



# Ten Ways

to  
Turn Around  
Your Teen  
MARK GREGSTON

# *Ten Ways to Turn Around Your Teen*

by

MARK GREGSTON

HEARTLIGHT MINISTRIES FOUNDATION

PO BOX 480 Hallsville, TX 75650

PHONE: 903-668-2173

[www.heartlightresources.org](http://www.heartlightresources.org)

[www.heartlightministries.org](http://www.heartlightministries.org)

[www.markgregston.com](http://www.markgregston.com)

©2009 HEARTLIGHT MINISTRIES FOUNDATION

Reproduction or duplication in any form of any portion of the material contained in this publication for the purpose of selling or gaining any form of remuneration for this material or any part thereof is strictly prohibited by U.S. copyright law.



**Mark Gregston** is the founder of [Heartlight Ministries](#), a residential counseling program for teens, and the author of several books and workbooks. A popular speaker and seminar leader, Mark offers Biblical insights and practical wisdom for parents wanting a deeper relationship with their teen.

For over 30 years, Mark has been helping families and teens through the challenges of adolescence. In the words of Dr. Tim Kimmel, “Mark Gregston has never met a teenager he can’t believe in or a parent he doesn’t want to help become better. . . . [he] has a clear ‘big picture’ grasp of effective parenting. It’s formatted by the power of God’s grace and seasoned from decades of experience.”

Mark and his wife Jan have been married for 34 years and have two children and two grandchildren.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
1 – Loosen the Reins and Empower Them.....	5
2 – Learn to Manage Conflict.....	15
3 – Establish a Belief System for Discipline.....	27
4 – Give and Expect Responsibility.....	41
5 – Understand the Problem Triggers.....	48
6 – Understand the Teen Culture.....	59
7 – Get Help for Yourself.....	64
8 – Engage with Your Teen.....	71
9 – Confront Inappropriate Behavior.....	76
10 – Rebuild Your Relationship.....	93
Closing.....	100
Addendum – Warning Signs.....	105

# INTRODUCTION

**T**hinking that anything a parent can say, do, or offer to their children as they grow up will guarantee a smooth and trouble-free adolescence is just plain wrong. I've learned that there are no such guarantees in parenting.

Stuff happens in the teen years that is out of a parent's control, even if you do everything right. Raising one "angelic" teenager can lead one to think you have found the right formula, right up until you see your next child go down a completely different path. Welcome to the real world — a world where God gives each child a free will.

One parent wrote me saying, "We've done everything right. We took our son to church, raised him in a Christian home, sent him to a great Christian school, home-schooled for a few years, have taken him on mission trips and poured our life into him. What has gone wrong? How can he reject all that we've taught, and all that we've been striving for?"

These parents raised their teen in the church and taught him good and strong values. Then one day he decided that those things no longer worked for him, so he started "trying on" other values — values of his peer group. He was not interested in how his behavior made his parents feel. He was "in control." He acted as he chose to act. Every trick in their parenting bag failed. Their arsenal was empty. Did they do everything right? Possibly.

Pain and stress comes when a child has chosen poorly and is clearly heading down the wrong path in life. This is not just when their choices are self-destructive — drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, etc. — but also when they abandon their faith or decide after years of hard work, that college no longer matters.

When your teen is struggling to discover his or her identity in a quest to become independent, it can be an extremely frustrating and painful process for all involved. But it helps us better understand how God must feel when He see His children fail. No parent is perfect, nor is perfection the answer, for even though God is perfect He still had a couple of rebellious kids.

So, it's not always about the parents, and it's not always about how a teen is raised. It's all about your child and his God-given gift of individuality and free will, which will be fully exercised during adolescence.

I'm sure you laid a firm foundation for your teen. You did a great job! You did such a great job that your teen feels capable of creating his own immature views. It may not seem like it now, but that is a very good thing. It's how a teen matures into well-grounded adults, who contributes positively to this world. It's how they stretch their wings and prepare to fly.

Sometimes these "first flights" are hard for parents to experience, especially when they typically involve several failed attempts. The important thing is to be there when your wounded teen wobbles back to the nest; to offer encouragement for a stronger and more skilled flight the next time around.

Being a parent of a teenager can be hard work. There is emotional pain and even feelings of betrayal when your child gets off track in the adolescent years. But I know this — it makes us parents spend a lot more time on our knees! Therefore, the process is worthwhile. For in our journey, no matter how bumpy the turbulence, we may learn what God is trying to teach us as well.

I'll be giving you a number of tips in this e-book, but my recommendation for most Christian homes is to loosen your grip, and let go of the rope, just a little. Allow your teen some healthy freedoms, and open the doors of your heart and mind to trusting God a little more, and a self-made, isolated existence a little less. It is tough to trust God this way, and even tougher to watch your teen navigate the rough waters of today's evils. But by the grace of God and the wisdom of parents willing to take their parenting to a level that is more effective — it can be done.

Stop Lecturing...Start Listening  
Stop Answering...Start Asking  
Stop Worrying...Start Praying  
Stop Frowning...Start Laughing  
Stop Controlling...Start Releasing  
Stop Reacting...Start Responding  
Stop Punishing...Start Disciplining  
Stop Ruling...Start Enforcing  
Stop Teaching...Start Trusting  
Stop Ending...Start Beginning  
Stop Talking...Start Hearing  
Stop Deciding...Start Empowering  
Stop Doing...Start Being



- 1 -

## Loosen the Reins and Empower Your Teen

**T**eens develop in maturity by doing, seeing, and experiencing. They crave freedom and they want to show the adults in their life that they are capable of making their own decisions. They want to break out of the box and have some control over what they do, where they go, and how they look.

But some parents prevent their teens from making mistakes (especially the same kind of mistakes they made when they were a teenager), by applying more and more controls. This excessive controlling and sheltering can lead teens to a life of sneakiness (doing what they want to do behind the parent's back), frustration, anger and eventually rebellion.

I can hear parents everywhere asking, "Isn't this the time in their life when we need to rein them in? This culture is horrible!" I agree. In fact, it is precisely because the culture is so difficult that it is important for Christian parents to prepare their teen by helping them develop discernment. An overprotective parent accomplishes just the opposite, and the bud of discernment never develops into full-bloom.

I'm not recommending suddenly becoming an overly permissive parent. You can never just cast your concerns about your teen to the wind, nor let them make foolish decisions again and again. Instead, I am talking about looking for ways to help your teen develop discernment through expanding their freedom and through learning responsibility.

The best way to offer freedom is to couple it with responsibility. For instance, a sense of freedom can come from having a responsible job. To have some hours away from home, to make some money, and to think on their own will give them more freedom while still being responsible to a boss. On the other hand, an unwise freedom is to allow your teen more time to simply hang out with his buddies at all hours, aimlessly thinking up the trouble they can get into.

From my years of training horses I have learned to let the rope out a little at a time. I loosen the reins as the horse and I develop more trust in one another. There is a big difference between letting out the rope a little, and letting the horse out of the corral. Likewise, when I talk about giving your teen more freedom, you still need to maintain the “fences” or boundaries, but gradually loosen the reins so your teen has more freedom to operate within those boundaries.

I admit, it takes a leap of faith to get both you and your teen to the next level. However, finding a way to give your teen more freedom allows them to develop in maturity, before they become an adult and leave home altogether. A wise parent will see a teen’s need for more freedom and find a way to give it them before they ever ask for or demand it, and even if they are still reticent to experience it. So, look ahead, and develop a test of their mettle that is age-appropriate. Explain the boundaries, rules, and consequences in advance, and then let them go.

Will they fail? Of course they will! They’ll make mistakes, and when they do, your job is to apply consequences, so they learn from those mistakes. Expect failure, and plan for how to address it.

- Don’t shame them when they fail. We all fail.
- Don’t purposely put them in situations where you know they’ll fail.
- Don’t let your fears keep you from allowing your teen to try appropriate things.
- Don’t fix the messes they make or lessen the consequences.
- Don’t resort to, “I told you so,” or, “I should never have trusted you,” statements.

I love Chuck Swindoll’s definition of failure. He said, “Failure is the backdoor to success.” No parent wants their child to fail on purpose, but there are times when failure really helps a teen learn to be more discerning. As for me, I have been more blessed and learned more from the failures of my life than from the successes.

On the other hand, when a teen doesn’t fail, reward them! Give them some positive feedback and reasons to continue making right choices. Thank them for thinking it through and coming to the right conclusion. Use their good decisions as an opportunity to give them more freedoms and therefore, more opportunities to make right choices.

You’ll provide your teen with the strength and discernment they need later in life by spending less time sheltering and hovering, and more time helping them learn



important lessons on their own. Appropriate freedom along with responsibility can be the catalyst to develop discernment and maturity in your teen.

Ultimately, you'll have to put your teen in God's hands. He loves and wants to protect your teen as much as you do. So pray, trust God to direct your child's path, and believe that He will make all things work toward His higher good. Pray for your teen's protection, for the right people to come into his life and for the lessons he'll learn as he begins to experience more freedom.

### **Empower Your Teenager**

Sometimes the most powerful – and the most difficult -- thing you can do as a parent is to give some of your power over to your teen. A line from the 1994 publication *Flight of the Buffalo* says it best; “Change is hard because people overestimate the value of what they have — and underestimate the value of what they gain by giving it up.” I tell parents all the time, if you want your child to grow up, you have to let go of some of the power and control over their life.

It boils down to one very simple concept — the best way to empower your teenager is to gradually share the power you have, allowing them more and more control and responsibility for their own decisions.

To empower your child, hand them the responsibility for their own decisions.

When empowered, your teen's expectations will shift away from leaning on mom and dad to fix everything, to understanding that they are the ones responsible for how things turn out. They may make many mistakes before they begin to understand what good decision-making looks like. And they may even try every trick in the book to get you to rescue them out of their poor choices. But don't do it! Hold them responsible, just as they will some day be held accountable as an adult.

Sometimes, we feel that the only way we can be a good parent is to be in control of our teenager and prevent them from making mistakes. And that's not true. A good parent gradually gives control back to the teenager and helps them learn through the decisions they make.

And when the teen displays immaturity and irresponsibility, or makes a really bad decision, we parents are often too quick to snatch back control and clamp down even harder on the rules. In those situations, protecting our teen from making any more mistakes may be doing more harm than good.

“The problem with over-control is this: while a major responsibility of good parenting is certainly to control and protect, they must make room for their child to make mistakes. Over-controlled children are subject to dependency, enmeshment conflicts and difficulty setting and keeping firm boundaries. They also have problems taking risks and being creative.” — Dr. Henry Cloud

So, my advice is to gradually allow your teenager to have some control, and avoid taking it back...

- Let them assume more and more responsibility
- Encourage them to make thoughtful decisions
- Set reasonable boundaries
- Let them learn from their mistakes and don't soften the blow
- Spend more time in discussion rather than dictation
- Offer sound advice, if they want it
- Avoid saying “I told you so.”

### **Control Shouldn't Be Without Limits**

Like training wheels on a bicycle, give your child some control over their “ride” in life, but have some basic safeguards in place. These are the same kind of limits we as adults experience. For instance, there is a limit on your credit card. Why do you think credit card companies do that? Once you prove yourself, they raise the limits. But it's still giving you control of your own spending. In every area of life we have limits, and it is just as important for your teen to learn how to incorporate living within certain limits as they make decisions on their own.

Limits and the easing of control for an older teen can usually go like this. “Yes, you can take the car, but you can have no more than one other teen in the car, and have it back here by 11PM.” You don't have to go into all the factual details, like studies have shown that having other teenagers in the car is a major cause of accidents for teenage drivers, and that most accidents for teens happen late at night. Simply make it known (and stick to it) that if your simple rules aren't followed, then the next time they need it, the car won't be available to them.

*Lack of limits has the tendency to produce a child that is selfish, independent, demanding and aggressively controlling.*

Teenagers will go wild if they aren't given some boundaries. Moral and ethical boundaries don't change from adolescence to adulthood, and neither should your expectations of your teen's behavior. What I'm referring to is giving them control over more and more decisions about things like budgeting money, education, clothing, and transportation, not over whether or not it is time to abandon civilized behavior. While they are living at home, or even at college while their tuition is being paid for by you, you can expect them to be living within reasonable moral boundaries, or they'll lose some of the privileges you are providing. Consequences of breaking those established boundaries should be clear and understood up front, and enforced without wavering.

### *Giving Control Means Allowing Your Teen To Learn From Bad Decisions...*

Giving control to your teen means they'll begin learning from making small mistakes, but only if you allow those mistake to hurt a bit. For example, if your teenage boy takes his gas money and decides to blow it all on the latest music CD, then you're not helping him by giving him more gas money. He needs to learn to set aside gas money and never use it for anything else. Softening the blow will only lead them to making the same mistakes again and again.

By the way, your teen will rarely come right out and say that they made a bad decision. If you're waiting for it, don't hold your breath. In fact, they may defend their decision with all their might, all along knowing it was bad. It simply is not in their nature to go around talking about their mistakes, nor to suggest that they were wrong, but they will have learned from the mistake nonetheless.

And, take note of this. Never use the old "I told you so" phrase with them when they make a mistake. If you're tempted to, bite your tongue, because "I told you so" tends to undermine the learning experience (and it makes an adult sound childish, too). If you offered your sage advice (which is the reasonable thing for any parent to do) and they didn't heed it, then it is best to keep that to yourself. They may only "fess up" that they should have taken your advice after years have gone by, or when they become a parent themselves.

### **A Job Well Done**

When the time comes for our children to enter adulthood and make tough decisions on their own, we hope that we have given them ample time and opportunity to learn from making smaller decisions. As in everything else in life, good decision-making takes practice. If they have had some control over their own decisions earlier on, and they've learned from making wrong decisions, then we've done our job of teaching them.

Most teenagers say that they want to be out on their own when they turn 18 and make all their own decisions. But the fact is, they usually have difficulty becoming independent. They secretly wish to avoid the kind of responsibilities they see their parents have for as long as possible. The tendency, then, is that we'll have to nudge them out of the nest in some way, and the best way to do that is to get them started early making their own decisions and learning to do so within the limits.

### **Hold Them Accountable**

Responsibility becomes an internal life force when parents empower a child to make decisions, line out their options, define the consequences, and then let them choose.

As you back off, let your teenager know they will be given even more freedoms if they handle the first steps well. And make it clear that you will remain in the role of the enforcer of consequences, should they break the rules. Such consequences could include losing some of their newfound freedoms and losing some of your trust.

Then, let them make their own choices, and also let them bear the full responsibility for those choices. Line out their options, define the consequences for bad decisions, and then let them choose. Don't rescue them by not enforcing consequences for their poor choices. And equally as important, don't forget to congratulate and reward them for making good choices!

As you learn to let go, your teen's expectations will shift away from leaning on you to run their life and fix everything for them (including their mistakes), to the understanding that they are the ones responsible for how things turn out. They'll surely make many mistakes before they begin to understand what good decision-making looks like. And they may even try every trick in the book to get you to rescue them out of their poor choices. But don't do it! Hold them responsible, just as they will some day be held accountable as an adult.

### **Give Them Something to Be Responsible For**

Teenagers don't become responsible or learn to think more maturely by accident. They learn from being in situations where responsibility and maturity is expected and modeled. That's why I highly recommend to parents that they get their child into a part-time job throughout the teen years, and particularly one that is service-oriented. Probably the biggest mistake of schools today is when they keep kids so busy with after school activities, that there is no time for a job in which teens can learn responsibility. Outside of what Mom and Dad are expecting of them, nothing

can teach a teenager about life and making a livelihood than a job can, whether they need the money or not. Kids who get their first job after they graduate from high school are at a disadvantage and have a lot of catch-up to do in the area of maturity.

The right job for just a few hours each week can be a perfect training ground for a teenager, teaching people-skills, money-management, time-management, and even helping the teenager determine what she does or doesn't want to do after high school. Skills learned on a part-time job can also help the teen appreciate their education and encourage them to seek more education after high school so they won't have to continue serving hamburgers, washing cars, or being a lifeguard their entire life.

### **When to Take Back Full Parental Power**

Now, let me address the family dealing with a teen who is already spinning out of control or is addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, or other harmful substances or behaviors. This situation is entirely different. In this day and age, a child choosing to self-destruct or to live a dangerous lifestyle could end up in serious trouble, or could even die. In this case, empowerment shifts back to the parent, who must intervene and retake decisive control, since the teen's lifestyle is actually controlling the teenager at this point.

An old Jewish proverb says, "Don't meet troubles half-way." Give it all your attention now, or it could take more than you can give later. And you'll be powerless when they become an adult. Take whatever measures are necessary to ensure his safety and do it now. It is up to you to create a solution, such as counseling or substance abuse treatment. And you, too, will need to surround yourself with good counsel and a group of godly friends who are willing to pray with you and encourage you.

Then, with a plan in hand and with all the power you can muster, communicate this message: "Honey – we love you. Nothing you do or say will make us love you any less, and nothing you do or say will make us love you any more. But we are not going to live like this anymore. Since you are not making the right choices on your own, here is what will change in your life, as of today..." And then stick to your plan. There's nothing that will ruin your future ability to get such a teen back on track than to not follow through the first time.

Small Bumps Are Temporary

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.— I Corinthians 13:11 (KJV)*

Maybe you are just having some small bumps in the road with your teenager. Let me assure you, most immature behavior is just that — immaturity. They will grow out of it as they mature and as they come up against the consequences for wrong decisions. And they'll mature more quickly if you empower them to take on more responsibility for their own life. Give them ample opportunity to make errors in judgment early on, when you still have some control over them in your home.

Letting go doesn't mean backing off completely. It simply means allowing the teenager to make more and more decisions on their own, and to have more and more freedoms. When they make mistakes, or overstep your household boundaries, it is still a parent's responsibility to dole out the consequences as a means of discipline, which will prevent them from making the same mistake again and again. For that is how teenagers learn.

So, what have you done today to encourage and empower your teenager to put away their childish immaturity?

### **Teaching Self-Control**

Your child needs to go through a process of learning self-control, which means to not be controlled by hormones, other things, or his peers. Here are some ways to begin the process of teaching your child self-control:

1. **A good place to start is with asking lots of questions.** Ask your teen questions about moral issues, and wait for their answer without giving your opinion. "How do you think that person felt about being treated that way? What do you think would be the best thing to do in this situation? What would you do if you were asked to have sex, steal or take drugs? Tell me what you think about...? Allow your teen to come up with his own answer without injecting yours. Don't use it as an opportunity to lecture or teach. Let them realize the fullness of their answer by hearing their own words. Their answer will often be immature or even irresponsible, but that answer will echo in their mind and begin them thinking about the issue and how they would really act if that situation were to arise.

2. **Put limits around their decisions to cause them to be more responsible.** Once you've given them more freedom, allow them to make their own decisions within that area of freedom, good or bad. For example, if you allow them use of the car and give them gas money, and if they instead spend the money on concert tickets, then they will have to figure out how another way to get around. Don't just give

them more gas money. Let them walk, if necessary, to show the foolishness and reality of spending money unwisely. Once they have to walk, they'll never make that foolish decision again. Or, if they use the car outside of designated hours, they lose that privilege for a time.

### **3. Set your boundaries, make them clear, and enforce them if they are broken.**

For example, if you see your teen watching an inappropriate movie, something that is out of bounds in your home, ask him – “Is this an appropriate movie for you to be watching?” Allow him the opportunity to respond as he should, by turning the movie off. Let him come to the right decision on his own. If his immaturity causes him to not respond as he should, then move in and make the decision to change the channel or turn the TV off yourself. Then reinforce the rule with consequences the next time the rule is broken, such as loss of the freedom to watch television for a time. If the rule is consistently broken, then remove the TV from the home altogether. It will be an inconvenience for you, but it shows your teen how passionately you feel about the issue of watching inappropriate material on television.

### **4. Encourage your child in their good decisions, and point your comments toward their successes, not their failures.**

Don't say, “I told you so,” or, “I should have made that decision instead of you,” when they make a mistake. Instead, patiently allow them the opportunity to make the right choice and look for progress. Whenever you see your child respond with maturity and responsibility, congratulate them and explain that because they made a good choice you are now moving them up to a new level of freedom. Keep in mind that instant feedback is always best.

### **5. Randomly offer examples of good decisions in your own life.**

While teens will respond to your own stories as examples out of the dark ages, revealing your own good decisions at key moments in your life will come back to them when they have the opportunity to make similar decisions. They will give the teen fuel and courage to make a similar decision in a similar situation. And they will also offer something to think about if the teen makes a different decision. Developing a portfolio of good decisions (both by you and others that the teen may admire) and injecting them in conversations randomly (not to make a point when the teen does something wrong) is a good way to teach your teen self-control by example.

My advice today for parents of teenagers is to begin to shift control to your child before you think they will need it. Give them the opportunity to show what they can handle asking them to do so, and don't bail them out or condemn them if they fail. Give them the chance to figure it out, learn from consequences, and find a

better way for the next time they are faced with the same decision. Giving teenagers increasing levels of independence, coupled with proper limits and parental guidance, will begin to teach them the most important type of control, self-control.





- 2 -

## Learn to Manage Conflict

**M**ost of us want to avoid conflict with our kids, but did you know that conflict in a family can offer you an opportunity to pull together like never before? If reckoned with properly, conflict is a force for change that has the power to bring relationships together rather than tear them apart.

