



# Meeting the Challenge of the Teenage Years:

## *Talking With Your Teenagers*

Those of us who are parents of teens know only too well the strange expressions that pass for communication between our offspring and their peers. A young lady tells her friend of an encounter with an eligible young man. "Well he looked at me and I was, like, freaked out. Then he like came over and asked me my name and I was like, duh, c'mon remember what it is. And he was like so cool about it and I was, like, sooo embarrassed."

### **What's the secret?**

Does the secret of successfully communicating with our teens lie in somehow unlocking their obscure *lingua franca*, or even more outrageous, embracing it ourselves? Must we as parents cast off the conversational conventions and social niceties we've been cultivating for decades and attempt to emulate the vagaries of the adolescent vernacular?

I would have thought not. However, just to be sure, I suggested to our home group that for one meeting we take a break from the prophecies of Ezekiel which we had been studying, and instead discuss the science of talking to teens to see whether we could come up with a few oracular pronouncements of our own. When we did have our discussion the funny thing was that the seasoned parental campaigners were remarkably quiet while the youngest ones, those who had no children of their own, seemed to have the most to say.

To begin with, the overwhelming consensus was no, parents shouldn't use teen-talk to communicate with their adolescents. For one thing, adults don't know the idioms well enough, and more tellingly, children see such an exercise as demeaning for their parents. So how should parents address their teens, then? Perhaps the best advice that the group agreed upon is to interact with children as far as possible in an adult way. Speak to them as if they are above their chronological age and challenge them to rise to a higher level of understanding.

Interestingly, we find no references at all to 'teenagers' or 'adolescents' in the Scriptures. Looking at the references to 'youth', far from being given helpful advice, the picture painted is very often one of unruliness and rebelliousness. Consider the disrespect shown to Elisha by the 42 youths subsequently mauled by two bears. Or Job's (13:26) and David's (Ps. 25:7) remembrance of the sins of their youth and Paul's injunction to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:22) to flee the sins of youth. On the other hand we are told "*better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king*" (Eccl. 4:13). Many times the Bible relates how during one's youth decisions are made that hold fast for the remainder of one's life. Many times the comment is passed that a certain pattern has been observed since youth. For example, Elijah's confession to the prophet Obadiah, "*Yet I your servant have worshipped the Lord since my youth*" (1 Kings 18:12).

### **Two truths**

So, given the importance of the time of youth, how do we as parents relate to and communicate with our teenagers? If we bear two truths in mind then we find that God's Word does indeed have much to offer on the subject. First, our teens are our children. Second, our teens may soon, by the grace of God, be our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our teenagers are our children. That's not to say we talk to them as if they were infants. But we are their parents and they are our sons and daughters. All that the Bible has to say about raising

children does not fall away when those children reach the age of thirteen. As parents we must continue to look to Deuteronomy 6:7: *“Impress them (the Lord’s commands) on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”* It will probably be true that by the time they reach adolescence our children will know the Ten Commandments and know that they are to love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and strength. That doesn’t mean that our job as parents is done. The message to parents is as much about setting an example, about continual reinforcement, as it is about merely imparting the truths. Parents must use all the means at their disposal to train their teens in the way of the Lord. Deuteronomy 6:7 also makes plain that our talking to our children about our heavenly Father does not just take place at our family devotions at mealtimes. Because our relationship with the Lord is, or ought to be, for the whole of life, then we will want to share the outworking of that relationship whenever and wherever the opportunity naturally presents itself.

### **Fathers do not...**

Another important teaching is that of Paul’s not to embitter or exasperate our children. Of such significance is this instruction that it is given both to the Ephesians (6:4) and to the Colossians (3:21). In writing thus, Paul addresses fathers. Fathers are well advised to heed these verses especially during the time of life when their offspring are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Talk to your teens as if they are still young children and they will become exasperated. Talk to them too far beyond their level of understanding or spiritual maturity and they will become embittered. Of course mothers as well as fathers can be responsible for strained relationships with their teens, but Paul addresses fathers in the first instance as they are the heads of their households and it is they who must set the tone.

