

Evangelical parents, teenage children

This article was first published in the Bulletin of March 2012 and is reproduced here as something that has ongoing relevance and importance six years later. It was the third in a series of articles on bringing up children within evangelical families.

In the previous two articles we saw that children are under enormous pressure from much of Western culture. This, coupled with the modern Western world's practice of putting the state between teen and parents – in spite of the rhetoric about family life and the responsibilities of parents – makes family life no longer as straightforward as it was some years ago.¹ We then explored how the challenge for parents in particular is to live and act by faith not fear. We now turn to the teenage years.

In his excellent book *Age of Opportunity*, Paul Tripp describes how most parents feel as they approach their children's teenage years: "Parents are afraid of their teenagers. Even as they are enjoying the early years of their child's life, they are looking over their shoulders with dread, expecting the worst... They've heard enough stories from parents who have gone through the dark valley of the teen years to know what lies ahead."² Tripp continues: "Something is inherently wrong with the cultural epidemic of fear and cynicism about our teenagers. Something is wrong when a parent's highest goal is survival."³

We turn now to consider how we might raise teens to follow Christ in our churches.

Some applied principles for raising teens⁴

Before embarking on the detail, it is important to note that fundamental to every interaction with teens is the simple matter of communication. The struggles very often occur around speaking precisely and listening well. Focus here will produce rich dividends in relationships. Resisting the temptation to rise at every provocation while ensuring that the teen respects authority is worth the considerable effort involved. Some examples will be provided in what follows but reading one of the books recommended will help in this area.

Begin with your own hearts

We need to start by looking at our own hearts – and the idols they contain – if we are ever to minister to our teens.

The Idol of Comfort

The demand here is that our teens give us what we desire – rest and tranquillity. Such an idol means that we end up fighting against our teens rather than with them in overcoming sin.

The Idol of Respect

Respect is something that parents are not wrong to desire but it can become an idolatrous demand that interprets every unacceptable teen act as a personal attack.

The Idol of Appreciation

The desire for appreciation can become a demand, which can deteriorate into a contractual mindset where appreciation is owed in return for all that the parents have invested in the teen. A good test of the presence of this desire is when we find ourselves saying: "After all I've done for you..."

¹ This is not to hearken back to some "golden age" of parenting but simply to acknowledge the particular shape of the problem in twenty-first century Britain.

² Paul Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, P&R, Phillipsburg, 2003,13.

³ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 14.

⁴ The issues that follow apply to all in a church who engage with teens in some way or another but particularly parents and youth workers, so whilst the material focuses on parents it has a wider applicability.

The Idol of Success

“We begin to look at our children as our trophies rather than God’s creatures... Whenever parenting is reduced to our hard work, the teen’s performance, and the reputation of the family, it will be very hard for us to respond with selfless faithfulness in the face of our child’s failure.”⁵

The Idol of Control

There are only two ways to live as a Christian: in joyful submission to God’s authority – and so he is in control – or to try to control things myself. Too often it is the latter that is the way we seek to manage or even manipulate our teens. Yet it should be the precise opposite since successful parenting is about raising individuals who in dependence on God live independently from their father and mother: “My goal is not to clone my tastes, my opinions, and my habits in my children. I am not looking for my image in them; I long to see Christ’s.”⁶

The heart of the teen

The modern concept of adolescence is one absent from Scripture but this is not to say that the teens’ heart is nowhere addressed.⁷ What are the things that their hearts produce?