Another positive aspect of conflict is that it helps a child learn how to stand up for himself. How else will he learn how to say “No” when he needs to, or “That’s just not right,” or, “I don’t agree with that.”

So, how can you effectively manage conflict with your teen in a way that maintains a solid relationship, while at the same time honors the household rules?

First, it involves agreeing with them in some way, while holding your ground in regard to enforcing the rules. Let me share with you one of my favorite words when it comes to managing conflict; the word is, “nevertheless.”

*Sweetheart, I’m aware your friends think this is a great movie, and they may be right, nevertheless...our rule for that is that we don’t go to R-rated movies.*

*Darlin’, you may have merit for being upset and I’d probably be upset too, nevertheless... our rule is that everyone in our family is required to be respectful of one another, even when we’re angry.*

*Son, I’m sorry you don’t like the new curfew rule. I didn’t either when I was a teen, nevertheless... our rule is that curfew is midnight.*

Handling conflict in a more intentional way sends your child the message – “Honey, I love you and I understand why you feel the way you do, but we’re still going to live according to our household rules. If you choose to disregard the rules, consequences will follow.”

You see, I believe conflict doesn’t have to separate us. The word, “nevertheless” acknowledges your teen’s angst or viewpoint, while at the same time reaffirming –

these are our rules, and if you choose not to follow them, these are the consequences.

Rather than leaving your child to wonder about the consequences, determine and communicate them in advance. How else can the teen properly choose? They can't. They need to be able to say to their peers, "If I do that, I'll lose my car for a month," or, "If I'm late now, my curfew will be even earlier for a month."

But you'd be surprised at the number of ways parents avoid enforcing consequences. Make it a rule for yourself, if nothing else — the consequences I've communicated to my teen will be enforced, one way or another. Get some outside help with structuring the consequences if you need it. And, always present, a united front with your spouse.

When having conflict and struggle with your teen, it's easy to feel as if the entire family is falling apart. I've found that a better view of handling conflict is to see it as an opportunity to pull your family together, like never before!

### **Conflict Can Be the Precursor to Positive Change**

I believe that relationships that stick together through conflict and hardship become closer relationships. In fact, the teens in our [Heartlight](#) program that I remember the most fondly are the ones that caused me to want to pull my hair out when dealing with their constant arguing and bad behavior.

Parents tend to put a lot of time and effort into peace-keeping or preventing conflict in the home, but it may be better for them to engage in it. Why? Because if you never engage in conflict, things in your home may never change, or take longer to change than they need to. Could it be that by avoiding conflict you're stifling an issue that God wants to use to bring about His plans for your life and the life of your teen?

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."* Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Most of us prefer to avoid conflict. It is tough to pull a family together when your teen is on one side of an issue and you are on the other. That's why parents need to better understand conflict, and how to engage in it in a way that is positive. Conflict can actually build a bridge between your differences and most kids simply need to know that you've heard them out, even if you don't agree with them.

## **Managing Conflict with Your Teen Means...**

### **1. Learning to Argue Well**

It's okay to have disagreements with your teen as they mature. Did you think there would never be conflict in your discussions or that your teen's growing independence wouldn't cause him to question your values? Could your teen actually think a bit differently about things than you do? You bet he does.

Sure, conflict will happen. And since it is inevitable that you will argue about some issues, why not use those times as an opportunity to honor your teen's independent thinking and also allow them time to process your side of the argument. They'll never listen to your side unless you honor their need to explain their side.

My point is this...don't allow conflicts to create a roadblock to future growth in your relationship. It's okay to feel anger in discussions at times. But scripture reminds us to "Be angry, but don't sin." So, never allow an argument to get physical, disrespectful, or demeaning. Know when to take a break, and when to stop until emotions can calm down and the discussion can continue on more respectful terms.

My goal for every difficult and sometimes heated discussion with a teen is this: At the end of the argument, I want there to be an opportunity for us to hug one another, even if I didn't change my mind at all. That's the goal. Even if we can't agree, I still remain in charge, and we can at least agree to disagree because it was all talked out.

The stance that you take in the heat of the battle is a reflection of who you are in real life. How you communicate during conflict teaches something very important to your teen. The messages that you will want to convey include:

*It's okay to not agree with everyone.*

*It's okay to not follow what everyone else is thinking.*

*There are times that we have to stand up and fight.*

*We can have conflict, and still remain friends.*

*And sometimes...I've heard your side of the argument, but for your own good, you simply need to follow the rules.*

### **2. Engaging in Order to Pull Together**

Parents often make the avoidance mistake when conflict shows itself. In other words, they break away. They stop spending time with their child and avoid the conflict at all costs. That may be a reasonable tactic for a short time, until everyone has a chance to cool off and respect is restored. However, ongoing avoidance will only serve to build walls between you and your child. Instead, by engaging in discussion you will let your child know you'll continue to love them and spend time together even though you are at odds.

Fathers especially need to spend time with their teens. In group counseling at [\*Heartlight\*](#), the most often wished-for thing by teen girls is, "I want more time with my Dad." They want time together, even if they act like they don't. For instance, when you make the effort to take your child out for a weekly breakfast, coffee, or dinner, she knows she is worth spending time with, even when she is at her worst. She also comes to understand that the conflict between you can be resolved, and it doesn't mean your relationship has to stop when you have problems or disagree.

### **3. Modeling Appropriate Action**

Teens are somewhat limited in their ability to solve problems. They often don't have the maturity to unravel life's bigger issues, and they don't understand how to change their behavior in order to help themselves. That's where a parent comes in. Demonstrating your own resources for managing frustration is one good way to teach your teen how to handle their own frustration. Tell them how you go about solving problems at work, or with your spouse. Let them know you need and daily seek God's help, and that you don't have all the answers. Help them learn how to use different behavior as a way to solve their own problems or to change their situation for the better.

### **4. Establishing Firm Boundaries and Clear Consequences to Maintain Respectful Discussion**

When conflict emerges, it's time to make sure that everyone knows the rules for the "fight" by setting up some basic boundaries. For instance, "We're not going to be disrespectful or dishonest with each other." Put it into words, and back it up with consequences. Words without backbone mean very little. Let the consequences for crossing boundaries of respect speak louder than your words. And for consistency, make sure those on both sides of the conflict embrace the idea of respect, 100% of the time.

## **5. Taking Care to Not Heat Up the Fire**

As you discuss your problems or conflicts, choose your words wisely. Stop saying things like, “No, I will never support that.” You’re setting yourself up for failure, and you may have to eat your words when you say that. Avoid words like “you” or “always” and speak in broader, less offensive terms. Be more open to what you will or won’t support, and pick your battles carefully. A wise parent will use the eternal perspective as a barometer for choosing which stances are worthy to fight for, and which ones may not be as important or are just a personal preference on your part.

By the way, be clear on your limits. Don’t say, “It’s your choice,” or “What do you think?” It is better to say, “Here are my limits...what I will and won’t allow in this situation. Then, explore their needs and ideas and try to find a way to meet each other halfway, listening more and talking less.

## **6. Loving Them - Regardless**

Teens need to know they have a relationship with their parents that love them through the conflicts, while at the same time a relationship that shows them the true character of God.

When I said earlier that the teens that I’m closest to are the ones that I have fought with the most, I meant it sincerely. Conflict, when handled properly, can improve relationships rather than tear them down. Just as you can rely on the fact that you will have conflict with your teen, rest assured that your teen will have conflict with their future college room-mate, their future spouse, a future employer, and even their future children (turnabout is fair play- Ha!). So, engaging with your teen in conflict now is more about teaching them how to manage conflict in the future and less about who wins today’s argument.

### **Handling Resistance**

Have you ever had a child balk at your ideas or run from your suggestions, even when you know life could be better if they followed your advice? Do you have a teen that would rather do it “their way” and not “your way?” Let me offer some advice from a lesson I learned when our organization received the gift of two Tennessee Walkers (horses). They are wonderfully spirited horses that we named Knox and Nash, in honor of their Tennessee roots.

The easy part was accepting the gift of the horses. The hard part was loading the two powerful animals into an unfamiliar trailer and keeping them calm enough to move them just a few miles to their new home at Heartlight.

The first horse, Nash, loaded up easily. She was older, and trusted me to walk her in without a fuss. We hoped Knox would load up just as readily, but as his handler approached the ramp with Knox in tow, he yanked on the horse's lead as if to remind Knox who was "boss." In the process he also closed Nash's side of the trailer, so Knox couldn't see his lifelong buddy already inside. What's worse, the handler allowed his dog to nip at the horse's heels to try and get him moving onto the loading ramp. Everyone there soon learned that you can't manhandle a horse into a trailer, especially not Knox.

The handler yanked, pulled, tugged, jerked, and wrenched on the rope for quite some time, but Knox stubbornly refused, and responded by planting his feet and jerking backwards. The harder Knox was tugged, the more he resisted.

I watched with gritted teeth as a second person decided to "help" by picking up and pulling one of the horse's legs in order to coax him onto the ramp. Knox, who was by now pretty furious about being yanked around by the head, nipped at by a dog, and grabbed at — lost it. He went berserk!

Knox lunged straight up in the air, narrowly missing the top of the trailer. The rope yanked and burned the handler's palms as the horse thrashed and retreated. Then Knox kicked up both hind legs at the dog nipping at his heels.

I unhappily watched as the horse-handler with a dented ego and burned hands tried to deal with Knox by yanking even more when he had caught up with him. But, Knox was determined not to go into the dark and unfamiliar trailer.

Now, I'm no horse whisperer, but I love horses, and I understand how a horse thinks. So, I intervened by suggesting we call everything to a halt and give everyone time to calm down. After awhile I took Knox for a walk, and we had a little talk. It did wonders.

Knox didn't get over his apprehension immediately. But, I hoped he would trust me enough to eventually step into the trailer on his own. I calmly walked him up to the edge of the trailer and released the tension on his lead rope. I didn't let him back up and run away, but I didn't yank and manhandle him either.

I gave him some feed, talked to him, patted and stroked him. I opened the door so that he could see his friend Nash. I even stood inside the dark trailer to show him everything would be okay

After 15 minutes of calm, Knox put one front foot onto the trailer. In another five minutes, the other front foot. In another five minutes, the third. That fourth foot

took the longest and a slight pat on the rear, but Knox finally stepped up into the trailer.

Knox was nervous about the sound of the trailer's wood floor, and it was dark and unfamiliar. So I stood in the trailer between the two horses, calmly letting them know that they were going to be okay. We all calmed down together.

Patience, which the handler later exclaimed that he lacked, helped us reach the goal, but my success with Knox was not so much about patience as it was about technique, and giving control back to the animal.

Do you suppose there is any lessons for parenting a resistant teen in this story? You bet! At Heartlight the kids learn a lot from handling horses, and sometimes we learn from the horses as well. Here's what Knox and Nash demonstrated to us that night that applies directly to parenting teens:

1. **No two teens are alike.** What works for one, doesn't work for another. Just because one is comfortable doesn't mean the other feels the same way. What feels safe for one is scary for another. It's important to know different techniques to handle their different responses.

2. **You can't get a child to go where you're not willing to go yourself.** Hop up in that place you want your child to go. Let them know that even though it's scary, it is better.

3. **Learn to let go of the rope.** When you yank and pull, you create the atmosphere for a fight. You don't have to be in control. It is better to "give over control" to your teen, and let them focus on why they need to move in the direction you're inviting them, rather than causing them to rebel against your manhandling techniques.

4. **Try a different approach.** That which you think must be yanked, pulled, tugged, jerked, and wrenched, might instead need to be lured, attracted, or enticed. Your push-pull technique might work well when making taffy, but it just won't work with teens.

5. **Call a timeout to regain calm.** If the situation is "out of control" go for a walk and have a little talk. It works wonders.

6. **Don't take the steps for them.** Create the atmosphere for them to take steps, but don't do it for them or force them forward.

7. **A gentle approach invites a kind response.** Your teen's hesitancy may be in response to the heavy handed way that you are asking, not what you are asking.

## 8. A gentle nudge at just the right moment encourages progress.

9. **Don't hesitate to stand with your teen in that new place.** It may be momentarily dark, and it may even stink a little....but it builds a great relationship of trust.

Many parents limit their parenting skills to those they already have “in their bag” and don't look for new ways of dealing with a resistant teen. Teens can be like these horses (and sometimes even as stubborn as mules!). Each is different and responds and learns differently. If your teen has dug in his or her heels and you are getting nowhere, you would be wise to seek a new approach for the New Year.

### **Don't Provoke Conflict**

If you hadn't noticed, teenagers are in an overactive state of emotion most of the time. It doesn't take much to bring them to the point of exasperation. They can only take so much pressure before they shut down or act out of frustration or anger instead of clear or right thinking. Sometimes they're provoked to the point of putting up walls of protection around themselves.

*An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel. – Proverbs 18:19*

Does it seem that your child is like a fortified city, a citadel with barred gates? In other words, nothing you say or do is getting through to them? Or, perhaps they respond only with bitterness and resentment?

I can see how some kids fall into patterns of bad behavior. I'm not saying they are right in their chosen ways of rebellion, anger, or self-destruction. But in some ways I can understand it, especially when the atmosphere at home is tense or disrespectful because of a provoking parent.

For instance, sometimes a parent has a problem with anger, or vents frustration with work, finances, or other disappointments in life on their child. Or, in an effort to control the situation and their teen, clamp down on the rules so hard that no one in the relationship can move or breathe.

When a teenager is provoked to exasperation by a parent, it's an invitation for them to become angry, and garner resentment. Teens are still too immature to handle it properly. Fact is, some never get over a mean or demeaning parent, even in later years of life. The seeming unfairness of their parent's poor performance can wound deeply, and they can either react explosively or clam up and hide. In either case, walls go up, and the child becomes like a barred fortress.



I'm not talking about momentary parental lapses here. If you are going through a struggle with your teenager right now, I guarantee there will be moments when you will not handle matters well. Even the best parent may "lose it" every now and then.

Instead, I am referring to a parent who has an ongoing problem losing it...of punishing and demeaning a child with destructive or negative words, who may or may not recognize it, and the child ends up in a perpetual state of anger and bitterness as a result.

**Scripture offers these tips to avoid provoking a child...**

**1. Be the Adult in the Heat of an Argument**

"A gentle answer turn away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." – Proverbs 15:1

**2. Avoid Teasing or Inappropriate Joking**

"Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking'." – Proverbs 26:18

**3. Don't Make Rash Comments**

"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." – Proverbs 12:18

**4. Avoid Being Overly Critical**

"The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire..." – James 3:9

**5. Don't Give an Answer Before First Listening**

"He who answers before listening, that is his folly and shame." – Proverbs 18:13

**6. Don't Withhold Wise Counsel**

"Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart, and the pleasantness of one's friend spring from his earnest counsel." – Proverbs 27:9

**7. Avoid Telling Untruths**

"A lying tongue hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin." – Proverbs 26:28

**8. Don't Make Insensitive Remarks**

"Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." – Proverbs 25:20

## 9. Don't Jump to Wrong Conclusions

"A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions."  
– Proverbs 18:2

You may discover that it is at least partly your fault that things are headed in the wrong direction with your teenager. But, don't despair. Identifying the problem is half the battle. Seeking forgiveness and asking for help is the other half. Your teen may be like a fortress with high walls and a locked gate — impenetrable, but it doesn't need to stay that way.

So, ask yourself, are the answers given at your house gentle, truthful, humble, and delivered with kindness, understanding and wisdom? Are you considerate of the feelings of everyone you live with, including your sometimes frustrating teenager? Are you teachable, sensitive, and a good listener?

I recently witnessed an entire family break down and sob when the father asked each member to forgive him for the way he'd handled himself in their relationship. He repeated his request with intensity and emotion. It was a humble, sincere apology, and a good step toward healing the resentment of his children. Every heart in the room melted.

Will you take responsibility for steering your home in the right direction, fostering positive emotions and mutual respect? Start by identifying where you have been wrong, and seek forgiveness from those you have offended. Start today.

Anger in your teenager can take on many faces. It can be a seething anger kept quietly below the surface, or a tidal wave unleashed on everyone around them. Anger can manifest itself in a covert refusal to comply with your household rules or wishes, or it can lead your teenager to outwardly undermine their own future or even strike out in violence.

Anger in teenagers usually comes from some unmet need or heart-longing. Such "wants" can be immature and selfish; like wanting more material things. Or the more complicated want for control and independence. But these can also be a smokescreen for deeper wants, like the want for love, acceptance, or even clearly defined rules to live by. Or, it can be a want for life to be the way it was before a major event took place, like the breakup of your family, the loss of innocence, or a betrayal. Anger can also come from the want to not be ridiculed or bullied or the want to be "normal" as defined by today's teen culture.

A wise parent will discern the difference between temporary and immature fits of anger and the kind of anger that bubbles up from somewhere deeper in a

teenager's heart. You will help your teen find the source of their anger — their unmet wants. And you'll express a desire to help your teen meet those deeper wants. If these wants simply cannot be met, or wouldn't be the best thing for your child right now, then a parent can at least express empathy and explain ways for your teen to better handle their anger.

### **Lessons of Grace**

Parents are responsible to create an environment where solutions to inappropriate anger can be found, even in the face of your own feelings of anger. Shutting down an angry teen resolves nothing, though sometimes a timeout needs to be called when things get too heated. If no progress is made on your own, you may want to include a counselor or a concerned youth minister to walk this path with your child and ask the hard question.

It reminds me of a teen I recently worked with. He was angry all the time. He spewed anger on everyone and everything around him. One day in one of his fits, he took a baseball bat to the side of my van. At that moment, I was pretty angry myself. I could have had him arrested, but I could see something in his eyes that said a different approach was needed. So I sat him down and simply told him that he was forgiven. I talked about how he needed to work out his anger differently from now on. He would still be held responsible for his actions and would have to work off the costly repairs, but he wouldn't be arrested — this time. As I talked, tears came to his eyes. He had never experienced that kind of calm forgiveness in the face of his anger, and he couldn't believe I didn't have the police waiting to take him to jail. Giving him grace, at just the right moment, went a long way to change the direction he was headed.

### **Anger that Won't Release**

Maybe your teenager's anger is the type that won't let up, no matter what you say or do. He wakes up angry, goes to bed angry, and lets everyone know he is angry. If so, I would strongly encourage you to get him into anger counseling. Angry teens release their anger somewhere and cause serious issues for your teen's future. So get them help in managing it if they are consumed or overwhelmed.

If you have a child who is so out of control that he becomes physical or abusive, then you need outside help. And I wouldn't hesitate to get that help from police, even if you are embarrassed by them pulling up to your home. If their involvement protects you and others in your family, then I would request the police send 10 cars with lights and sirens blasting as they roar to your home, giving your teen an

adequate response to his selfish, immature, disrespectful, and out of control behavior.

Keep this in mind. If your son or daughter spends one night in juvenile detention, and learns a good lesson from it, it is far better than spending a lifetime in prison. One night locked up is better than being locked out of your home in the future because you fear he or she may bring harm to you, your possessions or your family. The message has got to be, “Do not get physical. Period!”

### **When Anger Begets Anger**

And what about you? Does your teen’s anger issue make you angry, too? When your teen is angry all the time, it is natural to assume it is a direct reflection on your parenting. Personalizing their problem can cause anger to build up within you as well. Or, it could be that you feel disrespected. If so, identify your own anger and process it or get help yourself, before attempting to deal with your teen’s.

You may also feel angry with God for what you see as something He controls, or at the very least should have protected you from. It’s not God’s fault, but it is a human response to blame Him. I tell parents that it is okay to get angry with God. He is a big God, a mighty God. He can take it. But it is not okay to sit in the squalor of that anger and let it fester into bitterness. And it is not okay to take your anger and frustration out on your spouse, your dog, your other children or anyone else.

If you are trying to teach your teen how to deal with anger, lead the way with your own actions. Demonstrate calmness in your own times of frustration, and find opportunities to offer grace at a time when it is least deserved.



- 3 -

## Establish a Belief System for Discipline

---

### The Four-Steps of Developing a Belief System for Discipline in Your Home:

- I. Reveal your BELIEFS
  - II. Define BOUNDARIES
  - III. Establish your RULES
  - IV. Enforce CONSEQUENCES
- 

#### I. Reveal Your Beliefs

When a teenager doesn't know what is expected in your home, he does what seems right in his own eyes – and that's a formula for chaos.

A good way to avoid chaos in the teenage years is to establish a Belief System for Discipline, which is a clear and undeniable plan for what is expected in your home. A Belief System for Discipline is all about positive training or reinforcement for dearly held beliefs but also includes what consequences to expect if the rules are broken or boundaries crossed. The root of the word *discipline* is “disciple” – and discipline for your teen is best characterized by positive training, just as we saw Christ demonstrate with his disciples.

Having a clearly defined Belief System for your home helps everyone know how to act, where the “line” is so they know when they step over it, and what consequences to expect. Teenagers can learn from established rules and consequences, but generally get frustrated from rules and consequences that seem arbitrary or inconsistent.

Why is this so important? Because teens are prone to test their parents in every possible way. It is part of their built-in and growing need for independence, and

they need to exercise their own free will. This is why parents need to take time to establish a clearly defined Belief System before their children enter the adolescent years. Doing so will go a long way toward avoiding parenting chaos and helping your teen eventually establish similar beliefs for himself.