Parents sometimes find it difficult to accept that in some parts of life they are outshone by their teenage children. Their children may have become more articulate, studious, musical, strong, dexterous, good-looking; indeed superior in any manner of desirable character traits. Parents will do well to recognise that such developments are gifts from God, to be thankful for, to rejoice over with their teens.

The second guiding principle is that our teens may soon be our brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps, praise God, they already are. At the very least they will soon reach adulthood and our everyday relationship with them will change from that of parent and child to something that more resembles brothers and sisters. As our children emerge as adults, we as parents need to learn to talk to our teens accordingly. That’s not to say that teens are somehow independent, that they are free from the responsibilities and constraints of living as children in their parents’ home, rather there will be many times when teens will benefit richly from being spoken to in an adult manner. Our teens ought also to be included more and more fully in the exercise of the biblical fellowship that we share with one another as believers.

### **Talk with them**

Seek to cultivate an adult-type friendship with your teens. One that’s compatible with and complements the parent-child relationship. Tell them something of the highs and lows you went through as a teen. Tell them some of the blessings and disappointments you experience now as an adult – and do it from a Christian perspective. As Christian parents, most of us regularly talk about faith with our children. But it is far less often that we talk about how that faith is working itself out in our inner being. As and when appropriate, take your teen into your confidence about your plans, aspirations, evaluations and misgivings in your own life. As we volunteer personal information about ourselves we build a bond of trust and we can expect that our teens will respond in like manner.

In this vein Lou Priolo, in his article on getting teens to open up,<sup>1</sup> suggests that parents have their teens memorise 2 Corinthians 6:11-13: *“We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange – I speak as to my children – open wide your hearts also.”*

Be prepared to admit that you are fallible. If, regarding your mistakes and lapses in judgement towards your teens, you apologise to them then they will be less reluctant to do the same when the situation is reversed.

## **Get to know them**

To build an effective relationship with our teens, where talking together will come naturally, we need to spend time with them. We need to get to know them. Parents often think they do know their teens well – after all parents see their teens every day, they raised them from infancy. But parents can overlook the often rapid development or changes in character that occur in adolescence. Maturing children increasingly assimilate influences from beyond the home, and parents can sometimes struggle to keep up with how their youngsters are thinking. As we get to know our teens we will understand and appreciate their uniqueness; we will realise that not all the expectations we have of the one will be appropriate for the other.

In this short article I haven't attempted to discuss in detail the particular things parents might want to talk about with their teens, how they might broach these topics, how they can elicit good responses. I would like to recommend a book by Paul Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, which is a hugely valuable resource for parents, not only in talking to teens, but in the whole task of parenting adolescents from a biblical perspective. Tripp observes that too many parents content themselves with a mere survival of the teenage years. His response is a call for change:

*"It is time for us to reject the wholesale cynicism of our culture regarding adolescence. Rather than years of undirected and unproductive struggle, these are years of unprecedented opportunity. They are the golden age of parenting, when you begin to reap all the seeds you have sown in their lives, when you help your teenager to internalize truth, preparing him or her for a productive, God-honoring life as an adult."*<sup>2</sup>

In the same way that teens are all different, so too are parents. Some find it easy to talk from the heart and forge deep relationships; others by nature are more reserved. It was clear as we talked about this at our home group that mature children do understand their parents' weaknesses and limitations. When, in spite of failings, parents do their best, then there is a great spirit of generosity on the part of former teens in accepting and giving thanks for their parents' efforts in their upbringing.<sup>3</sup>

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## **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Lou Priolo: Training teens to open up, *Reformed Perspective*, May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Paul David Tripp: *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens* (P&R Publishing, 2001), p.19.

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to the members of the Morning-ton Home Group, 18 November 2010, whose thoughtful contributions have informed much of this article.