Teens Oppose Wisdom or Correction

- Teens think themselves wiser than they are. At the same time they assume that their parents have little wisdom to help them. We must model to them wisdom in the way we correct and speak to them. So, determine to avoid ugly verbal power battles. We do that by preparing ourselves before we speak about an issue. Once prepared then try to have the conversation in a place of comfort for your teen. Don’t do it in front of others or begin it on a journey.
- Teens tend to be defensive. Our concerns are interpreted as accusations of failure. So: a) clarify that you are not accusing and invite respectful personal correction by your teen if they consider you are behaving accusingly; b) help them identify their attitude⁸; c) confess your own failings willingly, especially owning up to the fact that your teens can push your buttons.
- Teens tend to be self-protective. Don’t acquiesce when they seek to withdraw from you but engage them intentionally (e.g. try to pray every day with them no matter what) and ask open-ended questions (i.e. requiring more than one-word answers): “Enter the world of your teenager and stay there. Don’t ever let them view you as being outside their functional world. Teenagers will reject grenades of wisdom and correction lobbed from afar by someone who has not been on site for quite a while.”⁹
- Teens tend to blame others. Unjust treatment can be the focus – for example, supposed leniency towards siblings. Don’t be diverted into justification but stick to the issue with an invitation to pursue the perceived injustice at another time.
- Teenagers tend to be poor listeners. It’s best by far to avoid lectures about your leadership or parenting and their failure but to encourage genuine dialogue: “Some of us carry invisible portable lecterns with us, which we are ready to set up in a moment.”¹⁰

Teens have a tendency towards legalism

They want things reduced to “How far can I go?” as opposed to the response of a godly heart which asks “How can I be pure?” We must seek to avoid being so focused on boundaries that the heart is missed.

⁵ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 35-36.

⁶ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 38.

⁷ Take, for example, chapters 1-9 of Proverbs in which a father aims to raise a boy who is nearing (if not actually undergoing) puberty. It provides a fascinating insight into the issues in a teen’s heart.

⁸ Tripp gives a good example, “There seems to be a lot of tension in this room. Now I haven’t yelled at you, I haven’t called you names, I haven’t accused you of anything but it seems that you are angry at me. Could you explain why you are so angry? I didn’t ask to talk to you because I felt like a good fight.” *Age of Opportunity*, 79.

⁹ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 80.

¹⁰ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 81.

Teens tend to choose friends unwisely

“Teenagers tend to be prickly and protective when it comes to discussions of their friends. It is as if the operational rule is ‘To reject my friends is to reject me.’”¹¹ We need to avoid accusatory or name-calling statements but to invite the teen to consider his or her desires in friendship. The “I can handle it” response needs challenging in a wise way.

Teens are susceptible to sexual temptation

The father in Proverbs has much to say on this topic. Ideally you should have begun to discuss these things so as to promote openness as puberty begins. Here are some questions we should know the answers to: “Have you given [your teen] a mixed message, on the one hand saying that sex is a wonderful gift from God, and on the other communicating fear, reticence, and avoidance? Have you agreed that this is a taboo topic? Do you know what your [teens] know and what their source of information is? Do you know where your teenager struggles with sexual temptation and how he or she is doing in that struggle? Is your teenager able to embrace a distinctly biblical view of sexuality? Is he or she able to critique the distortions of the surrounding culture? Does your teen have a heart for sexual purity or is he or she pushing the limits of biblical modesty and propriety?”¹²

Teens lack a long-term perspective

When it comes to delayed gratification, teenagers really struggle: “Why wait when you can have it all now?” This weakness is compounded by the heroes that teens are invited to emulate: those who lay up treasure on earth. Key statements of identity are all answered in the here and now: “You are the labels you wear; you are your body size; you are your intelligence; you are your athletic ability; you are the car you drive; you are the house you live in; you are the level of popularity that you have.”¹³

Teens don't truly know their hearts

A characteristic of teenagers is that they have an absence of self-awareness. It's as if they are absent in the video of their life which they play in their minds. This can result in a total failure to take responsibility for things. So one of the key tasks is to help teens to know their own hearts and to be willing to fight wrong desires with God's strength.

Some questions to help us think about how to do this are:

“Do you lead your teen to conversations that go deeper than solving problems of circumstance and relationship? Do you help him or her to see the heart behind those problems? Do you assist him or her in seeing the places where he or she has exchanged the Creator for some aspect of creation, such as peer acceptance, a certain possession, or some coveted position? Have you helped him or her to see the desires which rule his or her heart? Have you helped him or her to confess his or her true treasures? Have you taken time to point out lovingly where his or her thinking is out of conformity to the truths of Scripture? Have you asked questions that expose the thoughts and motives of the heart? Have you shown how his or her true worship is expressed in the way in which he or she responds to situations and relationships?”¹⁴

The goal in raising teens: identity

Our goal with teens is to see their identity firmly grounded as they move to leave behind some of the sureties that have surrounded their growing years. For that to happen that identity needs to be rooted in three things.