*A Belief System for Discipline is a set of beliefs, boundaries, rules, and consequences that govern the discipline in your home.*

### ***A Belief System for Discipline is the Remedy to Chaos***

An effective Belief System is one that is communicated in advance, and everyone knows what to expect. It lends a sense of security to highly insecure teenagers to know what to expect – especially when it comes to discipline. In other words, they know in advance whether or not experiencing the consequences is worth it when stepping across established boundaries.

*Teenagers quickly learn ...as the song lyrics go...don't do the crime if you can't do the time.*

I realize that some parents face insurmountable obstacles that come about when a child spends time on alternating weekends with two sets of parents and two different sets of beliefs. This can be very difficult and confusing for everyone involved. So, even in the case of divorce or separation, caring parents should think about uniting, whenever possible, under the banner of one Belief System, for the sake of their children.

Your teenager may not agree with your Belief System for Discipline. He may not like it and try to change your mind, but he cannot justify his misbehavior or avoid the consequences based on a difference of opinion. He knows well in advance what will happen if he transgresses the household Belief System, and can only hold himself responsible for the resulting consequences.

For example, let's say that one aspect of your Belief System is that you believe that smoking is bad for your health, and therefore smoking is not allowed in your home. Your teenager may not believe the same way – but it doesn't matter because this is your home, and this is what you believe. The belief will probably not change, even when they are adults. Your teenager then needs to decide for himself whether or not to smoke – and suffer the consequences if he chooses to do so.

*What you believe is the cause that eventually produces a desired effect.*

## **Generational Beliefs – Family Background and Traditions**

It's a given that the source of your Belief System for Discipline starts with you and your spouse, and the way you were raised. You may not operate your home exactly the same way as your parents, but you may adopt some of the same basic ideals you grew up with for your own home.

A simple example is the annual family vacation. Yes, that can be a part of your Belief System. If your parents provided for time away with the family on a yearly basis, and it worked out well for you, then you will probably establish in your own Belief System that an annual family vacation is important as well.

Or, if your parents believed it was best to teach you responsibility by allowing you to work for the things you wanted, you may likewise believe it's best for your children to work for the things they want. These are generational beliefs, or traditions passed down from grandparent, to parent, to child.

## **Spiritual Beliefs – Character and Spiritual Walk**

The next place to identify your beliefs, of course, is your relationship with God. The Bible is full of training on how to live honorably and in harmony with both God and man. The Bible is a good resource for ushering God's ideals for your home into your discipline structure. These are spiritual beliefs that address your child's character, spiritual training, and how you'll manage issues like honesty, obedience, and respect.

## **Functional Beliefs – Your Unique Likes and Dislikes**

Functional beliefs relate to everyday living, like bedrooms need to be cleaned on a periodic basis in order to avert inspection by local health officials. Or, chores are a part of each family member's duty in the home and must be done before anything else. Or, you believe a good way to encourage your child in sports is to attend as many of their games as possible, so you establish that own expectation for yourself. These are functional beliefs, and they address the daily habits and quirks unique to each individual in the family.

---

## **II. Setting Boundaries Based on Your Beliefs**

The next step is to develop your boundaries. Boundaries define you. They are the fence posts placed around your behavior, or the delineation of how your beliefs are to be lived out. They are the "I will" and "I will not" statements that are the basis of your daily living and interaction with others. When they are defined, they help

everyone in the family take responsibility for their own behavior, make their own choices, and know if they are headed into dangerous territory.

*Let me give you some examples of how boundaries support your beliefs...*

If an important cornerstone of your Belief System is **honesty**, then an umbrella family *boundary* in that regard would be: **We will be honest – and expect everyone in our family to be honest.** For example, consider something gained dishonestly. What does your family do when a cashier returns too much change? Do you make it right, or do you keep the change? Or, how about when something of value is found in a parking lot? Do you keep it, or take it to the lost and found department? If you believe in honesty, your boundary is to seek to live honestly at all times- it is a clear line that is not to be crossed, even by keeping a lost or dishonestly gained item. It also means you will not accept dishonesty from others in your relationships.

Another good example of a boundary that supports the same belief in **honesty** might be: **I will seek to honestly admit my mistakes and make things right whenever possible.** That means, for example, that if I ding another's car in a parking lot, I'll leave my name and phone number if the other driven cannot be found.

**Boundaries ensure each family member takes responsibility for themselves and their own actions.**

A second example might be if you believe that **respect** for one another has merit, then your boundary will include showing respect to those you live with, and teaching family members to respect those outside the family as well. Being respectful means: not taking things without asking, not talking badly about another, not leaving a mess, not calling names or mouthing off. On the positive side, being respectful means: celebrating one another's successes, helping each other out when it's needed, asking permission before using something that is not yours, or standing up for other family members. You fill in what you consider to be respectful and disrespectful practices.

**Boundaries help us set thoughtful limits to our own behavior, ensuring right behavior in the heat of the moment.**

And, as a final example, perhaps you believe that **dinner time** is an important time for building family togetherness. A *boundary* in that regard could be: **I will plan and implement dinner for the family every evening, and expect them to be there whenever possible.** Thinking a bit ahead to creating a rule that goes along with



your belief and boundary: “No one is to make conflicting plans for dinner time, nor accept phone calls or visits from friends during that time.”

Boundaries are about every member of the family, not just about you or your teen. They help us learn when to lovingly say “yes” or “no” when someone or something wants our time, our energy, our money, or our attention.

Sometimes boundaries need to be adjusted as your family grows up, in order to be more age-appropriate, or honed to address a specific problem. Boundaries are not **rules**, which will be discussed next week. Boundaries apply more to the person, and how you will function within your relationships. They help you take responsibility for your choices, and empower you to set limits with others.

---

### III. Establish Household Rules

Once boundaries are in place, we move on to creating the rules based on those boundaries, which are also based on your beliefs.

Most of us work for companies that have a policy manual. We follow the policies, since they are a requirement of enjoying the financial benefits and privileges of employment. From that we know what to expect, how to act, and how not to act if we want to keep our jobs. Likewise, the rules within your family Belief System will help each family member know what is expected of them, how to act, where the lines are drawn between right and wrong behavior, and the consequences for stepping over the line.

-----  
*Rules are expectations and guidelines placed around our behavior, in order to support our family boundaries and beliefs.*  
-----

So, how do we go about creating and implementing rules that will effectively guide our teen for their own good, and for the good of our entire family?

#### Rules Are For Your Child’s Own Benefit

Rules for your home will most likely fall into three main areas of concern, which are foundational to all other character issues. They are **honesty, obedience, and respect**.

Rules should be relevant, attainable and beneficial, not a source of shame, frustration, or failure. After all, isn’t the ultimate intent of creating and enforcing

rules in your home that of keeping a child's poor choices from consuming him, and destroying his relationships with others?

So, when you think about the rules that govern your home, you might want to ask yourself two questions. The first question is, **“How much will this rule matter after I am gone?”** The second question is, **“Will this help build my child's character, and cause him to become more mature or responsible?”**

If not, then you probably need to rethink the rule and your motivation for wanting to make it a rule.

Rules also need to make sense. We can all think about rules set down by our own parents that made no sense at all and others that were beneficial to us (even though we may not have liked them).

Finally, rules often need to evolve over time, as lessons are learned, and kept in line with the growing maturity of your teenager. Out of date, irrelevant or demeaning rules will lead to animosity, loss of respect and rebellion in your teenager. They can also lead to consequence confusion, since outdated rules are often not enforced. Regularly update your rules and restate them to your teenager, awarding them with freedom and added privileges for the progress they make.

---

*Setting up rules and enforcing consequences — more than any other thing you manage as a parent — is the best way to help your child learn right from wrong and to change from selfish to unselfish thinking.*

---

### **Keep Rules Within the Context of Relationship**

When you line out rules make it clear that they are developed in the context of longing for your child to do well in life, more than a selfish need for you to be in control. Rules are not just about having your house operate well and the chores done.

Above all, keep in mind that your relationship with your child is more important than any rule. Don't tie rule keeping or rule breaking to your love or acceptance of them. Let them know that you will continue to love them, even when they mess up. Continually say, “There is nothing you can do to make me love you more, and nothing you can do to make me love you less.”

When they break a rule (and they will!) show your deep love for them by refusing to let them off the hook. Teenagers mostly learn from consequences. When they

are known in advance, it shouldn't damage your relationship when they are handed out, since the teenager accepted the consequences at the same time that they chose to step over the line.

What your child wants more than anything else is to have more freedom, while also having a solid relationship with you. A wise parent will give their teenager rules and boundaries and offer them opportunities to choose. Should they break the rules in their search for more freedom, their freedoms will be further restricted, or the opposite of what they sought by breaking the rule. And if they consistently make right choices, then they also need to experience their freedoms expanding. In any event, your relationship remains rock solid and unwavering.

Some parents mix the idea of rulemaking with ruling their home. Reasonable rulemaking and proper boundaries will help a teenager mature into a confident adult, while living under a "ruler" can lead to frustration, rebellion and eroded self-esteem. Which kind of home is yours? One that has rules or one that is ruled?

Again, rules for your home should fall into three main areas of concern, which are foundational to all other character and maturity issues. They are **honesty, obedience, and respect**. After all, isn't the ultimate intent of creating and enforcing rules in your home that of keeping a child's poor choices from consuming him and destroying his relationships with others?

So, when you think about the rules that govern your home, you might want to ask yourself two questions. The first is, "How much will this rule matter after I am gone or when the child is out on his own?" The second is, "Will this help build my child's character and cause him to become more mature or responsible?" If the rules for your older teenagers are not centering on character, then you're most likely ruling your home instead.

"Ruling" works and is necessary when kids are younger, but as your children reach the teenage years they naturally begin weighing decisions on their own. When they choose to break the household rules, they need to deal with the resulting consequences. Teenagers understand consequences. That's how they learn, not from lecturing or parental anger.

When a teenager butts heads with a "ruler," conflict and frustration will result. The only thing they'll then learn is either how to better hide their improper actions or how to scream louder than the ruler does. Neither of these modes are productive and can also lead to a legacy of poor parenting.

## Rules Are Enforced Through Reasonable Consequences

Consequences for teenagers should never hurt physically (other than aching muscles from work assignments). They should never be demeaning or undermine the child's self-esteem. For teenagers, the loss of a privilege is the most reasonable and powerful consequence. Sometimes they don't realize how many privileges they enjoy — at least not until they lose them for a time.

Think about some reasonable consequences for your home. And keep in mind how important it is that they are communicated well in advance so the teenager doesn't attribute the consequences they receive to your poor mood or a bad day. When they break a rule they should know exactly what the consequence will be. And just like laws in our society, parents need to build in progressively stronger consequences for rules that are broken again and again (since the initial consequence was obviously not enough of a deterrent).

*Setting up rules and enforcing consequences — more than any other thing you manage as a parent — is the best way to help your child learn right from wrong and to change from selfish to unselfish thinking.*

When you line out the rules, make it clear that they are developed in the context of longing for your child to do well in life, more than a selfish need for you to be in control or your home to be pristine. Above all, keep in mind that your relationship with your child is more important than their breaking any rule.

### Don't Forget These Important Rules

Beyond the normal rules and boundaries for curfew and chores and such, there should also be some rules you may not have thought about. For instance:

#### 1. We MUST Spend Regular Time Together

Your relationship with your teen needs time to develop in a way that moves beyond entertaining them or simply providing for them. Require a one-on-one weekly breakfast or dinner to spend some time developing your relationship. Make it a rule — we will go out and eat together once a week. "If you don't show up, you owe me \$25. If I don't show up, I owe you \$100."

#### 2. Everyone Listens

Some of the best advice I give Moms is encompassed in a simple mandate: Keep Quiet! Instead of always nagging, correcting, cajoling, or critiquing — just be quiet. Look for opportunities to lead into a discussion where you can ask your teen to explain their point of view, their solution to a problem, or how they arrived at a

conclusion, then allow them to talk. Don't try to correct their thinking – just let them talk.

Some parents just need to zip it. They need to turn the table and allow their teen to ask questions for a change. Teenagers today need to know someone will truly listen to them and not judge them for what is said. So sharpen your own listening habits, and your teen's may grow as well.

The point is, make your home a place where everyone listens and enforce it as a rule.

### **3. Lighten Up! That's an Order!**

Some families need to learn to laugh together. So, make it a rule to do something wacky together every week. Play paint ball. Pull some stunts. Unexpectedly, take everyone to a motel with a pool and a game room for the night. Watch some really funny movies together, or have a water balloon fight on the lawn.

Parents today take themselves and their teens way too seriously, at times. Let your kids see just how goofy you can really become, and make it a goal to make someone in your family laugh every day. Bring some fun things into your home, be impetuous, and smile a little more.

### **4. Our Rules Will Be Periodically Reviewed**

Like "sunset laws," rules need to be reviewed from time to time to see if they are still appropriate for the age of your children. An extreme example is, "We must hold hands crossing the road." Now, that was appropriate for little children, but not teenagers. Likewise, a rule such as "curfew is 10 o'clock" for a 12-year-old may be obsolete for a 17-year-old.

Taking time to communicate to your teen the rule that have changed shows the teenager that you value the idea of having rules and you will make them appropriate for them. Nothing undermines rules, even in society, more than when they are totally inappropriate, like some of these wacky laws:

*In Hartford, Connecticut, it is illegal to cross the street walking on your hands.*

*In Memphis, Tennessee, it is illegal for a woman to drive a car unless there is a man either running or walking in front of it waving a red flag to warn approaching motorists and pedestrians.*

*In Washington, it is illegal to drive an ugly horse.*

*In Youngstown, Ohio, it is unlawful to run out of gas.*

By the way, some rules never change and these are the kind of rules that apply to all family members, including the adults. They generally have to do with the values you hold dear, like: respect, morality, family observances, faith, common decency and societal laws.

### **A Relationship that Doesn't Stop**

Your teen needs the kind of relationship that doesn't stop even if they overstep the boundaries (and there will be times when they do). At all times, keep reminding your teen: "There's nothing you can do to make me love you less, and nothing you can do to make me love you more. In other words, to do something wrong won't end our relationship. I will love you just the same regardless of your actions, but that doesn't mean I won't enforce consequences for breaking the rules."

Remember, "ruling" your home is not a good measurement of the effectiveness of your rulemaking.

---

## **IV. Establish and Communicate Consequences**

*A sensible person learns by being corrected. —Proverbs 19:25b*

Now that your beliefs, boundaries and rules are identified, it is time to begin to assign consequences for breaking these important rules.

If I asked, "Does your teen seem sensible?" Most parents would look at me cross-eyed, or ask me if I've lost my mind. Of course my teen isn't sensible! Teens are wired for chaos and they spread it everywhere they go, including your home.

Our job as parents is to help our teenagers become sensible, as well as responsible and mature. The best way to help our teen move in that direction is to allow consequences to teach them when they make bad choices.

Teenagers won't learn just from parental warnings. Most of us have tried that without much success. And unfortunately, one or both parents all too often cave in. We step in to lessen the consequences when Johnny or Julie gets in trouble. Each time we do so, a valuable lesson isn't learned and a mistake is apt to be repeated.

-----  
*If you rescue an angry man once, you'll just  
have to rescue him again. —Proverbs 19:19*  
-----

The point is, teens learn best by making mistakes and suffering a bit from the consequences. They remember the lessons when there are consequences because they are then able to figure it out for themselves.

It reminds me of when we recently were with some of the kids from *Heartlight* having a blast in the woods annihilating one another with paintballs. The kids especially loved plastering me. But when we finished, I was surprised to see that one of the boys refused to clean his paintball equipment.

I said to him, “You played paintball. We had a good time. And you know the rule for the course — everybody cleans their own equipment.”

“Well — I am not going to do it,” he said, and then further unleashed a verbal tirade.

I remained calm, and said to him, “Now, we have another problem. In addition to breaking the equipment cleaning rule, you are also being disrespectful to me.”

So, I laid down consequences for his disrespect and his refusal to cooperate. He would be required to do a specified amount of yard work and lose his extra privileges for a time. And he would still have to clean the paintball equipment and apologize for mouthing off.

After a couple of days raking pine needles, he came to me to apologize. As I got the equipment out for him to clean, I brought the lesson home and reaffirmed him saying, “You are a good man. But you need to work through the way you respond when you are angry. It is killing your relationships. Your friends and others will not put up with it. I want something better for you. And by the way...this lesson is not about cleaning the stupid paintball stuff — this is about helping you be successful in life.”

But because of the consequences, he already knew that. Time and work had allowed him to figure out a very important lesson, not just about being responsible for things, but about being responsible for his own behavior.

### **Give Them Something That Can Be Taken Away**

You may ask me, “How do I know what kind of consequence to apply?” I tell parents that one way is to give them something they want. But teach them they could lose it if they don’t follow the rules. And when they don’t, take it away for a time.

When thinking about consequences, it helps to know what your child values. If they don’t value it, they also won’t learn from losing it. Is it time with friends, text-messaging, car privileges, the cell phone, music, the computer, or after-school

events? By the way, should I need mention it, consequences for teenagers should never involve physical pain (other than some aching muscles from hard work).

Make the consequence relate to the privilege. A simple example might be: “If the car isn’t home by curfew tonight, then you won’t be able to use the car tomorrow.” If he continues to miss curfew each time he is given car privileges, then don’t let him drive for increasingly longer periods. And don’t even offer rides to school. Let him take the bus, so he learns from it.

Most of all, keep it calm. Keep anger and that “I’m disappointed in you” statement out of it altogether. Even side with the teen in how sad you feel that they have to experience the consequence. Our goal with consequences is to make the teen angry at himself or herself for knowingly doing something stupid, not angry at you.

### **Implement Consequences One Step at a Time**

Letting your teen know what will happen well in advance is a key part of the learning process. Decide ahead of time what the consequences will be so they don’t sound arbitrary or derived from anger when they are applied. Clearly communicate them to your teen.

If you haven’t done such a good job of communicating consequences up until this point, then start by letting your teen know you’ve blown it when it comes to certain areas of discipline, and you will be making a change that affects everyone soon. Give them time to adjust to the idea that discipline is going to be different, before you let them know exactly how it will look.

Then, call everyone together and work out your ideas for rules and consequences together. Your teen may surprise you and come up with even stricter requirements than you originally planned. And, when it comes time to give a consequence, your teen will already understand exactly what to expect, and exactly why to expect it. In fact, they will tell you what their consequence is, because they weighed it in their mind and deliberately chose to accept it when they broke the rule.

*Working out consequences well ahead of time helps everyone remain calm when your teen experiences the consequences related to breaking the rules.*

### **Take Seriously Your Role of Managing Consequences**

Some parents are surprised by the concept of “managing consequences.” They manage their budget. They manage their calendar. They may even manage employees. But most have never heard of managing consequences.



But I can't emphasize it enough. This is one of the most vital things you'll do in parenting adolescents. If you want your teenager to become responsible and mature, you have to let them take responsibility for their actions and feel the sting of consequences.

### **Let Your Teen Feel the Full Force of Being Caught Committing Illegal Acts**

Illegal behavior calls for consequences that get your teen's undivided attention. Such consequences are often out of your control anyway, but they shouldn't be lessened in any way by you. I've known some parents who are quite justified in their desire for their drug-abusing teenager to be caught by the police before they sink even deeper into that lifestyle. And refusing to bail a teenager out of jail or delaying that action a day or two is another example of allowing natural consequences to take their course. An appearance all alone before a judge and being processed into jail has a way of catching a teen's attention and changing their behavior like nothing else can. A key point is to let your teen know in advance that you won't bail them out if they are at fault.

### **Tough and Tender**

There are two sides to consequences — the tough side that says to your teen, "I will allow painful consequences to take place in order to teach you when you do something wrong." This is a big shift from parenting younger kids, when our main goal was to prevent our children from getting hurt simply because they don't know any better. And the tender side which says, "I will always love you no matter what you do and it truly hurts me to allow consequences in your life."

Your teen wants a taste of the character of God. They want to experience the strength of a warrior and the tender, caring side of somebody promising to help them get through their difficulties. So, even if you are dealing with painful consequences, make sure your teen knows you love them, no matter what they've done.

*Consequences, when applied correctly or allowed to happen naturally, change your child's thinking. They teach adolescents how to think or act differently the next time.*

This concept is among the most important I can teach you today. So, take time to call your family meeting and begin developing, communicating and enforcing this incredibly effective tool and responsibility of parenthood.

## **Don't Cut Off Relationship When They Do Wrong**

Don't ever correlate your teen's rule-keeping or rule-breaking to your love or acceptance of them. Regularly let them know that you will continue to love them, even when they mess up. Express your sorrow when your teen experiences consequences, but take care not to express your disappointment in them. There's a big difference between those two sentiments. One is caring and the other is destructive of your relationship.

The Parent's Admonition: *"There is nothing you can do to make me love you more, and nothing you can do to make me love you less."*

When your teenager breaks a rule (and they will!) show your deep love for them by refusing to let them off the hook. Teenagers mostly learn from consequences. So avoid taking the consequences away or lessening them. When consequences are known well in advance, it shouldn't damage your relationship when they are handed out. Surely, your teenager weighed the consequences at the same time they chose to step over the line, and chose to do it anyway!



