavigne died and was [replaced by a clone](#)—or something that seems all but proven. But there are many conspiracy theories that have roots in something harmful, can cause consequences for real people, or are simply malicious in and of themselves.

Reflection questions: What are some conspiracy theories you've heard of? Are there some that are more popular than others? Why do you think they interest people?

Does Gen Z care about conspiracy theories?

The reason it's important to understand and discuss conspiracy theories as parents of teens is because it's important to help teens learn how to think clearly and critically. Christians follow someone who refers to himself as "[the truth](#)," so pursuing and trying to understand what's actually true should always matter to us.

With the growth of social media has come a concept called "context collapse." One of the effects of this is that all information is presented on social media with equal weight. As Jason Bartz points out in [his article](#) on Medium:

Context collapse of social media leveled the exchange of information, allowing for the announcement of a presidential campaign to carry the same weight as a picture of a cat and dog cuddling or meme. As the content leveled, so did our ability to interact with it. The "like" button is the same response to all of the above.

As a result of context collapse on social media, we have been trained to give people's personal opinions the same weight as objective information. In less than a second, we can scroll from a TikTok made by a professional or expert to a person sharing whatever idea they just came up with as if it's a fact. There is no difference between the way this information reaches us, and little to no impetus to click off the app to do our own fact-checking (in fact, most social media apps are [specifically designed](#) so that you don't want to leave).

Social media makes us particularly vulnerable to accepting unverified and unverifiable information as true. Add to that the fact that conspiracy theories are usually pretty interesting, and you have a recipe for their proliferation. And, because teenagers are on social media [more than any other generation](#), they are often primed to receive these conspiracy theories in a way no one else is. In [a video](#) (*language*) about TikTok conspiracy theories, YouTuber Chad Chad noted that most videos tagged #conspiracytheory average a couple million views, with several reaching as many as 20 million. The sinking of the Titan submersible in June of 2023 sparked interest in the already prolific [Titanic conspiracy community](#), causing many to latch on to the idea that maybe the Titanic never sank at all, undermining the tragedy of over 1,500 people losing their lives.

From the lighthearted to the more serious, it's clear that Gen Z is in many ways the perfect audience for conspiracy theories, and that the interaction with social media content related to conspiracy theories is gaining enough consistent traction to demonstrate that many teens find them fascinating.

Reflection questions: Have you heard any teens in your life talking about conspiracy theories? What are their attitudes towards these ideas, and the people who believe them?

Are conspiracy theories dangerous?

As we mentioned above, for the most part the answer is no. Most people who take an interest in conspiracy theories do it for fun, to be part of an internet joke. Discussing “[flat-earth theory](#),” or the idea that our government might be concealing [alien life](#) from us usually just makes for an amusing conversation. However, there are some conspiracy theories which can and do have real-world consequences.

A key part of conspiracy theories is “othering,” the idea that there is an “us” and a “them.” This kind of fear and suspicion has found a locus throughout history in antisemitism. [A fascinating article](#) from the Atlantic goes in-depth on how Jewish people have been the target of fear and hatred going back to the people group’s beginnings. The idea that Jews were becoming too powerful and “replacing” those who had a right to the country they lived in was exactly the fear that drove Pharaoh to kill the Hebrew babies [in Exodus 1](#). This idea is present in conspiracy theories like the idea that shapeshifting reptilian people are attempting to create a New World Order (an idea which Anthony Quinn, who bombed Nashville on Christmas day in 2021, [fervently ascribed to](#)), as well as blatant arguments that [Jewish people were the cause of everything](#) from 9/11 to the Black Plague.

“Us vs. them” language conveys the idea that *we* are safe, moral, knowledgeable, and right; *those other people* are dangerous, and want to take what *we* have. Another good example of this might be QAnon, the belief that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media,” and that “[President](#) Donald J. Trump was recruited by top military generals to run for president in 2016 to break up this criminal conspiracy and bring its members to justice.” Belief in this theory has motivated some violent criminal activity, including [kidnappings](#), [assassination plots](#), and the 2019 [murder of a mafia boss](#) in New York.