Teens find identity in community

God does not call teens to live isolated lives: “The goal of a person's life is not to be a healthy individual,

¹¹ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 84.

¹² Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 87.

¹³ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 88

¹⁴ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 89.

but a person living in community with other people who are living in community with God.”¹⁵ Yet this great ideal seems almost impossible in the teen years not only to parents but also to the teen. Conflict seems to be the norm in society at large, and in the home, and it is easy to be overwhelmed and discouraged. Yet we know that the human heart desires its own pre-eminence which leaves no room for another human being with the same goal.

So how is it possible to move the teen to become part of God’s great work of creating a community of love (cf. John 13:34-5)? The family has a key role to play in this. It is the place where preparation for this can occur through the gospel being taught and modelled. The two great commandments need to be regularly before the teen so that they cry out – “But I can’t do this?” to which the answer will be: “I know, that’s why we need Jesus.” The teens’ heart will be ruled by either of two things, no matter what they say:

- the rule of godly love for others (Matt. 7:12)
- the rule of their own desires (James 4:1-2)

Teens find identity in the character and goodness of God

A teen’s identity is rooted in the existence of God: “He is the reality that gives sense and shape to every other fact we discuss and consider.”¹⁶ Deuteronomy 6:20-25 shows how this is done. Like it or not, we are constantly theologising. It depends whether our theology is accurately conveying what God has said about himself.

Do we give the impression that God is far away and only involved when we cry out to him for rescue? Yet he is near (e.g. Psalm 46:1). Nothing happens without his direct involvement. Do we give the impression that his love always means ease and comfort? Yet the most loving thing God can do is to glorify himself (John 11:4-6). Teens need to be helped to see that their own happiness is not the chief goal of life: “We need to call our teenagers away from their own glory to a concrete understanding of what it means to live for God’s glory.”¹⁷ Put differently, teens need to see the story of their lives in the bigger context of God’s story. Then their problems, while real and painful, will find due proportion and make sense. There are two things which teens get confused:

- Doing what God alone can do.
- Not doing what God has called them to do.

So they need to ask the right questions of themselves:

- What does God command me to do, think, or say, in this situation?
- What, in this situation, are the things I need to trust God for?

Teenagers handle neither disappointment nor frustration well: “They are filled with a sense of self. They know quite well what they want out of the moments of life, and they tend to wallow in self-pity... They tend to limit life to the moment of desire... they tend to live with a sense of entitlement.”¹⁸ So we have our work cut out.

Teens find identity in Christ’s forgiveness

Parents need to take the lead in acknowledging sin, so teaching their teens that sin must not be hidden or explained away: “As the Holy Spirit works through the faithful ministry of parents who forsake their own desire for comfort and ease, proud, self-defensive, self-excusing, self-righteous children will become seekers after grace.”¹⁹

Here are some classic ways in which we unintentionally undermine the Cross: “What on earth do you think you’re doing?” (as if we have no experience of sin). “I wish for once you’d get your act together” (as if we

¹⁵ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 44.

¹⁶ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 55.

¹⁷ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 58.

¹⁸ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 57.

¹⁹ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 68.

have no idea of the struggles involved in fighting sin and have now achieved perfection!). “You’ll never change” (so denying God’s ability to redeem even the worst sinner).

Our teens need to know that we have walked the road of sin and know the route to the Cross so well that we can point them to it. We can also provide a redemptive interpretation of the world around. It is not all pointless suffering, evil and chaos. The risen Lord Jesus reigns – indeed he has begun his reign in our hearts - and will one day return to usher in the new creation of perfect joy and complete perfection. Theologising well helps ground the teens’ identity well.