- 4 -

## Give and Expect Responsibility

*None of us can see our own errors; deliver me, LORD,  
(my) hidden faults! –Psalms 19:12*

*from*

**H**as your teen figured out that he can live without a care in the world? Do you spend all your time worrying about him or trying to figure out how to get him to behave differently?

Whenever I see a teen who is irresponsible, and happy to be so, I know his parents are the ones who are quite miserable. The more they try to take control and change their teen's poor choices, the worse the behavior becomes. It's what I call "the spin cycle," a downward spiral in teen behavior that often results in their life spinning totally out of control or ending in dire consequences. And the whole family spins out of control, too.

The good news is that there is a way out of the "spin cycle." Life doesn't have to revolve around chasing your troubled teen's problems and fixing them. Parents can stop it by handing the problems their teen creates right back to them, giving them responsibility for both their choices and the outcomes of their choices.

*Until your teen is given responsibility for the problems he causes, he won't stop causing them.*

It's not a mystery. Your child behaves irresponsibly because he is irresponsible. He'll not magically become more responsible or mature, or wise. He won't grow out of it. Responsibility is a learned behavior that comes from facing the consequences of one's deeds, and the direr the consequences, the more likely and quickly the lesson will be learned.

It would be impossible to change everything in your teen's behavior all at once, so let me offer one simple example: Say your 16-year-old is failing in math for the second time. You have gone through this struggle before, and you know your son is fully capable of passing his math class (he has the aptitude, but lacks the attitude).

So, you begin a process of systematically limiting how your child spends his time, help him complete lists of homework and study assignments, check daily to see his homework is finished, ask for weekly progress reports, and speak with the teacher every other week to make sure your child is on track, with passing grades.

Sounds like a good plan, right? Wrong! When you jump into the “gung ho” mode of parenting, like you had to do when he was a child, you make your son’s problems your own problems. Managing problems for a teenager never works! He needs to learn to solve his own problems in life. He’ll never take responsibility for his actions if he knows you’ll fix things for him.

A better approach might be to try something a little more drastic, but tons more effective. Hand the problem back to him; making him responsible to solve it. First, tell him that you welcome any questions about homework and you are willing to help him if he asks for it (even though you know he won’t). But you won’t bother him to make sure he’s keeping up on assignments, to see that he has passing grades, or to say one word about school for six weeks.

Next, tell him that at the end of six weeks you will check with his teacher to see if he has completed all of his homework assignments and has a passing grade. If even one assignment is missing, even just one, or if the grade has not improved . . . you will park the car and cancel his cell-phone. In fact, until he improves his grade, he can ride the bus to school and he’ll have no way to text message or chat with his friends.

You see, the really great thing about how many “things” kids have these days, is that they can be taken away, one by one, as consequences for bad behavior. In my teenage years, I had no cell phone, no iPod and no computer, so grounding the car was my parents’ only choice. And to this day, I still remember the times and circumstances of when my car was grounded.

But here’s the point where many parents fail. They cave in. They don’t follow through or they lessen the consequences due to sad, remorseful pleas from their teen. They think they are “loving” their teen by doing so, but in this case it’s not doing your teen or your relationship any good. If you don’t follow through, you’ve made an empty threat that will only serve to teach your teen that you really don’t mean what you say and that he is not really responsible to manage the problems he creates.

What’s worse, if you don’t follow through, his behavior will likely deteriorate, and after a few “feel good” minutes, hours or days of happiness for letting him off easy, the poor choices will return. So don’t make a threat if you can’t follow through with

it — to the letter. No remorse and no letting him off easy. The first few times need to be the whole nine yards.

Once your teen realizes you mean what you say, and that sooner or later you intend to hand him responsibility for every part of his life, then your life will improve as well. Your teen will know that you keep your promises, and a simple reminder about the “math” incident might be all it takes to help your teen remember that he is responsible to solve the problems his behavior creates. More importantly, your teen will learn from his mistakes.

To summarize, don’t step in to fix the irresponsibility or poor choices of your teenager. Instead, help him realize that his choices always have consequences that may even drastically change his life. It is totally up to him whether the results of his behavior will be good or bad.

### **Stop Giving them Everything!**

Teens today seem much more demanding than recent generations. That’s relatively new, but what’s not new is that teens are also less mature today. Add the two together and what you get is kids who expect their parents to be a walking, breathing ATM machine.

Parents who continually meet the financial demands of a teen fail to realize that they are unwittingly postponing their teen’s development into a responsible and mature adult. That’s because generosity and a parent’s desire to provide for their child often gets misinterpreted by the teen, leading them believe that this provisional lifestyle will continue endlessly. They want more and more and appreciate it less and less.

It echoes the attitudes of the Prodigal Son found in scripture, with one difference. Today’s prodigals don’t leave home. In fact, they are comfortable at home because they can continue a self-centered and lavish lifestyle right under their parent’s noses, with no real-life consequences to help them come to their senses.

Don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing inherently wrong for parents (and grandparents) to want to do great things for their children. But when the teen years come along and the child has not learned how to earn and manage their own money, then the over indulgent parent is unintentionally cutting short their teen’s ability to make it out in the real world.

I hear from parents every day who want to place their teenager in our counseling program. Many of these kids come from homes where parents have lavished on them everything they ever wanted and required nothing of them in return.

We have little ability to change the materialistic world in which our teens live. But I have no doubt of our ability to change what we will and won't give a child.

So, my recommendation is this. Let the demanding teenager know that it's time to take more responsibility for what they want or need. Tell them that good ol' mom and dad will help them make good buying choices and may provide ways for them to earn money, but they will no longer give them everything they want.

I'm usually pretty straight forward with a teen in such a conversation. I'll say, "Thanks for telling me what you want. But I need you to know something. Every time you ask, I get a feeling that it's more of a demand than a request. I just want to let you know that as your parent I owe you nothing, but I want to give you everything. For right now, my greatest gift to you would be to help you learn how to make and manage your own money."

This immediately lets your child know they need to lower their expectations about what you will provide, and allows them to begin assuming responsibility for what they want.

For instance, "Honey, your asking for a cell phone is important to you, and I know you would really like to have it. It's important for me to allow you to take responsibility for it, so let's talk about what you can do to make it happen. I'm willing to help you find an inexpensive way to have a cell phone, and you'll need that since you'll be paying for it."

But if your child is still young, you can head off such "entitled" attitudes. Begin early to teach them financial responsibility. For instance, when they are 13 they can begin to manage a checking account and pay for minor expenses like lunch money out of a weekly allowance. When they are 15 they can get themselves out of bed for school, do their own laundry, clean their own room, learn how to cook for themselves, and get a summer job to cover some of their own wants and needs. When they're 16 and can drive, an after-school or weekend job will help them pay for gas, auto insurance and other needs.

Let alone keeping idle hands busy and out of trouble, starting sooner to teach your teen how to work to make money will give them a greater feeling of independence and self-confidence and prepare them for the day in the future when they tell you they are starting out on their own.

## **What have you done today to help your teenager grow in maturity?**

Some parents feed their teen's selfishness into adult years by continuing to rotate their life around them. I tell parents that at age 15 it is time for them to begin aggressively helping their teen get over a selfish mindset.

Instead of always wanting to be "served" by mom and dad, older teens need to do things for themselves and also learn to serve others. After all, they are potentially only a few short years away from having to live totally unselfishly as parents themselves.

Scripture says, "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...*" (Romans 12:3 – NIV). This is a good principle to teach to your teens at this stage, since selfishness is just that — thinking more highly of oneself than others (including you). Should this selfishness be allowed to grow during the teen it years will only accentuate into other problems after they leave home.

## **So how do you put an end to your teen's selfishness?**

First, you need to put on the brakes! Stop doing everything for your teen. Quit jumping every time he says "frog." His control over your life and the life of others in your family is to cease, beginning now. Review the negative habit patterns you established in your home in the early years, and let it be known in a gentle way that you'll no longer be doing a lot of the things that you had been doing to help them as a younger child.

Break the news to your teenager in this way:

*I'll no longer be doing your laundry.*

*I'll no longer get you out of bed in the morning.*

*I'll no longer accept childish whining from you.*

*I'll not be doing what should be your chores, like cleaning your room or bathroom.*

*I'll no longer nag you about what you need to accomplish.*

*I'll no longer pay for gas or give you spending money unless you earn it.*

Get my point? You have got to *stop* doing some things, so that your child can *start* learning to do some of these things for themselves. You stop to get out of the way, so he or she can start.

If you don't do this, your teen is not being required to grow up. And I see a great number of kids today that remain immature into early adulthood. That happens not because of forces of nature or culture, but because parents enable it.

So the first step is to just stop. Can you do that? And I mean both parents, not just one.

The second step then is to have a discussion with them about why stopping. It doesn't have to be a deep philosophical discussion about their need to learn responsibility. I would leave it as a simple, "Because you now have the ability to do it for yourself and I don't want to do it anymore!" Any comments beyond that will only stir up further fruitless discussion. Let your teen know that you're not doing "it" (whatever "it" is) because you don't want to do "it" any more. You'll be amazed how it will put him in a position of not being so demanding of you, and will put you in a position of not having to do everything for them.

Sometimes it is best to let teenagers know that they will have to start these new responsibilities "this summer," or, "when school starts," or, "when you turn 15," or, "the first of the year." That way you prepare them for the change that is coming. Don't drop it on them overnight. Maybe even work with side by side them for couple of weeks as you make the transition, but be clear when your assistance will stop and that you'll not do it yourself during the transition period. They have to help.

Again, here's what to tell them:

*They'll be doing their own laundry and if not, they'll have nothing to wear.*

*The alarm clock you are putting in their room is so they can wake themselves and get to school on time. If not, they'll get in trouble at school.*

*That you expect respectful talk and no more childish whining.*

*That you'll help in emergencies, such as typing their homework if their fingers are broken (use a little humor). This is something one adult would do for another if they needed the help.*

*That you're not going to nag them any more. You'll ask once and that's it. Then, they'll have to suffer the consequences if they don't do it in a timely fashion.*

*That they'll have to begin earning some money to pay for their own gas for the car. You may pay for the insurance and some upkeep; but that's it.*



*That they'll have to clean their own room. If they want to live in a dump, that's their choice. If they want a clean bathroom, you'll purchase the cleaning materials, but that's all. They'll have to change burned out light bulbs, wash towels, and scrub their own toilet. Say you can't do those things for them because you can't breathe when you're in their room for the smell of the dirty shoes, socks and shorts.*

I'm sure that when you present these things to your son or daughter, you'll get to see their selfishness in action. They won't like it and may even throw a tantrum. If so, then it only says that you should have started this process sooner. They'll drop the ball a few times and have to suffer the consequences as a result, but be sure not to rescue them from their selfishness nor lessen the consequences. Doing so will only cause selfishness and immaturity to continue.



- 5 -

## Understand the Problem Triggers

**D**o your parents know everything that happened every minute of your childhood? Probably not. Neither do you know everything that has happened in your teenager's life.

Events in our childhood can impact the way we relate and act in our teenage years and sometimes for the rest of our lives. Past happenings may lead us to feel that we are inadequate and we react by learning to schmooze, to be suave, to snow people, to use humor to fit in, to be shy, or to avoid people or situations.

The first step should be to identify a specific situation that was the turning point in your teen's behavior, like the death of a parent or a divorce or even an inappropriate sexual encounter in childhood. This is where you need to start with a counselor. The emotions wrapped up in such an event, exploding to the surface in the years of emotional adolescence, could be triggering your teen's current inappropriate behavior.

Divorce, illness, job transfer, death, abuse, bullying – just about anything can trigger a change in your teen's behavior, even the transition into adolescence itself.

It may not be what's obvious. In fact, the obvious may just be a cover-up and a fallback position for your teen to hide behind. It could actually be something that your teen is keeping hidden. Something done by her or to her that is so personal that she would never dream of telling anyone about it, not even you.

Teens have not learned the skills to appropriately deal with all their emotions (especially the really intense emotions of anger, pain and loss). They'll do whatever pops into their heads (or whatever their peers encourage them to do). They'll take advantage of anything that is available to help dull their pain — including alcohol, drugs, cutting, eating disorders, and sex. Of course, this is not dealing with their

pain. This is stuffing it into a box that will explode and take them even deeper when it does.

When parents try to eliminate the outward indicators of pain — drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity — they are just taking away their teen’s coping mechanisms. That’s why intervention for these outward indicators, along with therapy relating to the deeper inward issues of loss and pain, is often a necessary and combination. The counselor will have to determine which is dealt with first, the cart or the horse.

Think back on your own life. Are there early events that caused you to think and behave the way you do? I’m sure if you think about it for a day or two, you’ll remember hurtful things you haven’t thought about for years, yet they impact your everyday life and relationships today.

Bad behavior in the teenage years can be triggered by something as simple as a comment made by someone many years prior. The teen may not even remember what was said, just the feeling it created. Or, it could be rooted in the consistent lack of affirmation, or a traumatic event in your child’s life, like a split in your home, sexual abuse, emotional abuse by a parent, or a major loss in the teen’s life.

We develop our behavior over a period of time and we can be sidetracked by damaging words said like, “You’re stupid,” which can set into motion a style of relating that means, “I’m not going to appear to be stupid.” I’m going to appear to be smart (or I’m always right, no matter what the truth is).

When piercing words are said. It hurts us to the core. And we react or cover it up by our behavior. We don’t want others to see the shame we feel, or see that we don’t have it all together. So we struggle in an endless cycle.

For kids, hurtful words in the sixth and seventh grade can be especially cruel. The verbal attacks will come. Accusations will happen and things will be told. Words will rip a child apart. It is fertile ground for lifelong affects. And today, the verbal attacks have shifted to even more ruthless cyber attacks on websites like MySpace, leading some recipients to the brink of suicide.

We simplistically teach our kids to defend themselves with comebacks like, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Or, “I’m rubber and you’re glue, what you say bounces off of me, and sticks on you.” And a teenager may say, “I don’t care what you think.” But the truth is, none of these are true. Kids are profoundly impacted by what their peers and the grownups in their life say or think.

Gary Smalley says, “Unfortunately, negative words (or just the lack of affirming ones) can turn out the lights in a child’s life. Lights that may never be lit again.”

Teenagers act the way they do for a reason. Even so, an errant teenager, when challenged, may retort, “I don’t know why I’m the way I am.” Or, “I don’t know why I chose to do that.” And that may be true. They may not know. What comes out can be the reaction to a bruise made on their heart years earlier, by some person, event or circumstance. “Garbage in, garbage out,” is the old computer adage that aptly relates to the human condition as well.

So, if your teenager is exhibiting serious behavioral problems and relational conflicts with you or others, there may be something in the past that helped trigger it. I don’t say this to dismiss blame for the teen’s actions, or to give license to bad behavior, no matter what caused it. But I say this to help you better understand such behavior, if you see it happening over and over again, and to seek help if needed.

A trained therapist can help uncover the root causes and bring these issues to the surface with the teenager so they can be dealt with. When the teen begins to see where they’re hurt and their own frailties, it’s only then that they’ll be willing to start to change some things. After all, they usually don’t want to be controlled by things they have no control over. They want to be their own people. Helping your teenager get a handle on these issues can help prevent a lifetime of bad behavior and relational struggles.

### **The Trigger of Loss of Identity Through Adoption**

Adopted children face unique circumstances, and it is not unusual for them to struggle with issues surrounding their identity in the teen years. For their parents, the most difficult part is trying not to take their sudden confusion personally. This tussle isn’t about teenage rebellion as much as a struggle to answer questions about their history — who they are, why their birth parents gave them up, and what it means for their future. It isn’t that the teen no longer loves the adoptive parents and are no longer appreciative of all their new family has done for them. It’s that they are in confusion over how they got to where they are.

If you are an adoptive parent, your role is to continue to parent them with the same kind of love you’ve always held. Remember God’s example of nurturing, understanding, love, patience, kindness, goodness, forgiveness and grace. Don’t respond negatively because your feelings are hurt. Don’t say you’re giving up as their parent. And don’t try to “fix” the problem with giving the teenager more

“things.” All of this only adds to an adopted teen’s mixed up sense of self and can lead to even more instability.

These kids need both time and stability to work through their issues. It is often a stage that they can work through and come out on the other side even more appreciative of their adoptive parents. In the meantime, they need their parents to remain steady and calm while they turn their world upside down in a quest to understand their history. And they may need professional help sorting it all out when the truth is finally made known. While not always true, your teen may discover that the circumstances of their adoption are not what they expected, and the history they uncover has potential to cause even more hurt. So, be watchful and take care to get your adopted teenager the kind of professional help they may need at this time in their life.

### **The Trigger of Divorce or Family Breakup**

When parents split up, it can cause a number of problems in the life of their children; especially if the children are in the pre-teen or teen years. I would never say divorce is responsible for every problem for the kids from split families who come to our [Heartlight teen counseling program](#), but it is a major factor for many. Divorce piles on emotional problems for a teen a little higher than there would normally be for an already emotional adolescent.

While there is no real way to fix the problems that divorce can bring into a teen’s life, there are ways to do damage control to help them through one of the most painful experiences they will ever encounter. Since half of all marriages end on divorce, I thought it may be helpful to provide a few ways for the parents to address the after-effects of divorce on a teenager. It can help them better deal with the hand they were dealt.

#### *Feelings of Isolation*

First, it helps for parents to understand that teens who have experienced divorce in their family will feel isolated and left behind. A split in the family may even make a teen feel as if he is no longer a whole person. And, when the parents remarry, teens respond to the change as a signal that they really are now all on their own. After all, the parents who came together to create them have each gone their different ways, and may have already connected with someone new. Younger kids are pretty resilient and can cope, but the older the teen is at the time of the divorce, the more betrayed and disconnected they may feel when separation becomes reality.

I encourage parents to address this disconnected feeling by making every effort to help their teen feel included in as many things as possible. A teen who feels excluded and disconnected will often act out on that feeling through rebellion, self-harm, depression or promiscuity. They'll be prone to seek a sense of "family" elsewhere, usually with a negative peer group where it is easy to find acceptance and form attachments.

So, counter those feelings of isolation and disconnection. Invite your teen into your discussions and decisions, even when the invitation doesn't seem necessary. And don't take your teen's heritage and childhood away from them by hiding it. They can feel as though their earlier life before the family split was a dream and a fraud, so counter that by displaying pictures of you and your teen around your home. Get out the old baby pictures and videos of your family, even though it will be hard for you to see you and your former spouse in some of them. Talk to your teen about the good times you had as a family; about how great it was the day they were born and the funny things they did when they were a toddler. This all adds validity to their past and helps them understand that "family" can be a good thing.

Then, be sure to double the number of times that you tell your teen you love them, even when they're acting in a way that makes them hard to love. Let them know that they are still part of your family and nothing can change that — nothing.

### *Claim Responsibility*

When you have a good moment, admit your own mistakes to your teen in regard to the marital split. I said "your own mistakes," not your former spouse's. Teens are good at deciphering who is responsible for what went wrong in the marriage, so there's no need to tell them about your spouse's mistakes. A parent willing to admit their own mistakes may see their teen being more honest and taking responsibility for their own mistakes. And it can open a dialogue for you both to work through the hurts and feelings of isolation together.

### *Don't Turn Negative in Front of Your Teen*

It is critical to refrain from negative comments about your former spouse and his or her new marital partner in front of your teen. This may be one of the most difficult things to commit yourself to avoid following a difficult divorce. In those moments when you are tempted to fall into the trap of saying negative things, no matter how factual they are, bite your tongue. Pray for patience. Put on a smile, and ask God for strength. Give your son or daughter what she needs to hear from you, not what you think your "ex" deserves to hear vicariously through your teen's ears.

Remember, the only person negatively affected by biting comments about your ex-spouse is your teen, so just don't do it.

### *Be There More...and More*

If you are the noncustodial parent, double your efforts to be there whenever you can for your teen. If you feel you are already doing everything possible to be there already, then double it! The amount of time you spend with your teen transfers a sense of value that no one else can give. If you only see your child every other weekend, then ask for more time. If you have the freedom to do it, take them to lunch, grab a snack after school, attend all games or school events, and communicate online. Send daily text messages to say "Hi," or, "I love you." Make sure your teen knows your desire to continue to be involved in his or her life, or they'll seek validation from someone else, and that can lead to bigger problems than you ever want to have with your teen.

### *Don't Stop Being a Parent*

Many divorced parents change their parenting behavior as a way to get back at their "ex." They give their children unnecessary gifts and unwarranted freedoms in order to make them like them more or like being in their home more. Comments like "Mommy gives me money" or "Daddy doesn't make me do that" are warning signs that the child is being pulled in two different directions. In this case, some consensus needs to be made between the parents, for the child's own good. So swallow your pride and look out for your child's best interests. Get together with your "ex" in a neutral public setting and hammer out your differences. Come up with a discipline plan for your kids that you can both agree on and stick to in regard to the rules for parenting your children. Include agreements about what you will and won't spend money on, curfews, freedoms, methods of discipline, etc.

