



Engaging our teenagers

How Are We to Connect With Our Teens?

Often, you'll hear someone say, "Oh, your kids are so cute. Enjoy them while they're young, because when they become teenagers, look out! Disaster will strike!" Our society often considers the coming wave of teenage years as an impending tsunami. Many parents dread this stage of parenting. As kids become teenagers, the goal for many parents is simply survival.

Wrong Perspective

Sadly, many Christian parents share this perspective. They brace themselves, kind of hope for the best, but really expect the worst. In fact, many Christian parents simply anticipate that their kids will go through that unavoidable phase of teenage rebellion. They expect that their kids will inevitably sow their wild oats, and hopefully, they'll make it through all right.

We need to reject this perspective. It diverts parents from their duties and renders them without hope. Further, this approach to parenting is not supported by the Word of God. Surely, if we believe that our children are duty bound to live according to the commandments of God, then we cannot possibly feel comfortable with this perspective. As Reformed Christians, we embrace a covenantal approach to parenting, and to dealing with our teenagers. What does this mean? For starters, it means that we are looking expectantly to our covenant God to work His grace in our own lives, and in the lives of our children. It also means that we will lovingly and passionately lead them in the ways of the Lord. And we will not expect, nor will we tolerate teenage rebellion.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's easy. Far from being idealistic, I know that dealing with our teenagers does have its challenges. It can be a very complicated experience! The apprehension many parents feel as their kids grow up is understandable. And it will take more than elevated expectations to deal effectively with our teenagers.

What are Teenagers?

There's no doubt that teenagers are complex and rather unusual creatures. What is it about teenagers that often makes parenting them so challenging? Tedd Tripp puts it this way:

The teen years are years of monumental insecurity. He is neither a child nor an adult. He is insecure about how to act.

Teens feel vulnerable about everything. They worry about their appearance. Do they have the right clothes? Are they wearing them right? What will their friends think about this shirt, dress, or new haircut?

Teens feel insecure about their bodies ... They worry about whether they are developing on schedule ... Teenagers experience apprehension about their personality. They wonder, are they serious enough, funny enough, creative enough, carefree enough?

While this is a period of instability, it is paradoxically a period when children are seeking to establish an independent persona. The teen wants to be his own person. While his need for direction has never been greater, he will resist overt attempts to corral him.¹

Paul Tripp expands on the nature of the teenage years this way:

This is the period when the teenager is flooded with questions. Who am I? Do I look okay? ... Who is right and who is wrong? ... What am I going to do with my life? ... Do people really like me? Am I normal? Is my family normal? Is God for real?²

Regarding their theological and spiritual development, Paul Tripp goes on to say:

The teenage years are often times of wrestling with questions of faith ... When they are little children, they believe everything you tell them about Jesus, His miracles, and more. They believe so because Mom and Dad say it is true. But as they get older they discover that some intelligent people out there don't believe the things you believe. They wrestle with the question, "Do I believe these things because I have been taught them or do I really believe them for myself?"³

Our teens need lots of interaction and guidance. I urge you to consider these challenging years, not as an impending tsunami, but, as Paul Tripp calls it, an *age of opportunity*. Our teens desperately need the wise and loving influence of their parents to guide them through these strenuous years. Let's consider a biblical approach to guiding our teens.

A Biblical Approach

Parents are often intimidated by the teenage years. They feel inadequate to provide the guidance, instruction and discipline their kids need. The temptation is to pull back, or to look to others to make up the slack. "Hopefully the teachers at school can talk some sense into my son." Or, "We need to have youth elders in all of our congregations who can spend time with our young people and give them the pastoral one-on-one they need." Some parents will say, "I'm not good at teaching theological concepts to my daughter. That's what Catechism teachers are for."

Imagine the frustration this generates for teachers, youth group leaders, pastors and elders, when parents abrogate what are *their* responsibilities in regard to their teens! John Angell James, in *The Christian Father's Present to His Children*, said, "*The man who does not make the religious character of his children the supreme end of all his conduct toward them may profess to believe as a Christian, but certainly acts as an atheist.*"⁴ The teen years are years when we should be even more engaged with our kids. It is indeed a great opportunity to nurture a wonderful and highly interactive relationship with them, preparing them to leave home, ready to face the world on their own.

That parents are suited for the task is clear from Scripture. The book of Proverbs has much wisdom to offer in this regard. For examples: "*My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother*" (Prov. 1:8). "*A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke*" (Prov. 13:1).

A key passage is Deuteronomy 6:6-7. Here the Lord tells His covenant people, "*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*" The idea here is that spiritual realities should be openly and regularly discussed in the home. If we apply this to our own families, the lordship of Christ over us and His claims upon us as His covenant people, this will be a normal part of our everyday conversation.

The issues teenagers are dealing with are most effectively addressed in times of non-conflict. That implies that we need to think creatively about how to initiate discussions. We must engage our teens in all the normal settings of life: as we rake the leaves together, have supper together and drive together to Canadian Tire. Let's not establish times or areas of our lives where we leave God out.

