



Parents, Meet Your Teenager

Do you remember what it was like to be a teenager? Do you remember your self-consciousness, your physical self-awareness, and your general confusion? Do you remember feeling great about yourself one day and wanting to die the next? Do you remember trying to be cool, only to make a complete fool of yourself? Do you remember doing immature and irresponsible things just at the time you were trying to win your parents' respect?

Effective parents of teenagers are people who are able to remember what it was like to live in the scary world of the teen years.

I remember the time I finally got my mom and dad to trust me with the car, only to run out of gas and hitchhike home, leaving the keys in the ignition! I was crushed as my mom told me in elaborate detail how dumb a thing that was.

If parents fail to remember moments like this, if we fail to recognise how huge these events are to our teenagers, we will fail to take them seriously. The problem is that teenage crises sneak up on you.

Maybe this is why parents approach adolescence with such apprehension. We don't like the unpredictability, the spontaneity. We get nervous about how quickly things get serious, or how rapidly things can change. So we tend to buy into the survival mentality of the culture and look for another book that will help us cope with teen chaos. I saw a tee-shirt recently that said, "Of course I look tired. I have a teenager!"

We will never be able to predict what each day will bring as we raise our teenagers, but the more we understand about the age the more we will be able to approach this time with a spirit of preparedness rather than a spirit of fear.

We must reject the self-centered survivalism that sees success as making it through our children's adolescence with our sanity and our marriages intact. We must settle for nothing less than being instruments in the hands of God who is doing important things in the lives of our children.

The first seven chapters of Proverbs record a wise father giving practical life advice to his son. As I have studied these chapters, I have found the sorts of things we will encounter with our teenagers. Yet none of these themes lead to the hopelessness so prevalent in our culture's view of teens. Rather, they simply and wisely begin to orient you to the kinds of struggles you will encounter as you live with your teenager. Let's look at the tendencies revealed in this section of Proverbs.

No hunger for correction: Proverbs emphasizes the value of wisdom and the importance of correction. The father of Proverbs essentially says to his son, "*Whatever you get in life, get wisdom! It is more valuable than you will ever know.*" Most teenagers simply don't have a hunger for wisdom. In fact, most think they are much wiser than they actually are, and they mistakenly believe that their parents have little practical insight to offer. They tend to think that their parents "don't really understand" or are "pretty much out of it." Yet most teenagers sorely lack wisdom and desperately need loving, biblical, and faithfully dispensed correction.

Most teenagers don't walk into the family room and say, "You know, Dad, I was just thinking how wise you are, and what a good thing it is that God put you in my life so that I could gain wisdom too. I just thought I'd come in and talk with you for a while and soak up some of the wisdom that

you and I both know I desperately need.” No, it doesn’t happen that way. Teens don’t tend to beg for our wisdom. Yet we cannot give in and let them set the agenda for our relationship with them.

Ask yourself, do I respond to my teenager in ways that make wisdom appealing? Do I make the taste of correction sweet? I watch parents make correction bitter as they beat their children with demeaning words. Make wisdom attractive. Make correction something to be desired.

Win your children for wisdom. Be a salesman for it. You don’t do this with nasty, inflammatory confrontations and ugly verbal power struggles. No wisdom is imparted in these moments. If you hit your kids with a barrage of verbal bullets, they will either run for the bunker or come out firing themselves.

After preparing yourself, talk with your teen in the right place at the right time. Get away into a quiet room in the house, preferably the teen’s room where he is comfortable. Don’t squeeze these important wisdom or corrective times into busy moments; don’t do this on the fly.

Don’t conduct them in front of other people, or introduce them as you are running out to the car on the way to school or church. Take time, and in so doing say, “You are important and what God says is important, so I am willing to invest the time necessary to be his instrument of correction.” Remember, giving wisdom is not hitting your teenager over the head with words.

Tendency to legalism: Proverbs doesn’t give us an encyclopedia of dos and don’ts, or rights and wrongs. What Proverbs gives us is two worldviews, wisdom and foolishness. Here we find two ways of living: the way of the wise that gets its direction from the truth of God, and the way of the fool that gets its direction from human perspective and desire. God is looking for more than outward behaviour. He is working so that we would be nothing less than partakers of his divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). We cannot and we must not reduce godly living to a ‘set of rules.’

Teenagers, however, tend to be dyed-in-the-wool legalists. They tend to emphasise the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Teenagers tend to push at the fences while telling you that they are still in the yard. They tend to drive you to boundary discussions. They engage you in “how far can I go” conversations, and they tend to respond later with “but I did exactly what you told me to do”.

We need to be skilled at talking about the spirit of the law with our teenagers. We need to talk about the heart issues behind the command. We need to show them the difference between an inner purity and a pharisaic performance of duty. We need to see teenage legalism as an opportunity to talk about what it means to have a heart for God and a heart for doing what is right.

My son tended to be rough in his physical play with his brother. He enjoyed his advantage of size and strength. There were many occasions when his younger brother would end up frustrated and in tears. So I went to my son and asked him not to engage in physical play with his brother. In making this request, I was actually summarizing a lot of things that were in the category of intimidation, using his size to take advantage of his younger brother.