### *Better Yet, Stick Around If You Haven't Split Yet*

I have grown to think highly of couples who, knowing that they're headed for a split, stay together until their teen graduates from high school or college. Many will argue this statement, but you will never convince me that a child is better off with parents living in separate homes, and this is especially true with teenagers. I realize this works only when both parents are able to work out a mature and amicable arrangement where contention is not displayed in front of the children. Mom and dad may feel as if they are better off to split up, but that's not always the case when adolescent children are involved. Teenage sons need their moms. Teenage daughters need their dads. Sons need their dads. Daughters need their moms. Will

you consider just staying under one roof at least until your teen becomes more independent?

Divorce is a harsh reality of our culture. While it is not my place to condemn a divorced person for being so, I encourage anyone considering divorce to think long and hard about the long-term consequences before engaging in the process — especially if their kids are in the adolescent years. Should it not be possible to avoid a split-up, or if already divorced, then it's good to remember to practice “damage control” in the life of your teen.

### **The Middle School Trigger for Girls**

Each year at back to school time I begin to hear concerns from parents of young girls who've just entered middle school. They send their princess off to school with her crown neatly polished and her entourage intact. But rarely do two princesses happily exist in the same place at the same time, much less hundreds converging on a first day at middle school. So, battle lines are drawn.

It can cause your daughter a lot of confusion when she suddenly realizes there are many princesses, all vying for the same kind of attention or acceptance. She may return home from her first day at middle school confused, lost, and full of hate for everything she once loved. She may feel like a boxer who has engaged in a boxing match all day.

The problem begins when all the princesses greet one another that first day. They quickly form alliances, choose their battlegrounds, exchange their phone numbers and email addresses. They size up the competition and silently determine their battle strategy for winning acceptance and attention for the rest of the year.

At this age, girls suddenly seem at odds with one another. They compete for territory, boundaries, position, and retention of the princess crown. What should be a cordial, socially controlled expansion of a young girl's view of the world and broadening of her educational existence becomes an all out fight for popularity, and peer acceptance. I call it the “Princess Brawl.”

*It is literally a fight to determine the pecking-order that gives position and value in the eyes of one's peers.*

A tactic young princesses often utilize is to change their own appearance to draw attention away from the competition, thus winning the popularity vote. Appearance is especially important in the life of teens, just as it was when we were growing up. But the growing influence of seduction and immorality has convinced young girls that they need to appear seductive to win popularity. It influences how



they dress, how they think, and how they act. Seemingly good kids get caught in this fight as well.

You may find your own little princess disheartened. If she's upset one day, don't make too much of it, but try to lovingly find out what is troubling her. You can help best by providing an atmosphere of acceptance at home where she can process her difficulties in light of what you know is true about her character. If you see her trying the appearance tactic, think of ways to help her fit in without being immodest, thereby making her a less easy target for bullies.

Other girls will choose "mean girl madness" as a way to preserve their princess position, turning to bullying in an effort to gain ground. They use words to destroy reputations and to damage the competition's self-confidence, as a way of increasing their own "king of the hill" standing.

Today's technology intensifies and multiplies the cruel insults of bullies far beyond the school corridors. Girls use text messaging, e-mails, chat rooms, social networks, and instant messaging and can hide behind a veil of anonymity to unleash their attacks. In older days, it would have been like getting on the school-wide intercom to say nasty things about another person. Such hateful words can damage a tender heart for years, and as we've seen in the news time and time again, it can even lead a teen to suicide.

If your child is being bullied, she may need you to go the extra mile to protect her, including going to those in authority or to the parents. And she needs her mom and dad to be sensitive to what's going on, to bring light into her darkness and allow her own to continue to shine — in spite of the attempts of others to snuff it out.

For the parents whose teen is the instigator of bullying, they should be quick to act to shut off access to the "tools of the trade," including the internet and text messaging, until the teen learns to be more respectful of his or her peers. The repercussions of bullying can be quite serious for the teen and the parents, and can also do severe harm to the girls who are the targets.

In either case, parents of young teens should keep a close eye on their child's online and text-messaging activities, warning the teen that any form of bullying or passing on falsehoods will be an immediate cause for having their digital communications tools taken away from them. If the teen isn't willing to reveal what they've been saying online or texting, then take it away until they do. Remember, what's said or shown on the internet can last for years, and it can affect the future of both the teller and the one who's talked about.

## The Trigger of Substance Abuse

What many parents don't seem to realize is that hidden drug use may be the underlying reason they are seeing behavioral issues in their teen. In fact, unless the possibility of drug use is first ruled out, all the counseling help in the world will have no positive effect. The teen will continue to struggle with life for as long as they are taking drugs, and usually for many months thereafter.

In addition to alcohol and the common illegal drugs we all know about, teens today are learning from the Internet and from their peers about every other way to get high, including potent concoctions of common items and prescription drugs readily available in your home and even some of the plants found in your yard. Though usually less addictive, some of these are even riskier to your teen's health and mental stability than the better known street drugs!

Is drug use happening right under your nose? Possibly. No, it's more like a real probability if you've seen drastic and unexplainable changes in a teen's thinking, behavior, grades, or circle of friends. You may be fortunate and discover your teen is just in the early stages of experimentation, or you may be shocked to find they have been at it in secrecy for quite some time. In either case, the key is to find out, for sure.

*Any behavioral issue that remains unresolved, despite repeated attempts to address it with differing approaches is one indicator you may be dealing with a teen who is abusing drugs in one form or another.*

### **A few other behavior signs of undetected drug abuse include:**

**Lying** – not just once or twice, but chronically, especially if lying is new for your teen.

**Breakdown in normal habits** – drastic changes in sleep, appetite, the ability to complete schoolwork, loss of interest in things they once loved, extreme forgetfulness, and no longer keep themselves clean.

**Change in friends** – they exchange healthy friendships for fierce loyalty to unhealthy relationships and friends you don't even know. They may even run away, or disappear with their friends and you don't know where they are for long stretches of time.

**Stealing or sudden wealth** - shoplifting, credit card abuse, things disappearing without explanation, joyriding, money or valuables missing. Or, you may see

unexplained money, jewelry, new clothes, or new gadgets from the selling of drugs (even from selling your prescriptions).

**Change in schedule** – up all night, or up very late at night, sleeps for days, misses work, misses appointments, misses school repeatedly, wants to be on the phone late at night or regularly wants to stay overnight at a friend’s house.

**Aggression, anger, mood swings, disrespect, and blaming** – to an unreasonable degree, and directed against you and your family or other authorities.

And, look for homemade drug paraphernalia, like: pincers or paper clips for smoking, empty or disassembled pen cases for snorting, credit cards or razors for sniffing, empty aerosol cans for huffing, match piles and lighters, bags of unknown leafs, burnt spoons, homemade pot pipes, steel wool, hypodermic needle parts, unknown prescription bottles, unexplained empty cold remedy blister packs, empty alcohol cans or bottles, missing glues or solvents, or knives and spoons for crushing pills repeatedly show up in their room.

Do you want to know one of the main sources of drugs for teens today? The evidence of your teen’s use can be seen in the dwindling supply of prescription meds you have in your medicine cabinet. Some kids are even getting a buzz off of massive doses of certain vitamins, or they are consuming mega doses of vitamins, teas and herbs in attempt to mask their drug use in drug tests.

The problem lies not in recognizing how drugs might be affecting your child’s behavior. It’s easy to identify bad behavior and blame it on normal teenage emotions. The real dilemma comes from the parent not believing their child might be experimenting with or using drugs in the first place. It’s simply called denial.

You may not understand the reason your child has chosen drug use as their way to “cope” with some giant in their life, but that’s another matter altogether. And because it is inconceivable that your child would ever do such a thing, you may fail to consider it, discuss it with him or drug test him to find out.

Don’t stick your head in the sand and pretend that your teen knows better than to try drugs. If you are dealing with an out of control teen, and there have been no other traumatic events or psychological problems in your child’s life, you are probably dealing with drugs or alcohol in one form or another. The sooner you know what you are dealing with, the better the chance you’ll have for finding the right kind of help for your child.

So, here’s the answer. If your teen is showing some of the signs I’ve already mentioned, I recommend that every few weeks, unannounced, you drug test your

teen. Do it even when they squeal in protest and are disappointed that you don't trust them. Easy to use home drug and alcohol test kits can be bought in almost any drug store. And when you test them, stay in the room. Don't trust them to give you a valid sample. If they are getting caught up in that culture, they'll also know ways to get around the test and they'll have no trouble lying to you about it.

Overall, they need to know you will do everything in your parental power to keep drugs from becoming a part of their history, even if it means putting them in a drug rehab program or even reporting them to the authorities and landing them in jail. Better a few days in jail than a life in the grip of drugs.

If your teen is acting up, act now to drug and alcohol test them, not later. Every day you wait is possibly another step closer to your teen becoming a drug addict or alcoholic, or worse yet, overdosing and dying. Sadly, it happens every few minutes of every day to a family just like yours.



- 6 -

## Understand The Teen Culture

**M**ost teenagers would love for their parents to get a taste of how confusing this culture is for them. They face a difficult world and have to process an amazing amount of information and conflicting values every day. They are overwhelmed on many levels.

The cultural pressures teens face today are far worse than we faced when we were that age. Any given day your teen may be exposed to pornography, perversion, immoral lifestyles, and encouraged by peers to participate in self-destructive behaviors. They live in a raw culture where what is right, healthy, and nurturing is deemed to be all wrong and what is wrong is thought to be all right.

Teens need to fit in, no matter how bizarre this world has become. So the dilemma Christian parents face is how to train their children to maneuver through their culture without allowing it to control them or to either dilute or counter your spiritual beliefs.

It is important to know your enemy (hint: it's not your teen). You need to understand and respond to the culture and all its pitfalls, not ignore it. Know the fads and the trends today, so you'll know how to respond appropriately. Expecting your teen to avoid participation isn't helping them at all, because they will participate; only they'll do it behind your back. So, find ways for your teen to fit into the culture, without compromising your values. Help your teen know where you draw the line, and why.

Continue to have hope and know that God has not ignored or turned His back on you or your teen, even if you are struggling through a difficult and confusing time. Your kids need you to be there for them, to train them, and to be tough with them as they learn to navigate today's culture, anchored securely in your love and acceptance of them no matter what they do or don't do in life.

### **What Where You Thinking?**

Do you understand what your teenager is thinking? Probably not. Maybe you wonder if your teenager is thinking at all! Though the evidence may suggest otherwise, your teenager is probably thinking too much about the world around them and wondering too much about how they will fit in.

So it would be a good exercise today to at least try to understand where they are coming from and to walk in their shoes for a day. You'll then begin to understand that it can be a very daunting world for them. They live in a cultural universe that is absent moral absolutes; devoid of values, and where integrity is conditional. Often a teenager's behavior is simply mirroring that culture without the teen ever realizing its effect on them. And nowadays, that culture isn't across town, or in another city — it beams into your home through the Internet, cell phone instant messaging and texting, video games and television. As a result, choices that seem perfectly fine to your teenager can counter just about everything you hold dear.

Expressing how badly you continue to feel about your own poor decisions at that age can teach a teenager a lot about how to avoid similar mistakes. More than ever, kids are in desperate need of parents who are willing to be a bit vulnerable in sharing their own failures. That's where transparency comes in. Teens can learn volumes from how you handled or mishandled decisions when you were the same age. You see, it's important to help your teen understand that mistakes are a part of growing up, and everyone makes them, but some mistakes are best avoided.

When you acknowledge your own imperfections and the lessons learned from your own mistakes, it builds a bridge to your teenager. So talk with remorse about those moments in the past when you blew it.

Being genuine and transparent also means communicating that you still aren't perfect. For instance, if you've recently failed your teen in some way, such as yelling at them inappropriately or maybe even being hypocritical about the rules in your home, then ask their forgiveness! Don't make excuses; admit it, and maybe even assign some consequences to yourself! Better yet, ask them what the consequences should be for your failure. When you are wrong, just be wrong, and accept the consequences. When a teen understands that his parents aren't perfect, it gives him freedom to confess his own failings and also to identify his own need for a Savior.

Like it or not, you as parents are accountable for being an example to your children, who will assimilate that example into their own lives when they are older. Be assured, they are watching you. And they'll learn the right or wrong way to deal with decisions and failures by your example.

So my advice is to begin to appreciate the pressure points in your teenager's world. You may not fully understand how your teenager thinks, or how different the culture is from when you were a teen, but when teens feel that their parents have at least tried to walk in their shoes, they'll be more likely to open up and accept parental help in pointing them in a better direction.

### **Think Back to Your Own Teenage Years**

Remember the crazy fads in the late 60's and 70's; the tie-dyed shirts, the beads, headbands, and the peace symbols? When I was in high school my dad hated my bushy sideburns and long hair, my purple bell bottoms and boots that came up over my knees. It was a fad to look like the rock idols of the day and that look was in. My appearance made no sense to my parents, but it made a lot of sense to me at the time.

I bet there are things your parents didn't like about the way you dressed as a teenager. Chances are, you don't still dress that way, and when you look at those old pictures you may giggle, as I do, about how foolish you looked back then.

I guess that's why many of us parents work overtime to help our teenagers avoid such embarrassment. But unfortunately, these life lessons cannot be learned any other way. Experiencing and becoming embarrassed by our own immaturity can do far more to help us reach maturity than anything else.

For many teenagers, the need to fit in can lead them to do some of the most immature things they'll ever do in their entire life. They'll mimic dress, language, musical preferences, attitudes and even the high risk activities of their peers just to fit in.

It can be highly confusing and shocking for parents because of the sudden changes in their child's appearance and demeanor. Overnight it may appear that their child is forsaking everything they've ever been taught.

It is natural then for parents to seek ways to protect their child from these "bad influences." They may go about pulling their teen out of that crowd, out of that school or out of that church. Or, they may even consider moving the entire family to a new town.

If your teen is being influenced to head down the wrong path, be sure to seek wise counsel and take care to look for any hidden reasons for the change. Could there be deeper psychological or medical issues, or underlying abuse, bullying, or a loss that could be causing this behavior? Could drugs be involved? Or, could the child not be getting enough acceptance at home, so they seek it elsewhere?

If the odd behavior is simply your teen trying to fit in, then don't overreact. Most teens are not actually being rebellious and it's best not to label them that way. They are just in a healthy pursuit of independence and personal validation. Inappropriate dress, talking back, or other disrespectful or unlawful behavior is never acceptable and should be corrected, but don't think your teen has "gone bad" just because he or she is making efforts to fit in.

As your teen gets older, I have found that it is best to mostly stand on the sidelines of the maturing game and offer wise coaching when the time is right. Stand your ground in regard to your household rules, but let your teen's own choices, good or bad, be their teacher. Some day they'll look back and realize that the group they were hanging with were totally immature. They'll realize that they, too, looked like a dork, sounded like an idiot, and acted like a jerk when they were with that crowd.

### **Outward Appearances are Paramount Today**

Teens today live in a world of sexual innuendo, where outward packaging and presentation is all important. The definition of modesty has changed for them, not so much because of the lack of values taught by parents, but because of the overwhelming exposure given to seductive lifestyles.

Girls from good Christian homes often tell me they are torn between doing what is acceptable by their peer group to "fit in," and doing what is taught them by their families and church. More times than not, the social pressures for the teen to look and act like their peers will win out when they are in school or out with their friends. But they will soon realize that the end result of their seductive presentation — when guys do pay attention — is not always what they expected, or what they really wanted in the first place.

My advice for parents is to not flip out when your daughter is just trying to fit in. Using harsh words that defame her character such as, "you look like a ..." will only push her deeper into the negative behavior. Rather, calmly and regularly address the more important issue of modesty. Focusing on modesty, versus putting down the current fashion as our own parents did with us, will eliminate the perceived generation gap. And that way, when the next fad comes along she'll understand her boundaries within that fad as well.

**Make sure she understands that modesty is an important part of your family's values and that's not an area you'll allow to be compromised, no matter what the current culture or fad says.**



Is maintaining modesty going to be easy? No. But by being diligent and also showing that you understand her need to fit in with the culture she lives in, you'll be able to maintain a great relationship with your little princess as you navigate and struggle through these tough waters. In the long run, a strong and open relationship with your child, coupled with uncompromising values of modesty, will best insure that she maintains appropriate dress, even when you aren't looking.

-----  
*...Have(ing) righteous principles in the first place...  
they will not fail to perform virtuous actions.  
– Martin Luther*  
-----



- 7 -

## Get Help for Yourself

If you're dealing with a wayward teen, you know how relationally fatigued, emotionally beaten up, and personally worn down you can get. In fact, you may right now be thinking, "I've been pushing against this wall forever...I just can't do it anymore." But let me encourage you to never give up...keep parenting, even when the going with your troubled teen gets toughest.

I understand just how confusing and tiring it is. I've spent most of my life working with dozens of struggling teens at a time! So, here are a few ways I've learned to cope...

### **Overcome Worry and Find Peace**

I have learned that in the midst of the worst storms with teenagers, peace is still possible, and peace can spread from you to your teen. It's infectious! The first step to find peace is to shift from worrying to meditating on God, entrusting the problems -- and your teenager -- to Him.

Peace is the direct opposite of worry. The situation with your teen won't improve when you worry. In fact, when worry takes control, it usually makes matters worse for everyone. So, where does the tendency to worry come from? Well, we know it doesn't come from God. 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

Peace can grow in your heart when sitting in the presence of the Lord, "being still." It is difficult to accomplish these days, as every minute seems to be filled with the hustle and bustle of 21st century life. However, when quality time with the Savior is given priority, peace can come amidst the turmoil.

*The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty One who will save;  
He will rejoice over you with gladness;*

### **He will quiet you by His love;**

*He will exult over you with loud singing. –Zephaniah 3:17 (NIV)*

Begin by spending a few minutes daily focusing on your relationship with God and reading His Word. It may mean changing your sleep schedule in order to wake up a little earlier, before everyone else. Or, it may mean you need to take regular breaks away from home to calm down, collect your thoughts and meet with God. You will come to know that God is able to quiet the worry in your heart with His love.

You might also visit someone who is a positive spiritual encouragement; attend a retreat to focus on God, or simply go on relaxing walks. When you do, avoid the distraction of electronic media, which can overpower what God may have to say to you. It is in those quieter moments, alone with God, that He can provide you with a new idea, a new approach for managing your problem with your teen, and a new perspective of resting in Him.

### **Seek Help with Change**

If you could fix the problem with your teen yourself, you would have done so by now. After all, your best thinking has you where you are at this point, and it doesn't appear to be working. So, it could be time to get some help from a pastor, a professional counselor, a medical doctor or a psychiatrist. Find a support group and don't be afraid to ask for help. Try something different, and keep trying. It may even be that something within you or your spouse needs to change before you will see difference in your teen's behavior. If so, be open to whatever change needs to take place.

### **Learn to Recognize Progress**

It's easy to be so overwhelmed by problems with your teen's behavior that you fail to recognize any progress. Progress is not "problem solved." Progress means steady improvement. So, if your child is screaming at you every day, and then only yells at you once every other day – then that's progress! Finishing some of his homework, when he previously did no homework, is progress. Effective parenting requires that you look at the big picture while focusing on just a few problems at a time; then applauding any progress, no matter how small. Refuse to make your teen's lack of a complete turnaround to be your constant disappointment. Turnarounds rarely happen overnight. Instead, applaud every step in the right direction, even if it is a small one.

Change is a personal matter for teens. They bristle at the thought that their parents or authorities are trying to "change them." They may or may not be comfortable in

their own skin, but they'll fiercely defend who they are now and how they think. When they feel you are trying to "change them" you'll have an even bigger battle on your hands. Instead, recognize progress when it happens, and shift the discussion from "changing them" to the specific things they can do to improve their own future.

### **Adjust Your Expectations**

Huge expectations hardly help anybody. It is better to realize that parenting teens is more like a marathon amidst a minefield, than a sprint through a flower garden. Chances are high that your teen will not have a smooth run down the road of adolescence, and it is better to expect some difficulties and prepare for them.

I say this because most of the parents of the kids I help are great parents. The kids I deal with are also usually great kids; they're just experiencing a blip on the radar screen of their life. Their spin-off into another realm has caught their parents by surprise, and they are at a loss to know what to do. I give them advice and help them know how to handle things, but most of all I say to them, "Don't expect perfection, and don't quit."

#### *Remember that Teen Problems Are Usually Short-Lived*

Teen problems usually have to do with hormones, immaturity, and brain development. They are fueled by struggles for independence, identity, and the testing of beliefs. But all of this is just a phase! That's why, in the midst of the turmoil, you still need to stick with them, and even if you don't feel your teen deserves it. The goal during the battle is to keep your relationship with your teen alive. God doesn't give up on us when we fail. He gives grace. Are you willing to give your teen the same grace?

Over time, your relationship with your child will change for the better, but only if you don't quit on them. It is tempting to just give up and let them run (and ruin) their own life, but for the rest of your life, knowing you hung in there will be your rich reward. So decide right now, "I'll never, ever quit." And through it all, remember this; the wrong idea of God is that He is too great to care. The right idea of God is that He is too great to fail.

*If pain were knocking on your door, you wouldn't welcome him, invite him in, or help him in any way. You would send him to the next neighborhood, reassuring him that he was at the wrong address.*

## Don't Seek Quick Fixes

Parenting a struggling teen will bring you face to face with your worst fears. Fear for the safety and well-being of your child. Fear for their future. Fear of how others will respond to your having a problem to begin with. You may not realize it, but another description of fear is emotional pain.