Human beings are meaning-making machines. We have been designed by God to connect dots between events and to try to build understanding. But the Lord calls His people to do this responsibly. In [Isaiah 8:12-13](#), the prophet says to Israel, “Do not call conspiracy everything this people calls a conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.”

In the Bible we are commanded to spend our combat energy against the [spiritual forces of evil](#), and meanwhile to act in love even toward those [we regard as our enemies](#). Conspiracy theories

become dangerous when they encourage us to disregard biblical principles like these. This kind of thinking not only changes our focus from the spiritual reality of evil to its manifestation in the people around us, but can lead us down a path where we see whole groups of people as evil, or even less than human.

Reflection: How do you interpret passages like [Isaiah 8:12-13](#) and [Ephesians 6:11-12](#)? How do those shape the way you think about conspiracy theories?

How else can conspiracy theories affect us?

An investment in conspiracy theories can have a real impact on our families, as well as our spiritual witness. As Dr. Russell Moore [puts it](#) in an article from July of 2023,

The No. 1 question that younger evangelicals ask me is how to relate to their parents and mentors who want to talk about culture-war politics and internet conspiracy theories instead of prayer or the Bible. These young people are committed to their Christian faith, but they feel despair and cynicism about the Church's future. Almost none of them even call themselves "evangelical" anymore, now that the label is confused with political categories.

One of the things that Christians should want is for our faith to appear credible to others—which is easiest when we prioritize credibility. The context collapse we talked about earlier, as well as the massive amount of information coming at us constantly can encourage people to develop entire worldviews around headlines and hearsay. Again: this affects both family conversation and our Christian witness. But these aren't the only other ways we can be affected by conspiracy theories.

Not only can conspiracy theories misdirect our understanding of who our enemies are, they can encourage us to discriminate against people who have done nothing wrong at all. Some of the most popular conspiracy theories have roots in bigotry. Take, for example, a conspiracy theory that went viral on TikTok recently: the idea that [Helen Keller was not disabled](#). It started as a joke about how a deafblind woman could write books. As so often happens on social media, the concept took flight without much, if any, research or evidence. The reality is that Helen Keller was an incredible activist and advocate, and her life and work made a huge impact on the way disabled people were viewed not only in the United States, but across the world. She lived an amazing life, and fought not only for respect for disabled people but women's suffrage, civil rights, and labor rights. She wrote twelve books and gave lectures. Her work was so influential that her writing was burned by the Nazis for its support of those they sought to eliminate. The theory that all of this was a ploy for attention or fame can imply that disabled people could never really achieve this level of success and influence.

These sorts of conspiracy theories can have harmful consequences for real people, especially when those people have already experienced pain from cultural othering.

Reflection questions: Are there areas in your life where you've held beliefs that could hurt other people or "other" them? Why do you think conspiracy theories have traction even when people know they can be harmful? What are some ideas you hear from culture that you think could be harmful in ways people don't realize?

How can I have a discipleship conversation with my teen about conspiracy theories?

While everything we've talked about above regarding the potential danger of conspiracy theories is a conversation that might be important to have, a discussion of conspiracy theories can be a good way to help our teens understand the importance of critical thinking and good judgment on the internet.

One of the most important conversations that can stem from this is about the concept of truth itself. What does it mean for something to be true? How can we know what the truth is?