A few days later I heard his brother crying again in the family room. I said, “I thought I asked you not to do this with your brother?” His response was, “I didn’t touch him.” Do you see what happened? He technically kept the letter of the law, in that he did not physically touch or hurt his brother. Yet he completely disobeyed the spirit of the request by physically intimidating his brother without touching him.

As we point out this legalism to our teenagers and remind them of the true spirit of God’s requirements, they will see their inability and begin to hunger for Christ. Otherwise, they will tend to be like the Pharisees who reduced the law of God to double human standards. Christ told his followers that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees they would not enter the kingdom of heaven! As we point our teenagers to the grandeur of the spirit of the law, they will say, “I can’t do this. I can’t love. I can’t give. I am not a servant.” They will begin to reach out for the help that only Christ can give.

The stakes here are high. Human legalism leads to human self-righteousness. Human self-righteousness denies the need for the saving, enabling grace of Christ. Human righteousness embraces the cruelest of Satan's lies, that a person can be righteous by keeping the law. If that were true, there would have been no need for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

We must help our teenagers to see their legalism, and we must not get into the endless boundary debates that legalism enjoys. We must help our children to see their rebellion of heart, and take them to Christ, who is their righteousness.

Tendency to unwise company: There is a great deal of material in Proverbs about friendship and the influence that others have on you and your behavior. Teenagers often are naive and unwise in their choice of friends. Proverbs goes so far as to say that when you see certain people, you should cross the road and walk on the other side! Friendship is very important. A person is known by the company he keeps. It is impossible to be uninfluenced by one's friends. Yet teenagers typically assume that they won't be influenced and will respond to our concern with "I can handle it".

We need to approach these conversations with sensitivity and patient love. Teenagers tend to be prickly and protective when it comes to discussions of their friends. It is as if the operational rule is this: "To reject my friends is to reject me."

As parents we need to be very careful about the way we have these conversations. Never resort to name-calling and character assassination. Your goal should be to get your teenager to step outside the emotion and commitment of the relationship to give it a long, honest, biblical look. They won't do this without your help. But it's also true that they won't do it if, in your own fear, you have emotionally denigrated relationships that are precious to them.

This subject must be put on the table. Teenagers need to learn the skill of wisely choosing friends. They need to understand the powerful influence of friendship upon them.

Susceptibility to sexual temptation: The father in Proverbs has much to say about sexual temptation. We need to take this theme seriously, particularly in a culture that has such a distorted view of human sexuality. There is almost nowhere outside the Christian community that a teenager will get anything close to an accurate perspective of this significant area of human life. The teenage years are a time of physical awakening. For the first time, children become desirous of relationships with the opposite sex. Lust and fantasy often become the private sins of teenagers. We cannot avoid this area or respond to it with embarrassment and ambivalence. We must put this subject on the table early with our children and keep it there as a topic for open discussion.

Many parents seem to dread having that first sex talk. They spend weeks working themselves up to it. They breathe a sigh of relief that they made it through it alive, and they never discuss the subject again.

How about you? Do you know how your child is doing in this area? Do you know if he struggles with lust, fantasy, or masturbation? Do you know if he has a biblical view of relationships with the opposite sex? Do you know how many of the sexual lies of the world he has accepted? Do you understand the situations, locations, and relationships where he is experiencing temptation? Have you brainstormed with him about ways of fleeing the "lust of youth"? You cannot parent here if you have allowed the doors to be closed.

If we are going to help our teenagers with their struggle to be sexually pure, the key is to start early so that by the time the child is a teenager, parent and child alike have moved beyond any embarrassment or reticence in talking about sex.

Learning how to recognise and flee temptation is not a skill that is mastered after one introductory talk about sexuality. Parents need to be committed to a process that begins in the pre-teen years and continues, with consistency, until our children are ready to leave our homes.

There is an explosion of sexual awareness and sexual temptation in the teen years. Teenagers are beginning to form a sexual lifestyle that will be with them for years. It is a time when many teens fall into sexual sin that alters the course of their lives, secret patterns of sexual sin that leave them in bondage for years. We must be committed to open, positive, and consistent parenting in this area.

No eschatological perspective: eschatology — a focus on eternity — is not the strong point of most teenagers' functional theology. They don't tend to live with eternity in view. They don't think in terms of delayed gratification.

Teenagers are shockingly present-focused. They live as if the present moment is the only moment of life. They don't think in terms of investment. They don't have a harvest mentality. Galatians 6:7 says, "*God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*" This is a significant spiritual principle that is seldom in the typical teenager's view.

Teenagers need to be taught to think in terms of long-term investment. This is not the typical way they think about their lives. Teenagers tend to live for whatever they want at the moment and they tend to put off their responsibilities until the very last minute.

We need to teach them to examine the kinds of seeds they are now planting and the kind of harvest those seeds will bring.

Open doors all around: Issues of wisdom and foolishness, legalism and true godliness, friendship, sexuality, eternity, and a personal awareness of the heart all are on the table during the teen years, providing wide open doors of opportunity.

God uses discussions like these to help your teenagers come to know him, and love him, and to internalize his truth in a way that gives practical direction to their lives.

These are also the things that make this a scary time of parenting. These are issues that can cause parental panic and dread and become the occasion of parental anger. These are the issues around which parents say things they live to regret. These issues can be used of God to form a deeper bond between parent and teen, or be the thing the enemy uses to drive a deeper wedge in the relationship.

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