The problem of the “gospel gap”

One key issue that raises itself repeatedly in conversation with parents or youth group leaders is the fact that well-taught young people have not fully grasped the implications of the principles of their faith in connection with their lives, conduct and attitudes. There is a worrying detachment which then affects their attitudes and opinions on lifestyle issues. Because of the widespread nature of this gospel gap (the gap between what has been taught the teen and how they are living) it’s worth enquiring whether or not there may be ways in which our teaching input can be improved.²⁰

It is all too possible for Christian adults engaged with children to have a reductionist view of the gospel, seeing it as essentially about personal salvation but not about living the Christian life. A kind of “justified by faith, saved by works” mindset follows which undermines faith as a living, vibrant thing seen day by day in adults.

Another area that would benefit from some attention concerns how we teach teens. It is easy to teach, explain and encourage discussion on important issues in atomistic ways, as if they are disconnected from any all-embracing whole or each other. So sexual matters, addictive behaviours, or love of material things, can all be taught faithfully and helpfully in the church or the youth group but without enabling teens to see the context in which these issues apply. The way to address this therefore is to teach these matters and others in the context of a worldview.²¹

Positively, we can see this being done by the father in Proverbs. There are four key elements that his wise advice and persistent exhortation are based on which provide a clear worldview.

- The universe is created by God

The world isn’t the result of a chance accident in time. The whole world is not only made by him, but belongs to God. He is actively involved in his own world (Proverbs 3:19 –20). This means that human meaning is found only in knowing the Creator and that all of life is to be lived under the Creator’s gaze – there is no part of it that is more spiritual than another. All of life is like one seamless fabric, not broken up into religious and non-religious segments.

- The world has order

Because God created the world, it is not controlled by arbitrary forces but rather the purposes of this personal God. Because of this there is predictability about our world. Wisdom then is the acquired skill to live according to the order God has built into his creation. What the Bible makes abundantly plain is that God has revealed his order to us – at least in part (e.g. the ways of the ant can be studied and lessons learned precisely because of that order (Proverbs 6:6). This order is moral (it contains “rights” and “wrongs”). Learning also involves accepting that God has created a moral order in his world. Thus, consequences flow from either ignoring or following what God has laid down (Proverbs 2:21-22; 5:21-23.)

- Fearing God

The fear of God is central to what the father says (Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10). This fear of God is a natural result of acknowledging God’s creative power. If he is responsible for the very world we inhabit, and for our lives,

²⁰ This is not to ignore the importance of the example of key adults around them.

²¹ A worldview is a way of explaining the world and our place in it. It need not necessarily make sense (often it doesn’t) but it is something everyone does because every human being is a meaning maker.

then it is folly indeed to ignore him. The very fact of the world means that “the proper stance for humans is humble submission to... God, rather than the arrogant insistence on choosing their own way, independent of the Lord who made them.”²² This then is not abject terror but a submissive attitude towards God: “The one who fears God admits that he alone possesses total knowledge and control in the universe he has made.”²³

Negatively, this involves understanding the worldview of those around us and helping teens to see it. This by no means need be simply defensive. Indeed, the best appreciation of worldview equips teens to have genuine sympathy for a lost world rather than either despising it or being drawn to it.

Having done all, we have a choice

Faced with these issues we can either, “Respond out of anxiety, irritation and fear [and] try to control your child all the more. Instead of seeing this as a time of preparation, you will take on a survival mentality... In your self-pity over the toughness of your job as a parent and the peace your child has taken away, you will resort to beating him with words and seeking to motivate him with threats. You will try to manipulate him into obedience, and you will initiate unproductive power struggles... [Or you can] move toward your teenager with a confident faith in the Redeemer, whose word is true and whose sovereign presence empowers your weak and feeble parental efforts [and so] communicate love, understanding, grace, hope and life.”²⁴

We rely on grace

In their recently published book on parenting,²⁵ a mother and daughter remind us of the vital thing which can easily be forgotten amid all our thinking and practice, especially amid the stresses and strains of life. They say of Luke 18:15-16: “The disciples couldn’t hinder the children from coming to [Jesus] even though they tried.”