Developing a Strategy

Too often we react to our teenagers, addressing them only in times of conflict. When we address their specific negative behaviour, we quickly show that we are angry or frustrated, and our teens

become defensive and less teachable. We need to be more pro-active. We should spend a lot more energy nurturing an open and comfortable relationship with our teens. Ideally, we will be able to talk casually with them about everything: money, sports, sex, worship, the boy or girl they like, and everything else under heaven. We need to bring the claims of Christ into every area of life. This will increase our overall influence upon them. As our kids get older, we should rely less and less on our authority over them and seek more and more opportunity to influence them. Tedd Tripp warns against being overly authoritarian with our teens:

By authoritarianism I'm ... talking about being overly tough: "You can't get away with anything with me. I'll make your punishment more onerous." Rather than becoming a bigger authority, we need to come along side our teens as bigger positive influences ... If I told you the president of the United States never makes a decision without checking with me, and he always does what I suggest, how much authority would I have in the government? None. But I'd have a great deal of influence because I'd have the president's ear. We want to become parents who have influence with our teens.⁵

This takes work. In order to make the most of this age of opportunity, we need to be taking a real interest in the lives of our teens. We need to spend time with them. This means, for one thing, that we do not allow them the level of interaction with other teens that they demand. It also means that we need to evaluate how we prioritize our time. Spending quantity time with our teens is not easy to do in our day. It may mean that you ask for a demotion at work, so that your work doesn't control your life. It may mean taking up fishing, or hockey or some other activity your teenager enjoys. It may mean that you get out and cheer them on at their volleyball game. We need to provide the context in order for the interaction to take place.

Watch for the tendency for teens to avoid interacting with different age groups, and only wanting to hang out with their own specific age group. This is not healthy. Our society tends to segregate children and youth into clearly defined age groups. This influences God's people too. We need to work at cultivating multi-age interaction, and multi-family activities. Teens need to have mentors around older than they are, and they also need to see how they can impact the lives of kids younger than they are.

Building a Relationship

Aim for a relationship with your teen in which you are not embarrassed by your child, and they are not embarrassed by you. You should not feel awkward when you come upon your teen and his or her group of friends. They should not feel awkward either. If you do, more work needs to be done in developing a healthy relationship with them. Remember, family relationships are primary relationships. Aim high.

When you engage in spiritual or theological conversation with your teens, give them lots of space. Remember that they are young and tender. Give them freedom to express themselves and gently guide them. Tedd Tripp gives this advice:

Shepherd your teens through those inevitable periods of doubt. Don't challenge "How could you question the being and existence of God after all we've taught you?" Rather say, "What are your questions? Let's talk about them. Your Mom and I are not Christians because we shut off our brains. We believe our faith is a reasonable faith" ... Like in any relay race, you run alongside the other runner and make sure he has a firm hold on the baton before you let him run on his own.⁶

Be ready to give biblical contribution to theological or moral disagreements. This may take some study and work on your part, but saying "this is the way we've always done it" is likely to backfire. Your teen is entitled to biblical reasoning. In our day there are literally tons of good helpful resources readily available, so have some good books on hand. (A few suggestions would include *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* by R.C. Sproul, *Refuting Evolution* by Jonathan Sarfati, Berkhof's *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, and *The Bible Answer Book*, Vols. 1 and 2 by Hank Hanegraaff. Ask your pastor or elder for further suggestions.)

Come Alongside

When you decide you need to confront your child on a moral or behavioral issue, be sure that you know what you're talking about. As Paul Tripp say, *"Parents often lose credibility because they are ill-informed. When you haven't done your homework, you will resort to stereotypes, generalizations, rumors and straw man characterizations."*⁷ Get the facts, and be gracious in your confrontation. Remember, *"A soft answer turns away wrath"* (Prov. 15:1). At the same time, be firm. Do not allow defiance and disrespect.

Be sure to come along side your teen, reminding them that you too are no more than a sinner saved by grace. Be sure to show them what grace looks like. Ask them for forgiveness when you've wronged them. Similarly, ask your spouse to forgive you for when you have sinned against him or her – and do that in front of your teens. Exemplify Christian character in your home. Pray together with your teen. Talk about what the love of Jesus means to you. Speak about the challenges you face in submitting your own will to the will of your heavenly Father. Talk, talk, talk.

Speak highly of the institutional church. Speak with respect about your local church, your elders, your pastor and the preaching. Be very careful if something in the preaching needs to be corrected or clarified. Your teens pick up on any sarcasm and disrespect; this is very damaging. Speak of how you consider the corporate worship services and the gathering together of God's people as the highlight of your week! Talk, talk, talk with your teen.

Finally, make your home a fun and attractive place to be. Be hospitable. Let the young people scatter their dirty running shoes all over your front hall. Strive to make your home a place where your teen feels at home – sheltered, loved and encouraged to pursue the service of the Lord.

Conclusions

The teenage years are sure to be interesting and challenging. However, we ought not to envision that there is a tsunami on the way. Instead, we need to view this period as an age of great opportunity. The Lord has given us guidance in His Word. Let us look to the Lord to bless our parental efforts. And let us use the means He has provided. May the Lord grant His grace and wisdom to us parents, and to our teens, to His glory!

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¹ Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 210-211.

² Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity* (Phillipbsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 24.

³ Tedd Tripp, "Communicate with Teens," in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2005), 30.

⁴ Quoted in Michael S. Beates, "The Father as Priest," in *Family Practice* (Phillipbsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), ed. R. C. Sproul, Jr., 34.

⁵ Tedd Tripp, "Communicate with Teens," 29.

⁶ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷ Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 239.