Parents never expect pain when raising a child. In fact, they do everything in their power to avoid it in their life and the life of their child. Even so, when a problem is ignored because they don't know how to deal with it, or they hide it for fear of being exposed, or they fail to listen to wise counsel — pain can come to rule in their lives.

To lessen the pain, the tendency is to look for a “quick fix” for the troubled teenager, when in reality; God may be using this painful situation expressly for the purpose of bringing about a change in the parent. Most of the parents I work with say they had to change before any real progress could be made with their teen. When a parent changes, it creates a wonderful model for a child to also recognize his own foolish thinking.

It's difficult to learn that we don't always have all the answers. But it is a good lesson to learn. A parent in the midst of pain is in the worst position to correct their own situation, but in the best position to be changed by it. Openly admitting that problems exist, and finding good counsel to work through those issues on the parenting side of the equation, will go a long way toward solving the teen's issues as well.

I like what CS Lewis said about pain. He said, “I know God wants the best for us. I just wonder how painful it's going to be.” It reminds me that God's intention is not to allow us to be in pain for pain's sake, but that He uses pain for our ultimate good. I know you would never choose the pain of the troubles you are experiencing with your teenager, but believing God has a higher purpose in allowing you to experience it may help you embrace and learn from it.

I see as many problems surface from the unrealistic expectations of parents of struggling teenagers as I do with the teenagers themselves. In some ways parental issues are tougher to address than a teen's.

It is important to prepare yourself for the long haul. Be prepared to spend more time, money, and energy than you ever imagined in this process. Find friends and spiritual advisors to lean on, and be real with them. Take care of your physical body, and pay attention to your walk with God.

Spiritually, parents of troubled teens are eventually forced to their knees to draw upon the Lord's guidance and help with their teen. This position of utter helplessness is actually the best position to be in. The greatest strength comes from letting go of your child into the arms of a loving God. The Lord becomes the only real help when a teen is out of control or absent from the home anyway.

So, simply give up the idea that for serious teen problems there is a pill to take or a quick fix to be found. Instead, act quickly yourself to build up the support and strength you need, both from the Lord above and from those to which He's given special knowledge and experience here on Earth.

### **Where Does Hope Begin?**

So, where does a parent turn to find hope when things seem so bleak? Scripture gives us two fine examples of people who found a place to turn when everything seemed to be going wrong. In the stories of Job and King David we learn that there is a pathway toward hope, even in the midst of despair. Both had honest conversations with God about their suffering, their sorrow, and their need for relief. Each sought to understand what God was doing in their life through their suffering. In the end, both found hope—not because He or they were able to solve their problem, or because their suffering ended, but because through it they also found a nearness to God.

For the frazzled parents of a troubled teen, the journey of hope entails a journey back to the presence of God, where you can know without a doubt that He is there, even when your life remains difficult and your teen continues to struggle.

## **Tell God Your Troubles**

Let me urge you to not despair and certainly not to quit. Instead, choose to have an honest conversation with God about your struggle. Ask Him your questions, and tell Him how you feel. Ask Him what you are supposed to learn from this struggle. Stop worrying about how it looks to everyone else, and rest assured that it's not a problem to have a problem. Be okay with life not always making sense. Celebrate being needful of God's care. Doesn't scripture confirm that our Heavenly Father shines best when our life is a mess?

### *How Does That Help?*

When you invite God's presence to invade your life, then you no longer have to fix the problem yourself. You just have to hold on and trust that He sees it all. You can work through your struggle knowing that God is very near, that He loves both you and your child, and that He will use every single bit of your current dilemma for His good purposes.

Trust me. The pain you are feeling at this moment will eventually come to an end. In the meantime, a renewed hope will come from recognizing that this temporary suffering is a part of God's plan, and that He is not only aware of the struggle, He is right there in the midst of the struggle. He hasn't abandoned you and He hasn't abandoned your teen, no matter what you or they have done.

## **Tools and Resources to Help You Cope**

If you are having difficulty coping or your teen is too close to the edge of self-destruction, one option is to place your teen in a therapeutic residential program for a time. That's why we developed the [Heartlight Residential Counseling Center](#) in East Texas 20 years ago. Our trained staff helps both the teen and the family work through tough situations, providing a relief for the parents and time for relationships to heal. Our program is full to capacity much of the time, but there are other good programs we can refer you to as well. So, please contact us if things have gotten to a point that placing your teen in a program is recommended by your counselor or if you and your family simply need a break from the stress.

Another option is to participate in one of our [Families in Crisis](#) or [Turbulence Ahead](#) retreats and seminars, where parents of struggling teenagers learn new tools for coping, and the proper relational skills for dealing with their teen. Participants learn from individual and group counseling how to address their own unique situation. You will hear from teenagers who are working through their rebellion, or have successfully struggled through their teen years and become

fantastic and caring adults. Just call us at **903-668-2173** for the next retreat date and more details or visit <http://www.familycrisisconference.com>.

And finally, we've developed various books, tapes and video resources to help parents deal with a struggling teenager and learn from our own experience of working with teens for 30 years. To see these resources online, visit [www.heartlightresources.com](http://www.heartlightresources.com).





- 8 -

## Engage with Your Teen

*One would think it is becoming easier to connect with our teenagers today with all of the newer, faster, and easier ways to communicate. We have chat, e-mail, VOIP, SKYPE, instant messaging, cell phones, text messaging and voicemail. But are they really doing anything to improve your parental communications?*

Lately I was in a conversation where plenty of information was transferred, lips were moving, my ears were working, but there really wasn't a connection. I asked a young teenager in our [Heartlight](#) residential counseling program how she was doing. It was a simple question in passing, and I expected a simple answer. Instead, the young lady proceeded to tell me everything about herself, everything she ever did, everything she ever accomplished, everywhere she had ever traveled and every talent she had.

She reported how she could play the guitar, the cello, the violin, the piano, the harp, the drums, the trumpet, the bass guitar, the flute, the clarinet, and the tuba. She told me about all the things she likes to do, and all the things she doesn't like to do. She talked about how she is a swimmer, a gymnast, a dancer, an equestrian, a pianist, a volleyball queen, and a lacrosse player.

She "shared" how she was homecoming queen, the "most likely to succeed" in her class, winter ball queen, spring fling queen, and strawberry festival queen. She told me what she wanted to be, and what she did not want to be. She told me all her hopes and dreams, and all her disappointments and failures in one breathless dissertation.

You get the picture, right? All I did was ask her how she was doing! She responded like a Chatty doll on steroids, an energy bunny with a mouth instead of a drum — one that kept on going, never stopping to hear a response or to ask me anything.

I quickly realized that this one-way “conversation” was a desperate cover-up of what was going on inside her. She wanted me to know she is worth something and she plead her case based on her accomplishments.

I was saddened because I could see that this young lady really wanted to participate in a meaningful discussion, but the more she talked about herself and her achievements, the more she hid what was really on her mind. She did well at talking, but failed completely at connecting and communicating. It was like a one-way sales pitch without the closer.

When she took a breath, I finally got a chance to wedge in a better question that might open a real dialogue. Her demeanor completely changed when I asked, “What’s been the most difficult thing that has happened in your life?” Her chattering stopped, her eyes whelped up with tears, and she replied, “When my Dad died and I felt all alone.”

Suddenly, there was silence. I stood looking at her for a few seconds and instead of trying to come up with the right words to say, I just gave her a hug. She wanted to talk, but I encouraged her, “Hey, hey, hey....you don’t need to say anything.” Her mother, also standing by, began to talk in an attempt to ease the awkwardness of the situation. I quietly motioned and said to her mom, “Shhhhh....we’re communicating.”

Finally, a real connection was made. Finally, we could talk about the most important things in her life — her real self, not just her accomplishments.

The point is this . . . talking with or to your teenager does not necessarily mean you’re communicating. In fact, too much talk can actually cover up what really needs to be said. Sometimes the most important connection with your teen can happen with very few words.

Are you looking for ways to really connect with your teen’s deepest hopes, concerns and fears; or is the mode of communication between the two of you an endless stream of superficial words? I encourage you to stop the chatter, look for issues that need to be dealt with under the surface, and connect with your teen in a truly meaningful way.

While teens have more ways to communicate than ever before, they are increasingly failing to “connect” in their relationships. Relationships become more shallow than they could have been if more time were spent sharing thoughts and ideas, and having discussion face-to-face.

Young people today seem to rely more on text-messaging, instant messaging, e-mailing, and their own web pages to communicate. I've even watched teens sit in the same room and send one another text messages without ever stopping to talk to one another face to face. And I've observed the effect on teens who are "dumping" more and listening to each other less.

My point is that while there is value in all these new creative communications toys, they may preclude the development of some valuable old communications tools that are a useful part of growing up. In a culture that nurtures self-expression, mostly relying on these devices to communicate creates a terrible habit of conversation that is shallow and one that encourages self-expression stretched to unimaginable limits.

I have always viewed e-mail and blogging as a complement to how I already communicate. But I do not use it as my only way to communicate. I by far spend the majority of my time communicating one-on-one. That emphasis on honesty and face-to-face dialogue is what we need to get across to our teens.

For parents, I recommend this . . . help your teen learn to communicate by truly connecting one-on-one with others in their world. Ask them to give their digital communications a rest for a period of time so they can catch up with their friends on a deeper level. Teach your teen to be consistent in how they represent themselves, keeping it real, both online and in person. And put daily limits on the amount of time your teen participates in online social networking. Instead, find ways to encourage every form of real-life social interaction.

*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*

*-- Proverbs 25:11 (NIV)*

### **Offer Constructive Feedback**

Constructive feedback can light the way for the most positive and rewarding moments in parenting teens. Well-timed, well-worded feedback is a powerful tool in the parental tool box that can help encourage good decisions and shore up wobbly relationships. The key to helping your teen benefit from positive feedback is to deliver it at the right moment, in the right way, and with the right motives. Here's my blueprint for constructive feedback:

#### ***Constructive Feedback is...***

**Focused** - Talk about behavior and choices, not their person. Give feedback regarding their actions, not their character.

**Helpful** – Positive feedback should be designed to serve the needs of the person receiving it; not the person giving it.

**Relevant** – Provide guidance for the things that your teen can do something about.

**Best When Solicited** – Feedback is best heard when it is given in response to an invitation by the teen to share your opinion or counsel.

**Immediate** – Give positive support at the earliest opportunity following good decision-making.

**Unassuming** – Take the “why” out of the conversation and don’t double-guess their motivations. Instead, focus on “what” happened.

**Authentic** – Constructive feedback is accomplished best in a relationship built on concern for the teenager’s welfare, not on parental convenience or to protect the family image.

### ***Constructive Feedback Is NOT...***

**Forced** – Wait to be invited before offering feedback. Otherwise, it will sound like a lecture and fall on deaf ears.

**Overloaded** – Offer feedback in small bites. Instead of telling your teen everything you think they need to hear to fix every problem, limit the information to what they can most readily use today. If you find this difficult, you are probably seeking to satisfy your own needs, not your teen’s.

**Threatening** - There should be no mixed messages or hidden threats in giving constructive feedback. If you are unsure of how your teen is receiving the message, ask him to rephrase what you’ve said to make sure it is clear.

It isn’t always possible to deliver constructive feedback wrapped up in neat little packages. Just be sure your discussion doesn’t get out of hand or turn into a cycle of negativity. And it will probably be necessary to repeat or reinforce the message several times before your teen will clearly understand what you are saying. That just goes with the territory.

You may consider your feedback successful when you are sure it is understood exactly as you meant it (for their own good). Whether or not they heed the advice is another matter altogether. But I’ve found that over time, such feedback will begin to take hold in the life of the teen, especially if the advice leans more toward the positive than the negative.





- 9 -

## Confront Inappropriate Behavior

**T**hirty years ago, a pastor of the church I worked for asked me, “Mark, do you see every person in this room?” I knew there was a lesson coming. He then said something that has been with me every since. He said, “Each person here feels like they’re carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.” You might not think that too profound. Over the years I have learned that his comment was utterly profound. I think it especially applies to teenagers.

Parents do a wonderful job of teaching and encouraging their kids with uplifting words and rewards for participation in every activity. You tell him them they are great, brag on them in conversations and post their photo in your Christmas cards. Then your child reaches the teen years, and things begin to look a little different.

Life for any teenager can be a tough time, and even more difficult when parents begin making greater demands that force the teen to begin taking more and more responsibility for himself.

Suddenly, it seems the weight of the world is on their shoulders. Classes get harder. The pond just got bigger and he or she just got smaller. Their social world gets divided and distributed. They are too old to ride a bike and too young to drive a car. The lessons you taught them are harder to apply than first thought. Their accomplishments are dissipated into an overwhelming number of other kids who have accomplished the same, and perhaps more.

You might begin to see that the pain of growing up makes your teenager behave more selfishly. It might make them angry because they are getting less of what they wanted in life, and more of what they didn’t want. They may take to “spewing” at you because there is no one else who will take it. They hurt because it’s harder than they thought. Sometimes they retreat to a virtual world of games, hide in their room, or just crawl inside their own depression. They may associate with a new

group of kids that look like “losers” because they find that those losers feel the same way.

They might feel stuck, frustrated, and begin to lose motivation. They might begin to use words that you only see on public bathroom walls. They might express themselves in ways you would have never expected. It’s a tough time. But it’s the right time for you to help them through it so you aren’t left dealing with a prodigal at 18 or 25.

### **If Your Teenager is Out of Control**

It is difficult to know what to do and how to react when your teen reaches new lows in disobedience, dishonesty, and disrespect, and chooses every wrong thing.

Begin to address problems by taking time to understand your teen’s battles. Try to understand how tough life seems, and move toward them in compassion, not anger for the outward appearances of their struggle.

Then, decide what you will and won’t do to help them get to the place they want to be. If counseling is needed, get it. If medical issues arise, see a doctor. If there are academic issues surrounded by learning disabilities, get help. If it’s a discipline issue, take the following steps to send the message, “We’re not going to live like this anymore.”

#### **1. Set the Stage**

When there’s a lull in the battle, share with your child that you’d like to have a conversation later in the week about how things are going. Don’t give them any more information than just that. Just tell them that you’d like to wait, and talk about it when you get together. This will help them understand the serious nature of what you’re requesting. They’ll know something is “up”. They may begin to think about things they haven’t up until now, because you’ve never asked this of them before.

When you get together later in the week, make sure it’s just one-on-one. This is not the time to have two parents meeting with one child. Scripture admonishes us to settle conflict by going to the person alone first; we should do the same with our child.

#### **2. Have the Talk**

At the meeting, tell your teen that you know it is a tough age for them. I would encourage you not to share all the details of why you know it’s a tough time. You’ll

come up short, or say something “wrong,” or say too much and take away from the real point of the discussion. Just tell him you know it’s a tough age.

Share with them how their behavior makes you feel. I’ve found you can never really change a person’s feelings, so expressing your own gives them something that they cannot really argue or dispute. You feel the way you do for whatever reason.

If accusations come up about your own failures, admit them. Agreeing with your child about your failures pulls the fuse out of his firecracker. It can no longer be used as ammunition. In addition, admitting your own wrongdoing provides an amazing example to your child of what you might want to see them do one day...admit when they are wrong. They never will if you never do.

Tell them that from now on there are three rules for your home: Respect. Honesty. Obedience. In that order.

Share your heart. “Son, there’s some things that have to change....some things that have to stop, and some new things need to happen.” Or, “Sweetheart, things can’t continue the way they are.” The overall message is, “There are going to be some changes in the way that we operate from now on.”

### **Feel free to use these helps that let them know change is inevitable:**

*“I can’t allow for the following behavior to happen anymore.”*

*“Beginning now life will be different in our household.”*

*“Yelling at your mother has to stop. It is disrespectful and I can’t allow anyone to speak to my wife that way.”*

*“We have some new rules about money, chores, and helping around the house.”*

*“You may not demand everything all the time.”*

*“We will no longer do “these things” (laundry, driving you everywhere, paying for everything, cooking every meal, and jumping every time you say ‘frog’).”*

*“Your cussing must stop. Your younger brothers and sisters are being affected.”*

*“Our home will be safe for everyone. You cannot get physical or be threatening. If you do, we will call the police.”*

*“We will come to agreement about the way you dress.”*

*“You’re on the computer quite a bit, and it’s keeping you from interacting with others. We’re going to limit its use.”*



*“I love cell phones, but you have to turn it off during meals, after 10:00 pm, and when we’re having a discussion.”*

*“When you get your car next year, and I’ll put up the same amount of money that you give for its purchase, you’ll have to pay for gas or insurance”. (This is for future use. You’re saying it now to help get their expectations in order.)*

Hopefully you understand what I’m proposing. You are detailing what you would like to see in your home and what you want to be different. You are lining out expectations, changing the rules of the game, establishing boundaries, developing new rules of engagement, and giving definition to acceptable and unacceptable behavior for your home.

### **3. Lay Out the Consequences**

This is also the time to identify and express the consequences. Then, when it comes time to enforce the consequences, your child already knows what to expect.

Here are a few helpful bits of wisdom that I’ve found are essential as you change the laws of your home, and move into new territory. Know which battles you want to fight, and which ones you can let go. Don’t try to correct everything at once. Don’t keep hounding your child to change everything all at once.

Tell them that you owe them nothing, but want to give them everything. It’s a message that bears repeating to the point that he can say it back to you. Plan for special times where the only boundary for the time together is “no sermons and no cell phones.” You don’t preach, and the teen won’t talk or text on the phone.

And surprise your teen occasionally by bringing them the computer game or CD that they’ve always wanted. Not because it was demanded, but because you know it was wanted. It’s a lot easier to require something of them when they know that you are willing to also give to them.

To the harshest of situations, approach with humility, but carry that “big stick” of parental authority. If you just don’t know what to do, then don’t lean on your own understanding. Find help from others who have been there. Let your teenager know that you will stop at nothing to prevent them from heading in the wrong direction.

### **What About Sexual Confusion?**

Today’s teens are influenced by a culture that, in many ways, fosters great confusion about sexual identity. Kids are encouraged by their idols and classmates to act on their feelings, and “anything goes.” Teens doing whatever they want,

along with a newfound acceptance and outright promotion of homosexual lifestyles, culminate in confusion for even well-schooled Christian teens.

This is a tough issue, but Christian parents tell me more and more, “We were shocked to read some of our daughter’s e-mails and find that she is calling herself a lesbian and has a “girlfriend.” Initially we thought it was just some sort of joke, but we have found out it is true. We’re devastated! And the girl she’s ‘involved with’ is a girl that we’ve known for years. We are good friends with her parents and they go to our church. What are we supposed to do? We feel helpless and lost. I don’t think we could hear worse news.”

First, while such news is shocking and needs to be dealt with, let’s give this some perspective. Let me assure you that you could hear worse news. For instance, as I wrote this I had just received news that my friend’s teenage son backed the family car over his little sister — and she died. You probably heard about it in the news. The terrible loss of a five-year-old adopted daughter because of a simple teenage mistake is worse news. So, you have to keep things in perspective. I know many families who would have given anything to have their daughter back, to struggle through some sexual identity issues, had she lived that long.

Whatever your daughter is going through, the fact that she is alive and that you have raised her in a Christian environment brings about a different perspective. Just because she’s making bad decisions right now and being deceitful doesn’t mean she is any less precious to God, nor that she will continue in those activities forever. She is still worthy of someone throwing her a “lifeline” in her time of need. You may not agree with her decisions or her current choice of lifestyle, but I pray that you would never lose your love for her, or your willingness to pursue your relationship with her in the midst of her struggle.

Some Christian parents simply abandon a teen that’s dabbling with same-sex relationships. This is probably because the situation feels so foreign to them. They cannot believe their daughter would choose such a path. But when parents allow their daughter’s offensive choices to push them away, they lose the opportunity to speak the truth into her life at a time when she needs it most.

Who else will be there for her when her life begins to fall apart? And it will! Parents must become comfortable with being uncomfortable, and not allow their daughter’s sinful activities, no matter how distasteful they are, to put up a wall between them and their child. She happens to be a precious child of God making some wrong decisions, just like all of us have at one time or another.

## Keep From Labeling

Consider this. Discovering same-sex activity by your daughter doesn't mean she is an avowed homosexual. Today's teen culture encourages same-sex interactions without calling it "homosexual." It is more of an experimental mode than a lifestyle at this point. So, don't blow up and label your child a "homosexual," or that label could stick!

On the other hand, letting your daughter have her way and waiting to see where she ends up will be damaging for her in the long run. Doing nothing only allows her to sink deeper into a lifestyle that God warns against. That's because He loves us and He really doesn't want us to end up in a bad place.