Here's a simple definition: truth is whatever corresponds to reality. It's not what we want to believe, it's not what we're afraid of, it's not what we feel, and it's not our best guess based on articles we skimmed and videos we watched half of. Truth is whatever is actually real, in reality. This concept of objective truth is absolutely foundational for Christianity. As the Apostle Paul said about the resurrection in [1 Corinthians 15:14](#), "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

It's also important that we model for our teens an ability to admit when we're wrong. Sometimes this is easy, like realizing after a Google search that we repeated hearsay as fact, and sometimes it might be a lot harder, like growing to understand that we have harmful opinions or inaccurate beliefs. This can be especially difficult when it feels like our job as parents is to always have the right answer. But when we are willing to acknowledge the fact that we are all sinful and we all make mistakes in what we do and say, we teach and model for our teens how to do the same.

When we were teenagers, the particular parts of our brains that were still developing were [the portions that manage impulse control](#). Teens are neurologically more impulsive and less likely to think long-term about their actions. In this way, social media can provide a challenge for teens because they simply aren't wired to think about how what they post may affect them in the future, and they may not be thinking as much about how what they're saying and how their words might affect others. This is a wonderful opportunity for us as parents to step into our teens' worlds and help them learn to pause and think about their own actions.

The internet may seem temporary, but it's not, and once something is posted there is no way to fully retract it. Many teens do know this, as evidenced by comments about "[digital footprints](#)" when people overshare on their platforms, but that doesn't mean they always remember it when it comes to posting their own content. Showing genuine interest in the things our teens post and being involved in their interests is a great way to stay aware of how our teens are building their online identities, and aware of what sorts of content they're engaging with.

It's also helpful to establish a relationship with your teen and an expectation within your family that you will think and talk about the content and ideas you consume. Sharing things you're hearing in your own life—be that in your newsfeed, on social media, or in conversations with others—and being willing to discuss what the ideas mean and where they come from creates a space for your teen to feel safe exploring and analyzing their own ideas and the things they see around them. This might include researching the information they come across online or at school, or taking time to sit down and discuss certain topics in a more thorough way.

When it comes to conspiracy theories, your teen might have any number of opinions about them. It's important to help them understand that just because something is a joke doesn't mean it has no impact; words have power, even when they're meant in jest. There are also many people who [simply aren't joking](#), and dismissing the harm they do can enable them to continue hurting people with their words. Proverbs has a lot to say about the significance of what we say, emphasizing over and over again that, "The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit" ([15:4](#)).

For teens who are invested in conspiracy theories and maybe even spend their time looking for evidence and sharing ideas online, it's essential to help them understand how these ideas might be affecting the ways they think and see the world. Encourage your teen to think about the things they dwell on, how much time they're spending in places that might not be good for their hearts and minds, and whether or not they're practicing any beliefs or behaviors that lead them to fear, suspicion, or bigotry.

Reflection questions: Do you talk with the teens in your life about the ideas they hear from media and on the internet? Do they take time to think critically about what they listen to or what they post online? How can you model healthy judgment in your own online activity?

“Do not fear what they fear.”

A few chapters after the verse from Isaiah 8 about “not calling conspiracy everything this people calls conspiracy,” [Isaiah says](#) that God’s people do not need to fear, because God himself tells us, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Above all, it’s our responsibility as well as our honor as parents to help lead our children towards the path that Christ paved for us with his life. That means leaving no room to choose the kind of fear conspiracy theories can plant in our lives, and it also means practicing empathy, love, and kindness to those around us. Not only do we want to teach our teens to love and follow Jesus, but we want to help them be a reflection of who He is to a world that doesn’t understand that His light saves us from all darkness. When we talk with our children, whether it’s a light conversation or a heavy one, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will move in us to teach them how to live their lives with wisdom and kindness in all they do and say.

Questions to start conversations with your teen:

- ✓ Do your friends ever talk about conspiracy theories? Which ones?
- ✓ Why do you think people like conspiracy theories? Do you think they would be as popular without the internet?
- ✓ How would you define the word “truth”?
- ✓ What would be some indications that someone’s belief is true? What would be some indications that someone’s belief is false?
- ✓ What do you think is the line between a joke and something hurtful?

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at axis.org/give. Thank you!

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