When God calls our children to come to him, even if we haven’t gotten it all right, even if we have trained little Pharisees or have a house full of prodigals, nothing is impossible for him. He can break through all our flawed methods and redeem all our frail errors. The world tells us that their success depends upon our success. The world knows nothing of God’s ability to use our failures as means to bless: “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27).

So, even though we desire to be the ones who place our children in the lap of God’s mercy and even though we stumble so badly trying to do so, Jesus is strong enough to pick each of us up and carry us all the way. Parents, too, are weak, but Jesus is strong. No one, not even you, can thwart his purpose to bless those who are his (Ephesians 1:11).”

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Updated bibliography

Three books that are extremely helpful for parenting are:

Loving the Little Years: Motherhood in the Trenches, Rachel Jankovic – excellent for parents with under 5s

²² Daniel Estes, *Hear my Son: Teaching and Learning in Proverbs 1-9*, Apollos, Leicester, 1997.

²³ Estes, *Hear my Son*.

²⁴ Tripp, *Age of Opportunity*, 93.

²⁵ Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson, *Give them Grace*, Crossway, Wheaton, 2011.

(the author had five children aged 5 and under when she wrote this, so it is very realistic).

Give them Grace, Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson.

Instructing a Child's Heart, Tedd and Margy Tripp.

Teenage-focused books

Age of Opportunity, Paul Tripp.

Getting a Grip: the Heart of Anger Handbook for Teens, Lou Priolo.

Teenagers, Ann Benton.

For a popular and basic introduction on worldviews:

A Spectator's Guide to Worldviews: ten ways of understanding life, Edited by Simon Smart (an Australian book written for school sixth forms).

Appendix: How mature is your teen?²⁶

This checklist is NOT meant as a rod to beat your teen with! It is meant to be used as a guide to parents and youth workers in understanding the heart of the teens in their care. Rate the maturity of your teen, scoring 4 as high and 1 as low.

My teen accepts and finds satisfaction in his or her responsibilities.	1 2 3 4	My teen acts as if life is supposed to be fun and enjoyable all the time.
My teen has a reputation for being trustworthy.	1 2 3 4	My teen frequently excuses irresponsibility with statements such as: "Oh I forgot;" "I didn't know I was supposed to;" "I didn't hear what you said."
My teen acts responsibly even when no-one is watching.	1 2 3 4	My teen must be coerced into doing what he or she is supposed to do.
My teen pursues personal time with God on his or her own.	1 2 3 4	My teen's time with God occurs only when initiated by others.
My teen maintains healthy God-glorifying relationships with others.	1 2 3 4	My teen requires constant input from others to maintain relationships.
My teen knows how to solve problems with others.	1 2 3 4	My teen doesn't understand how he or she creates problems with others.
My teen finds joy and meaning in work.	1 2 3 4	My teen considers work a necessary evil and avoids it if possible.
Teachers and others indicate that my teen is a willing worker.	1 2 3 4	My teen grumbles and complains about work.
My teen has clear moral boundaries.	1 2 3 4	My teen likes to get as near to the moral edge as possible.
My teen can be trusted to make good moral choices even when others aren't watching.	1 2 3 4	My teen is not trustworthy even for very small things.
My teen is open and transparent.	1 2 3 4	My teen is secretive and resents talking about his or her activities.
My teen seeks out good advice.	1 2 3 4	My teen gets defensive when he or she is questioned.
My teen is approachable.	1 2 3 4	I feel as if I'm walking on eggshells with my teen.
I can lovingly challenge my teen's thinking, choices and actions.	1 2 3 4	My teen turns even friendly discussions into unfriendly debates.
My teen has a sense of his or her strengths and weaknesses.	1 2 3 4	When weaknesses are pointed out, my teen responds with: "What are you talking about, I never do that!"
My teen is thankful for what he or she has.	1 2 3 4	My teen is rarely content and constantly wants something new.
My teen reaches out to those who don't have much.	1 2 3 4	My teen judges people by their looks and clothing.
My teen uses money to serve others and the Lord.	1 2 3 4	My teen uses money to buy more things.
My teen's goals are to please God with his or her life.	1 2 3 4	My teen's life goals are focused on materialistic achievements.

²⁶ Adapted from a parenting course.