## Understanding Same-Sex Motivations

From the kids I've counseled I've learned that a teen will move toward same sex relationships for a number of reasons:

1. **Abuse:** There might be confusion over their sexual identity because of prior sexual abuse. You may or may not be aware of the damage, but it would be in your child's best interest for you to find out.
2. **Isolation:** Girls sometimes move into a same sex relationship because they aren't given the opportunity to "like" anything else. I have seen numerous times where parents limit or forbid their daughter to date or develop any type of relationship with a young man, which results in their daughter's unfulfilled longings to connect directed toward girl friends. In the current permissive culture, teens are no longer discouraged in forming this type of relationship.
3. **Fad:** Same sex relationships are currently a fad; and some girls want to experiment. A few years ago three popular music stars named Britney, Christina and Madonna kissed one another on MTV. The ripple effect of their behavior sent a message to teen girls; "this type of display is acceptable." Easily influenced or inquisitive young girls may be curious...and try it.
4. **Individuality:** And then there are those girls that just want to be different. A same-sex relationship is a way to be different, so they shock those around them with their new "look how much I'm different" mentality and behavior. Teens want to be known for something. They want recognition. They want to be different. And they want to make their own decisions. I've always thought that same-sex relationships is an awfully drastic way to stand out, not only because it is immoral, but because most girls don't realize the ripple effects of such a choice will follow them throughout their high school years and even into college.

I would never justify or give license for same-sex relationships. My observations of potential causes and motivations are shared with a hope that parents will gain a deeper understanding of why a daughter might choose this path. Having a better understanding will “flavor” a parent’s approach, keeping a positive outcome in mind, rather than pushing a child away and deeper into the unhealthy relationship.

High school social scenes don’t allow for changes in how a person is perceived to happen as quickly as some girls would like. So they get stuck in the role they have constructed for themselves. This issue becomes particularly important when a girl is trying to break out of the mold.

A parent can help a daughter, if she is willing and wanting to make a clean break, by allowing her to live away from her current scene, with relatives or at a place like [Heartlight](#). Or they may move to another town, or help the girl graduate early or with a G.E.D., so she can start a new life without the baggage of high school perceptions.

Here’s my encouragement...kids raised in Christian homes know what is right and what is wrong. The seeds sown by godly parents into the life of a daughter don’t just all of a sudden die because she states that she doesn’t believe them any more. Those seeds are still there, still germinating, growing, and still waiting to be nourished. And they will continue to be an influence....just as God has promised.

Remember, for teens, violation of your family policies means automatic invasion of their privacy, until you are sure you know the whole truth. While it is important to trust your teen, if you suspect something is happening and the warning signs are there, action is required. Adolescents are capable of making poor choices, being deceived, and easily influenced in ways that could unravel your family forever.

Before you jump to wrong conclusions about your teen’s inappropriate relationships, including same-sex relationships, investigate your suspicions. Talk to teachers and school officials for their observations. Read your teen’s text messages and e-mails and view Internet activity and MySpace or Facebook pages. Listen for what you would normally miss in conversations.

Once you are sure of your child’s inappropriate involvement, let that truth sink in to your mind and heart for a few days before acting to deal with it. Don’t feel like you have to tackle the issue the minute you find out. Pray and seek wise counsel in order to gain more understanding, and move into a mindset for dealing with the problem appropriately. Patience will keep you from saying things you regret, or acting in ways that do more damage than good. Take your time, and trust that God will give you His direction as you walk along the path of this conflict. He’s doesn’t

always give you an immediate answer, but He promises to not leave you while you are in the process.

Keep in mind that in today's culture, teens see nothing wrong with all sorts of sexual behavior that parents would deem inappropriate or immoral. And that includes kids in Christian schools. You certainly don't have to go along with it, but understanding why it might happen will help provide the right perspective during the correction process. In other words, don't automatically think your child has become a reprobate. It may just be a phase she is going through, or it may be because of a loss in the teen's life or her way of getting back at you for a breakdown in your relationship.

In any event, the issue needs to be confronted, and the sooner the better. When you are ready and have the evidence you need, I suggest you set up a series of three meetings for the purpose of exposure, expression, and for discussion of your expectations. Don't talk about everything in one sitting. These three meetings could take place over the course of a single day, or a few weeks. Whichever you choose, stick to the plan, and don't let your child's negative responses undermine the purposes for each meeting.

### **Meeting One: Exposure**

The first meeting is to expose what you know, reveal what you have been told, and talk about what you believe is happening. If both parents are present, then I'd encourage just one person to take the lead. Some of the following statements might help give you some direction:

*"Sarah, we have reason to believe that your relationship with a boy has moved into an unhealthy one."*

*"Mark, we want to talk about the inappropriate sites you've been visiting on the internet and what you've posted on your MySpace page."*

*"Kim, we've been told that your relationship with another girl has moved from friendship to a physical involvement."*

Exposing the fact that you know what is going on will hopefully engage her thinking in new ways. It might be the wake-up call your teen needs, or it might open a Pandora's Box full of problems. Whatever the response, let your teen think about it and tell her that you want to get back together in a couple of days to talk again. Tell her "I want you to think about what's going on, and we want to share what we feel and think. But let's do this in a couple of days."

Revealing what you know begins the process of your teen realizing the truth is known and it won't be ignored. Your child may respond in a number of ways. She might get mad as she realizes that her scheme to keep you out of the loop isn't working. She might feel betrayed by friends or teachers. She may get depressed, run out in embarrassment, act out in anger, or simply deny it all. She might hide in her room in shame. Who knows?

Whatever the response, and whether she is yelling at you or sulking in her room, don't be afraid to let her know of your love, your commitment, and your willingness to continue to be a part of her life. That may be conveyed in words, whether written or spoken, a slip of a note under her door, a letter stuck in her notebook, a text message sent to her after a couple of hours. There just needs to be some type of affirmation of your love for your boy or girl.

*"Sweetheart, I want you to know that I love you just as much today as the day we brought you home into our family."*

*"John, your dad and I are happy that we get to put things on the table and discuss where you are in your thinking."*

*"Molly, we're not going to stop loving you and want you to know that we will never allow anyone to take you to a place that you really don't want to be."*

*"Randy, we love you."*

Anytime a teen is caught, or their misbehavior is exposed; their greatest fear is that they will no longer be loved. Saying these things, even if the response from the teen is negative, is an affirmation of your loving relationship. At this point, your child needs reassurance, especially as you move through the process of helping them make healthier decisions.

### **Meeting Two: Expression**

This meeting is the time to share how you feel about the inappropriate relationships. Your comments might be similar to these comments:

*"Suzie, we want you to know that we're not in favor of this relationship and feel like it's wrong. And it's wrong because it will take you to a place where you don't want to end up. Your future family will look so different than what we know that you want."*

*"Joe, we can't allow this to happen. It is against what we believe for you, what we want for you, and what we think you want for yourself."*

*“Amber, you know this isn’t right and we want to help you any way we know how, but there is no way that we can be supportive of this relationship.”*

*“Melissa, we love you, and love you enough to not allow you to walk down this path with our support. We will have to stand for what we believe to be right; just as you are standing to believe what you think is right.”*

This is the time to bring your feelings to the table, and hopefully, she’ll bring hers. When you begin to share your heart with your child, I would encourage you not to preach or quote scripture. She already knows it. You raised her in it, and you live it. Scripture can be reflected in your comments without having to quote chapter and verse. Your beliefs can be communicated without quizzing her with comments like, “You know what scripture says.....”, or “What you are doing goes against God.” While theses may be truthful, they may not be appropriate for this moment. Trust the Holy Spirit to impress these truths into your daughter’s thinking. Try to draw your daughter into more discussion, without shaming or condemning. Be truthful and loving, and lead the conversation in a way that leads her to repentance and restoration; not in a way that drives her away feeling belittled.

### **Meeting Three: Expectations**

Meet again for the purpose of sharing your expectations for this situation. I implore you to receive godly counsel before you enter this meeting, as the directives you give during this time carry great importance. This is a difficult discussion where you detail what you are going to do or not do, and how you are going to deal with the problem. You’ll notice the escalating intensity of your message:

*“Alison, we can’t allow this relationship to continue, so we’re either going to ask you to control it and stay away from “x” or we’ll have to put some controls around you to protect you. We want you to meet with a counselor to talk about all of this, and make sure you don’t head in a direction that is going to eventually hurt you.”*

*“Karl, your mom and I can’t allow you to go back to the same school because we feel you can’t break away from “x.” It seems like he/she’s controlling you and you can’t think on your own.”*

*“Karen, we’ve tried counseling, taking things away from you, pleading with you, and hoping that things would turn, but it just doesn’t seem to be happening. We’ve decided to have you go to a place where you can be protected and can also receive some help to get through this craziness.”*

*“Meg, you and I are going to get away for a while to talk, and spend some time thinking through all that’s been going on in your life. I want you to plan on being*

*gone a month. This means no cell phones and no contact with anyone back home except Dad and your sisters.”*

*“Jimmy, we love you. But we don’t support what you’re doing with “x” and if it continues, you’ll not longer be able to live at home. We don’t allow living here and not adhering to our rules, beliefs, and principles. You’re almost 18 and we can’t make you do what you don’t want to do. But we won’t support this. As long as it continues, we will not support you at college, we won’t pay for tuition, and we won’t give you money for living expenses. You’ll be on your own.” This isn’t our choice, but it is your choice by not supporting what we’re asking of you as long as you’re in our home. We can’t support your lifestyle as your choices will only lead you to ruin, and we won’t have a part of them.”*

This is the time to state exactly what you will and won’t do. You can tell from the volatility of the discussion why it is vital you seek counsel before implementing any new rules. I always suggest a strong response to this particular problem, as I truly believe that it demands one.

When you pose a strong response, be ready for a strong reaction. Your refusal to support what your teen is doing means they won’t receive your full support while continuing to live a life that you disagree with. If they decide to leave home and live with a boyfriend or girlfriend, then still invite your child over for family dinner, birthdays, and holidays, outside the influence of unhealthy friends or inappropriate relationships.

During this difficult time, I also encourage you to surround yourself with like-minded parents, and engage your close family friends in this process. Ask your teen’s friends to talk with him or her and share their concerns as well. The purpose in surrounding yourself with support and using friends to help carry the right message is to counterbalance the secrecy your teen has built into their life, and undermine the time spent with no healthy input. Parents in this situation also need fellowship with other believers who are willing to listen, and help carry the burden without judging.

### **Confronting the Spoiled Prodigal**

In a world where parents indulge their kids with everything they want, it would seem that these kids would be especially grateful. Instead, a generation has become selfish, self-centered, and unprepared for real life.

A dictionary definition of a “prodigal” is “one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly.” You may think your teenager is acting like a prodigal these days, but



have you considered that according to this definition, you may be the prodigal yourself?

Many parents lavishly and foolishly give material things to their kids. Some say it is their “right” to spoil their kids — and there is truth to that. The truth is not as much regarding the parent’s rights, but that, yes, it will spoil their kids. Unbridled spending on kids can lead to selfish attitudes and feelings of entitlement on the part of the teen. And such kids are in for a rude awakening when real life comes calling.

Sometimes a parent is being extra generous out of an “I’m giving my child what I lacked as a child” attitude. Or, perhaps the gifts are being used as leverage to improve the attitudes and cooperation of the teenager. In either case, the kids on the receiving end can become pretty comfortable with such generosity. It can lead to immaturity, irresponsibility, selfishness and a hard time understanding finances and the obligations of real life when they become adults. In other words, spoiled kids later become spoiled adults.

I know it’s tough for loving parents to limit their giving of material things to their children, especially when they have it to give. But they may want to keep it in check to prevent the kind of damage that I see every day in some of the teens who are sent to our Heartlight residential program. For them it can take months of therapy and doing without material things to bring them back down to earth.

The biblical story of the Prodigal in Luke 15 wonderfully illustrates such a turnabout in thinking for a pampered, selfish child who suddenly faced the realities of life.

In Luke 15:12 the son in the story says, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” For whatever reason, this young man had a “give me” sense of entitlement that was pretty demanding. It was probably because he never had a need for anything for as long as he had lived. The family was obviously wealthy.

So, as was the custom in those days, the father went ahead and gave him his portion of the estate. The son gleefully took it all and moved away. But he had soon spent his entire inheritance, all of it, on riotous living. What a great lesson in finance! Though he was given so much, he lost it all in a very short period of time.

Then, half-starved and thinking that his gold digger friends would help him out in his time of need, he found out differently. In Luke 15:16 it says, “...but no one gave him anything.” Whether they were acting as selfish as he was, or just fed up with him, their denials told him that he needed to do something different from now on, or else he wouldn’t survive. The very next verse brings it all home.

In Luke 15:17 it says, "...he came to his senses..." He saw the light. When the money ran out and everyone stopped feeding this young man's foolishness, he faced some pretty important decisions in his life. It helped him realize his predicament and he quickly discovered what life is all about, perhaps for the very first time.

The point is...it took a very traumatic experience for him to come to his senses. Before he could get past his prodigal mindset, he had to hit rock bottom. Then he finally began thinking more clearly about finances and about the basic necessities of life.

Could you be the one responsible for your own teen becoming a prodigal? Moreover, could you be the one acting like a prodigal yourself? You are if you are catering to your teen's every financial want or need without teaching them the value of work and how to wisely manage their own money. Perhaps it's time to take a look at your finances and begin to limit your giving to your teen, before it contributes to them becoming a prodigal.

By the way, a good way to counteract selfishness and financial foolishness in a teen is to teach them to give of themselves and a portion of their finances to others who are in need. Take them down to the local mission to volunteer in the food line. Require that they help an elderly friend or a shut-in neighbor once a week. Take them on a short-term mission trip to a place in the world where kids have nothing. When they interact with others who are helpless and in desperate need, they soon realize (without having to hit rock bottom themselves), how important it is to manage their own life and their money.

If you're an adult prodigal, you may want to shift gears to lavish upon your kids **every good thing** they need in life, not **everything** they want. One good thing they desperately need is to learn how to make money and manage finances on their own. They'll have to go without all the goodies you've financed in the past, but it's a lesson they'll thank you for one day.

### **Parenting Teens with Grace**

When a teenager's behavior is way out of line, when he or she crosses established boundaries and offends us and makes us angry, it is easy to think he or she doesn't deserve grace. But that may be exactly the right time to give it.

Grace – given at just the right moment – has the power to change the direction of any struggle, and may ultimately bring it to an end. Grace can bring healing, restoration, and redirect your teen's path.

A biblical definition of grace is this: *God's undeserved favor and forgiveness when we've chosen the unforgivable*. In human terms, grace is an act of kindness, love, and forgiveness in the face of bad behavior or poor choices. For your teen, it can even extend to outright rebellion and rotten attitudes.

I recently worked with a teen who rarely received grace at home. He was angry, all the time, and spewed anger on everyone and everything around him, including the side of my van. Instead of having him arrested for bashing my vehicle with a baseball bat, I sat him down and told him he was forgiven, he wouldn't be arrested, and that we were going to work things out differently from now on.

As we began to talk, tears came to his eyes. He had never experienced that kind of forgiveness in the face of his anger, and he couldn't believe I didn't have the police waiting to take him to jail. Giving him grace, at just the right moment, went a long way to change the direction he was headed, and in the end, after a lot of work, he successfully completed the Heartlight program.

### ***Grace When it is Least Deserved***

How do you know exactly the right time to extend grace? How about when it's least deserved? I guess that's how you'll know it is grace – because it won't feel good – in fact, it may be enough to put you in a really bad mood. I didn't enjoy having a smashed-in van. I didn't like having to pay for the repairs. But that's the nature of grace. It doesn't feel good when you're giving it, it's costly, but you are never more like Christ than when you offer it.

As believers, we should understand grace-giving. After all, didn't God love us so much that while we were sinners He sent His Son to die for us? He took our place for the penalty of sin. That kind of grace didn't come easily, but we can learn from it and imitate it.

### ***Grace is Not Meant to Enable Bad Behavior***

Seeking grace in parenting doesn't mean we allow bad behavior to continue unchecked. That's not grace. That's enabling or empowering our child to keep up their bad behavior without fear of consequences. As I've talked about many times, the pain of consequences is what causes all of us to take notice of our bad behavior – so we make a change. Some say that pain is a terrible part of God's creation, but the fact is, without it we'd never change. Pain keeps us in check and tells us when something is wrong.

### ***Grace Can be Misunderstood by Others***

The biblical story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-22) is a good illustration of a father who extended grace without enabling. It wasn't easy to see his son leave, and as the story goes, the son only came to his senses when he had wasted all of his inheritance and hit bottom. The father still welcomed him back into the family, but to our knowledge, he didn't offer the son more money or enable him to go back to an unfruitful lifestyle.

But giving grace isn't always popular. Remember the sibling in the story – the good son? He questioned his father's decision to extend grace to his prodigal brother. After all, he had stayed behind to help the family while the prodigal was off seeking pleasure. Even though the decision was unpopular, the father gave grace and most likely did so not just because his son returned, but because he wisely saw that his son had finally come to his senses.

***Remember, Giving Grace is...***

Most often needed when it is least deserved

Doesn't directly benefit the giver

Can be misunderstood by others

Doesn't enable bad behavior to continue

Is best when it is offered at just the right time

Comes from a desire for a new direction, understanding your child's heart, and his need to be restored.

We are never more like Christ than when we give our teen grace in the face of a struggle. And, giving grace when it surely is not deserved may change the direction of the struggle, or even bring it to an end.

Have you ever asked yourself, "What on earth does God have in mind by allowing both me and my teen to struggle so?"

I often see Christians who believe that parenting according to scriptural values, taking their kids to church every time the doors are open, and promoting family togetherness means that all will be well in the teenage years. Like buying an insurance plan, they think that doing the right things will bring about the right result.

Let me tell you, based on years of experience with struggling teens and their parents, that this thinking is just plain wrong. Never assume that applying a continuous moral or religious presence in your child's life will in itself bring about a

perfect transition from childhood to adulthood. It can help and should be encouraged, but it is no guarantee. The often quoted scripture “train up a child in the way he should go” says nothing about the turbulent teenage years. In fact, you’ll want to remember that some biblical characters with seemingly perfect spiritual upbringings had difficulties themselves in their teenage years.

Stuff happens that is out of our control as parents, and even if we do everything right, stuff still happens. One angelic teenager can lead us to think that we have found the *right formula*, right up until we see our next child go down a completely different path. Welcome to the real world — where God gives each of our children a free will.

And, welcome to the one thing in life over which you have absolutely no control. It may be the first time in your life that you have to lean on God completely. And that’s not all bad.

### **Could this Time Be God’s Challenge to You?**

In the heart of any parenting struggle there is usually more that we can learn. For instance, could God want us to know Him more fully? Could we benefit from a different perspective and have a better understanding of how to help other kids or parents? Could this difficult time reveal areas of our lives that need to change?

The point is, in God’s economy there is always a point to the pain. So allow God to use this time to move you along to a better place or to develop your own character.

Consider Psalm 139:23-24, “Search me oh God, and know my anxious thoughts, and see if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in paths of righteousness.”

In addition, think about Matthew 7:4-5, “How can you say, ‘My friend, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you don’t see the log in your own eye? You’re nothing but show-offs! First, take the log out of your own eye. Then you can see how to take the speck out of your friend’s eye.”

Do you have something that needs attention in your own life at the same time as you seek help for your teen? If so, remember this...it could have lasting benefits that go far beyond this difficult period. You will learn to trust God in a very real way.

- You will learn how to become a good listener — one who waits to be invited.
- You will grow spiritually, become more self-controlled, slower to speak, slower to anger.

- You will realize that God is still dependable, even when everything seems out of control.
- You will learn the extent of God’s great love for you.
- You will develop wisdom that is useful for the next generation in your family.
- Other parents will benefit from watching you handle your struggle in the right way.
- Out of desperation, you will stop faking your faith and make your dependence upon God real.

You see, the struggle is always partly about us, how we handle things and how we seek God’s help in the midst of the storm. It will challenge and sharpen our beliefs and help us confront our fear of losing control. Stated in another way, it will help build our faith and dependence on God’s every provision in our lives.

### **Aim Higher**

Isn’t it somewhat comforting to know that God may have a bigger purpose in it all for both you and your teen? If you believe that, then don’t just focus on your teenager’s struggles at this time. Step in front of a mirror and look for areas in your own life that need to grow, and aim to make those changes with God’s help.

Take a moment right now to think about how God might be using your situation to reveal more about His character, and how that knowledge can help you in turn deal with your struggling teen.



- 10 -

## Rebuild Your Relationship

**W**hat your child wants more than anything else is a strong relationship with you – whether they demonstrate that want or tell you they hate you. By God’s divine guidance, He’s either placed the child in your presence or has allowed you to give birth to this child. There is a master plan in the midst of all of it which sometimes gets lost in the dealing with the struggles and difficulties and the issues. There’s something intentional and there are no mistakes in the midst of it. There’s that need for relationships.

Here are some ways to develop that relationship:

### **1. Spend Time Together**

Of all the advice I swear by, this is one you cannot ignore; Take your child out for breakfast, out for coffee, or do a lunch — and make it a habit every week. Even if they resist, you must insist. It tells your child, “You are worth spending time with, even when you are at your worst.” Make it a one on one time together and come prepared with a topic to discuss that will be of interest to your teen. It doesn’t have to take a lot of time. But it should be consistent.

For their best interest, and no matter how nasty things get, continue to love them and spend time together. Fathers, if you have a daughter, you’ll never spend enough time with your daughter. In any group counseling setting I’ve ever been in, the number one thing daughters request is, “I want more time with my Dad.” Even if you spent 24/7 with your daughter, it would never be enough time. So just know that. Make sure you’re spending plenty of time with them.

### **2. Create Shared Experiences**

Find a challenge for the both of you and pursue it with excitement, resources, time, effort, interest, and vigor. Parents need to spend more time having fun with their child when he or she reaches adolescence. Unfortunately, many organized school and church activities can tend to get in the way of that. I recommend you find a

challenge you both appreciate and pursue it together with excitement. Dedicate some resources, time, effort, interest, and vigor to developing your interest together.

Bike riding, buy a couple of horses, buy some jet skis, buy a boat, go white water rafting. Doesn't have to be Noah's Ark, it can be Billy Bob's barge. It doesn't have to be some Christian thing. Go ride horses in Montana. Those trips are far cheaper than having to enroll your teen in a program like Heartlight. Go do some things that are out of the ordinary. Learn to scuba dive together. Go snorkeling down in the Grand Caymans. Go camping – buy some good camping gear – you can always turn around and sell it. Buy anything used. And then sell it used. You won't lose any money on it. Do something that's different.

You must establish patterns of doing things while you're still working so that these patterns are in place when you retire. It doesn't work to put off things to do until you retire if you haven't been doing them. Take advantage of the time now. Start doing something now that's different. Don't think that you can't learn. Start doing something with your child. Buy tickets to go see something that you can't afford. That's what kids remember when they've grown up and don't live with you any more. You're going to want shared experiences to come back and be the foundation of your relationship.

### **3. Seek Opportunities for Discussion**

Look for opportunities to lead into a discussion where the wisdom of a parent can be communicated along a common focal point. Ask the right kind of questions. The kind of questions that make them think about things, not just a "yes" or "no" questions. Find out what they think, how they would do something, where they would go, and why they think a certain way. Take advantage of reinforcing those moments when a discussion leads to surprising expressions of wisdom from your teen. Talk about controversial subjects as you would a friend or co-worker for whom you have extreme respect. Never belittle their opinions about things. After all, did you know everything when you were a teen?

If you want your teen to grasp what you are thinking, then stop telling him what you are thinking until your are asked for your opinion. Zip your lip – just be quiet. Stop lecturing, start listening. Your teen won't be ready to really listen until he becomes the initiator of a discussion, so just hush and get out of the way of him taking the lead.

There is nothing so demeaning as assuming your child can't think for himself. There is nothing so disrespectful as throwing your child's mistakes back in his face and



condemning him. Keep in mind that I am referring to teenagers here, not your 2-year-old.

So, here is my advice...until you have a better understanding of how to handle it – **JUST SHUT UP!**

I'm not trying to be rude in saying "shut up" (it is a no-no in some households) but I am dead-serious. Just shut up! In case I haven't made myself clear enough, that means, be quiet, stay silent, zip it, don't speak.

Try it for a day, and watch what happens. When your teenager drops a "jewel" on you and says something you feel needs "correcting," just be quiet. Don't flip out, argue, or try to make it right. Just let it go. Stop lecturing, start listening.

You may be surprised to find that:

1. You can't do it! You just can't keep quiet. You are not a good listener, and that listening to your child is an area you need to grow in.
2. Your child has a mind of his own, and is fully able to use it without constantly pointing him in the direction you think he needs to go.
3. Your child wants to talk to you more when you don't verbally beat him down every opportunity you get.
4. Your child has ideas of his own that are different from yours, perhaps he doesn't want what you want, and you need to change your mind about some things.
5. Your child may learn the important lessons in one teachable moment, and you don't need all that other verbal garbage to make your point.

"But Mark," you say, "I can't teach my child what he needs to know by being quiet!"

Yes you can – you can, and most of the time you should, because most of the time, your teen isn't saying anything earth-shattering or profound....he is just processing what's happening in his world.

For those times you need to address an "issue" I recommend trying a different approach. Instead of making your point, try asking a question. Not a rhetorical question either – that's just back-alley lecturing. Asking the right question may help him arrive at the right answer in a way that engages his thinking process and system of beliefs. You may be surprised to find he comes to the right conclusion all on his own.

For example:

I never thought of it that way, what makes you think so?

What do you think will happen if...?

Success in the Shut-up Challenge means you create a space in your relationship with your child by taking a verbal step backwards. This will allow your child to move toward you. Give your child room to ask some questions of his own and come to his own conclusions.

Instead of always pushing to lead the discussion, or to turn it into a one-way lecture, you might just be invited by your teen to participate in the best two-way discussion you've ever had.

#### **4. Develop a Sense of Humor**

Learn to laugh, share the good jokes, lighten up, do some fun things, be impetuous, and smile a little more. Some of us are sour, bitter, and stressed all of the time. Lighten up! When was the last time you really laughed? Try having a joke night – where everyone has to come to dinner with a joke to share. Even if it's corny, everyone laughs! Everyone needs to share a joke so the whole group can laugh.

Find something the kids can laugh about and have fun. Pull some stunts. Create a sense of humor. Have fun. Live it up and enjoy this with your kids in some way. Develop a sense of humor.

#### **5. Share Your Thoughts**

Look for those times that you are invited to share your thoughts...not just throwing out your ideas for the sake of filling silence.

Sometimes it's okay just to sit and watch a movie, go to sleep at night, good night, and it was a relaxing time. Go fishing somewhere. This could be a monumental time in the life of your child – spending time with his Dad and loved it. (Dad may feel the day is wasted, but child has it etched in his memory. Share the thoughts. Kids enjoy it when they just sit around and do nothing with their parent(s), enjoy just sitting back and looking at the stars. Go to an observatory and go look at Saturn. Make that a deal – I want you to see Saturn. Take blankets and go out and see the stars in the middle of the night. You may see a meteor shower. (Turn off all the lights possible). Play music while you're watching the stars and talk about the stars.

That the God of the Heavens even thinks about you is an amazing thing. Start a fire and sleep outside. These are manufactured times and they just don't happen all at

once. Learn a special song and sing to your child in front of an audience. Come up with ideas that you've got to make happen for that special time with your child. Share your thoughts during those times and look for them. Even when they don't want to do it. Build up to it, "when we get home, we're going to do this." Every Sunday is my night and your night. We're going to do something. You don't get to go out with or get to do anything. If you do, we're going to cut off one of your toes. But it ain't going to happen. You have those times for that.

## **6. Offer Opportunities to See You "In Action"**

Take them to work, share your frustrations, hurts, and longings. Enter their world. And always keep an invitation open for them to come into yours.

In some way, they need to see what you do and what you deal with and the frustrations – so that can feel that there's some identity with you at the same time. Tell them how you deal with problems. How you seek God's guidance. How you don't have all the answers.

## **7. Remember the Good in the Past**

Carry a photo of your child as a youngster with you at all times! Post their baby photo on your refrigerator. This way you won't forget who this child was when they turn into an alien in their teens. Keep in mind the joy of bringing them home at birth. Remember, the thumbprint of God is still on their life. Don't dwell solely on their current struggles and difficulties. Thank God for the work He is doing and will do in your child's life.

Don't forget who this child was, who he is, or who he will become. The benchmark is the joy at birth...not at the struggles and difficulties.

Get an image of your child, say at age 2. Your child is the same image when you brought them home or if you adopted them. When you got them there and you looked at them and said this is an unbelievable baby – it's the same child. And they're made up the same and they're the same purpose they were created for that day. It may be covered up with stuff, but it's the same one. If you keep that in mind, whatever circumstances there are surrounding the child, it is there for a reason. So it's really a coming along side rather than a standing in front of or always having to feel behind. It is being with them at those times.

Seek right things for the right reasons, confront with calmness, and correct with firmness...with a love that seeks their best interest.

## 8. Provide a Place of Rest

Too many times parents become a place of added burden or hardship, or an extra “measure” of correction, when correcting, and a life of training, has already been done. Moms have the tendency to do the “Energizer bunny” communication that just keeps on going. And dads have that tendency to tune out when communication is most needed.

Moms, your over-correcting does not provide the rest your child needs. And dad, your refusal to speak up does not restore. What is crucial for your child is the balance of the mom and dad mix, which will result in that place of rest.

But to achieve this balance, it is important for us as parents to transition with our children, to change our style of communication. If we can successfully make this transition, then the day when our children begin to struggle or have difficulties and desperately need someone to talk to we are the ones they will turn to.

## 9. Offer Them Respect

Easy to say, and sometimes tough to do. It’s basically putting your child first and showing them respect, even as you demand that of them. This should affect the way you speak to them (you wouldn’t yell at, belittle, or talk down to someone you respect), the way you discipline, the way you show grace and the way you respond when you are disappointed and upset.

Relationships thrive in settings where everyone agrees that nobody is perfect. Unconditional love is fundamental for building healthy relationships with teenage children who will test their parents and their rules in every possible way. When they do, a busy, stressed-out parent can often react in ways that don’t always convey unconditional love.

If that sounds like you, maybe you need to work on mending your relationship before it is destroyed altogether. Consider implementing some of these bridge-builders:

### **Most of All, Don’t Wait!**

You may wonder what the best timing is for building good lines of communication with your teen or pre-teen. **That’s simple. Do it NOW, before problems, struggles and difficulties begin. And never stop working at it, even when there is conflict.**

As your children move from the elementary years into early adolescence, it’s essential that you adapt your style of communication to the changes taking place with your child. What was non-hormonal, now becomes laced with hormones.

Total dependence moves closer to independence, and that affects how your teen interacts with you. Unless you change with them, there will be conflict and broken communications.

There is a scripture that I believe accurately reflects the condition of most teens, and the “should-be” role of most parents. It’s when Jesus says, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden (the condition of the teens part), and I will give you rest for your soul” (the parent’s part).

The hope is that we, as parents, become that place of rest for our kids a place where they might be restored. Remember, relationships thrive when unconditional love is delivered across a bridge of friendship that never stops — even if your teen doesn’t respond or goes on making mistakes.

-----  
*Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love:  
therefore with loving-kindness have I drawn thee. --Jeremiah 31:3*  
-----



## CLOSING

**W**hen you're struggling with a wayward teenager, everything you've planned and hoped for in the child's life appears to be fading away. In essence, you feel like a failure.

It is common for such parents to have sleepless nights...finger-pointing arguments...tears...and stress far beyond what they've ever experienced before. The energetic little boy who was so fun...or the sweet little girl who used to be full of hugs...has become someone totally different, and is teetering on the edge of disaster. It's enough to make you lose all hope.

Over the past 30 years, my wife Jan and I have spent countless hours with teens and their parents, and we've seen God do some incredible, amazing things. And what I have learned is this: Because God is faithful, there is hope. There is hope for your teen...and there is hope for your family...no matter how desperate the situation may seem.

First of all, hope can be found by focusing on God's promises and seeking support from other caring believers. Search God's Word and let it speak hope into your life. Get into a small group of other parents going through something similar to what you're experiencing. There's nothing like having a crowd of people around you who are in the same boat trying to bail. Many times, people get involved in small groups just to talk. I would encourage you to get into a small group so you can also listen. When all you know to do isn't working, the counsel of others might spark some new ideas or directions with your teen. There is wisdom and comfort in the presence of many.

Second, hope can be found by pinpointing possible underlying triggers of the problem. You see, good kids generally don't make bad choices or hang out with the wrong crowd unless something else is bothering them. Knowing what those triggers may be — usually a loss or damage in their life of some sort — can help you better understand why your teen is acting the way they do. This isn't to justify the

behavior, but to better understand it. Pinpointing the cause of the struggle will help you realize that your teen isn't necessarily *choosing* a lifestyle or turning away from you or your values at this point. They are simply responding to or covering up the hurts that they feel by grasping onto new things that their culture says will bring them joy, pleasure and satisfaction.

Third, hope can be found by tightening the boundaries. Just because someone is lost, hurt, or damaged doesn't give him or her license to destroy you or your home, or constantly disrupt your family. When a teen has lost his way, he doesn't know where he is, much less where he is going, so any attempt to get him somewhere or keep him from heading down a path of trouble is usually met with resistance. Parents can spend all the time they want telling their teen that the path he is on will take him somewhere he doesn't want to be, but it will usually have little effect. So establish solid boundaries, which will give your teen a road map. He'll then know what to expect if he sways off the road. It also helps take some of the parental emotion and anger out of the equation.

And fourth, hope can be found through taking time to build a stronger relationship with your teen. Begin with a conversation of restoration. You do this by admitting where you may have been wrong as well. Tell your teen where you've made mistakes and how you'd like to relate differently in the future. Sharing your failures just might give her the motivation and example she needs to do the same, though usually not right away. Require that you do something fun together (fun to the teen, not necessarily you) once every week and then let the conversation flow naturally. It may take several weeks of outings before anything is said by the teen, but keep it up. This approach conveys the message that you can still love your child even though she is a mess, even though she is making mistakes and being hurtful. It lets her know that you can love her when she has it all together, and you can love her when she doesn't. Isn't this what we all desire?

You can rest assured that God is pursuing your child just as intensely as you are. And He won't stop until your wayward one is found. God says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). God has not left what He is building. This doesn't mean you can just sit back and let God do all the work. He's going to use you in that process. As an old Russian proverb says, "Pray to God, but keep rowing to shore."

Years ago, I listened to a man on the radio that I've been a fan of all my life, Chuck Swindoll. He stated in so many words, "What I want written on my epitaph is that 'Dad was fun!'" Does that surprise you? It did me. I thought what every good Christian parent was supposed to want written on their epitaph was something to

the affect of how godly or spiritual a person they were, or some thought about how they provided for the family. And here was one of the most godly men that I ever listened to sharing about how he wanted to be known forever as a “Dad of fun.”

So, what kind of parent do you want to be? Here are some good suggestions...

### **An Imperfect Parent and an Imperfect Person**

When a parent admits their imperfection, it makes a teen feel a little more human, and not so messed up. There are times when parents share their imperfections a couple of things happen. First, teens are glad that you finally admit where you fall short, because they’ve seen it, and are just waiting for it to be acknowledged. Secondly, your admission gives them permission to not always have it together.

A young lady once told me that she sinfully felt pretty good when she heard of the divorce of two parents that we knew. Everyone thought this was a perfect family, with perfect kids, in a perfect home. She told me that when she heard that this particular mom and dad had gotten a divorce, that she felt a little better about her parent’s divorce, and didn’t feel as much as an outcast. I believe it is a message that scripture has been telling us for quite some time. “For all have sinned and fallen short...” (Romans 3:23 NIV).

As your child nears their teen years, begin to share with them some of your downfalls, hurts, losses, and mistakes. When they do the same, they will feel a sense that it is normal and they’re not weird, more sinful than others, or more of a mess than other people say they are.

### **A Loving Parent Who Doesn’t Have to Be Liked**

Parenting adolescents is tough. It’s a time when you are challenged, confronted with your own inadequacies, and get worn out defending what and why you desire good things for your teens. And part of the toughness of parenting is knowing that some things you say, some opinions you share, rules you enforce, and consequences you enact, won’t be taken by your teen with a smile on their face and a warm “thank you”. But your teen, whether they admit it or not, like the fact that you’re thinking of their best interest when they would just as soon wish you wouldn’t.

Drill sergeants aren’t the most loved people in the world, but they’re the people you want next to you when your life is on the line. A coach is not always a friendly person, but teens are sure appreciative when they help capture a win. A counselor who shares some hard things with your teen isn’t very appreciated, until the teen realizes down the road that there was some wisdom in what that idiot said. A judge



isn't very appreciated until the "judged" gets on the other side of their sentence. A true friend goes through much hurt when they have to say some pretty truthful things to your teen, but faithful are those wounds. If you mix all these people together, you'll get a parent of an adolescent who has pushed, pulled, counseled, administered justice, and told the truth. And chances are, they aren't too liked during this time. But when teen realize the bigger picture, they'll appreciate the role that these parents have played.

### **A Parent Who is Willing to Say "No"**

Our generation of parents want so hard to say yes to everything a teen requests, that the foolishness of teens is determining the roles of mom and dad. On the heels of not having to be liked, I would tell you that it's okay to say "No" a little more often than you do. When you say, "No," a teen learns that it's okay to say the word, "No." They learn that it's okay to stand up for what they believe. You'll be thanked numerous times.

### **A Parent First, Then a Friend**

Be a parent that is willing to exert some authority, and not be afraid to "put your foot down" when needed. Your teen needs a parent. And if you're not going to be that parent, and just remain a friend, they'll look for that role model elsewhere. And greater chances are that they'll outgrow your friendship and move on to other friends. Anybody can have many friends, but everyone can only have one set of parents.

There seems to be a shift by many parents to a parenting style that accommodates a teen's immaturity, and even enabling its furtherance at times. Many times, parents who are struggling with their teens look for ways to be their teen's savior, rescuer, or lifeline that come alongside their teen in hopes of showing them how much they love them, when in reality; it's not love at all. Love would want the best for the teen, and many parent's actions are far from the "best." These parents usually accommodate a teen's inappropriate behavior and thinking. While they may enjoy a facade of a relationship, most times it is only temporary because teens really want one who will do what's best, not what just fills the time with accommodating recklessness.

### **A Parent Who Won't Bend the Rules of Integrity and Deep in Character**

This is the parent that won't lie, won't cheat, and will keep his word. It's called integrity. And it's this type of parent that most teens will cling to in their time of

need. It is a parent of integrity that can be trusted because they have watching your actions and interactions with others.

The honor your teen gives you is directly proportional to the integrity that you display in everyday life. This is the type of parent who teens lean on during tough times. And it is this parent that beckons to their children a message of “come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and you will not find judgment, condemnation, ridicule, shame; you will find “rest.” Rest because they know that you can be trusted, that you’ll do right, and that you’ll keep your promises.

### **A Parent Who is Fun**

Oh, and one more thing. Like Chuck Swindoll recommends, have some fun! Loosen up a little. Laugh a little more. Be a little more impetuous and impulsive. Tell a joke. You might just connect with your teen on a deeper level than you would have ever guessed.

# Addendum – Teen Warning Signs

If you feel that your teen is on an unhealthy downward spiral, you can take this assessment. Just rank the symptoms you are experiencing, on a scale from 0 to 5 depending on their severity. And ask other family members to do the same, and then compare notes. You may find that your teen is exhibiting somewhat normal adolescent behavior, or that he or she needs more help than you alone can provide.

## **THE TROUBLED TEENAGER ASSESSMENT**

### **Our Family is Under Stress from Our Teen’s Behavior**

Does your teen refuse to abide by anything you say or request, leading to a constant high level of stress and conflict in the home as a direct result? Does your stress meter go up whenever he or she walks into the room?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**

Never....Often....Always

### **We’ve Seen Changes in Our Teen’s Motivation**

Is your child displaying markedly different motivation from what has been normal? For instance: sleeping too little or too long, extreme forgetfulness, either over aggression and explosiveness or depression and an uncaring attitude, anxiety or sadness, grades slipping and not turning in homework, hating what they once loved or loving what they once hated, or spending too much time alone?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**

Never....Often....Always

### **Our Teenager is Increasingly Disrespectful and Uncaring**

Has your child become increasingly disrespectful, dishonest, or disobedient, openly displaying rebellion, no longer hiding his or her feelings or caring about the consequences? Is your teen living only for the moment and not caring about the future as he or she once did?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**

Never....Often....Always

### **We See Significant Rebellion or Defiance from Our Teenager**

Is there profound rebellion toward your boundaries and the rules of the home? This may appear in passive aggressiveness or open defiance that is unusually excessive for your child.

**0—1—2—3—4—5**  
Never....Often....Always

### **Our Teenager is Threatening and Acting Out Troubling Behaviors**

Are there veiled or outright threats of suicide, or engaging in self-mutilation, eating disorders, cutting or other self-destructive activities? Does he or she participate in excessive risk-taking, dangerous drug use or blatant sexual promiscuity? Is a once healthy conscience or moral compass seemingly lost?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**  
Never....Often....Always

### **We Also See Him/Her Mistreat Others**

Does your teen treat people, pets, or belongings in a threatening or out of control manner? Do you have to hide or disconnect the internet, telephone, television in order to stop your teen from blatantly and repeatedly using them inappropriately? Are things of value broken or lost by the teen with an uncaring attitude about it? Have you had occasion to consider hiding your wallet, your keys, and anything having to do with money or valuables out of fear your teen may take them?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**  
Never....Often....Always

### **He/She Has Selfish or Self-Centered Thinking**

Does your child think he or she is the center of your family (or the universe), show blatant disregard for other family members' time, feelings, schedule, or possessions? Is manipulation or threats used as a tool to get what he or she wants?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**  
Never....Often....Always

### **Our Teen Refuses to Participate with the Family**

Does your child refuse to participate or do anything with the family, or display a growing hatred for the family? Is there constant conflict with one family member or another?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**  
Never....Often....Always

### **We're Seeing Extreme Peer-Dependent Attitudes**

Are peers the center of your child's life? Is it nearly impossible to keep your child away from peers who are obviously leading a lifestyle counter to your beliefs? Do you see your child buying into their attitudes and taking on their appearance, their talk, and their dangerous or illegal activities? Does your teen stay up most of the night taking calls from friends or sneak out or run away to be with them?

**0—1—2—3—4—5**

Never....Often....Always

**TOTAL SCORE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**SCORING:** If your assessment score is **25 or more**, you should consider getting immediate counseling help for your teenager.