

What You Wish Your Parents Knew About Their Teens

Guidelines for Parents to stay engaged in their teens' lives.

From the youth worker's perspective . . .

As church professionals and youth advisors, we have a unique relationship with young people who are a part of our community. As part of the community of God, we often have a different role and can be considered a source of safety and confidant for teens. We are a support to both parents and to youth within our church. In the ways in which we work with young people, their defenses often slip away as we play, serve, and study together so they share feelings, concerns, questions, and experiences. As we practice living out what we believe, our role in young people's lives provide us the opportunity to know them in ways their parents may not.

As children transition into adolescence and peers become an integral part of how they define themselves, parents may become less and less their child's confidant. With the onslaught of social media and the ease with which young people connect online, even diligent parents can find themselves out of the loop. Here are some things we wish parents knew about their teen so we can be in partnership with parents in raising healthy children who become faithful members of the community.

Technology

Technology is a whole new world that continues to change. It is an understatement to say technology changes rapidly. Parents need to be aware of the varied ways young people connect online. Here are some questions parents should consider regarding technology:

- Are you friends with your child on Facebook? Do you follow them on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, etc.?
- Have you looked at your child's smartphone to see what apps they've downloaded?
- Do you have parameters for where the computer can be used in your house or where your child keeps their phone at night?

If parents have answered no to any of these questions, here are areas they might want to reflect on with members of their household:

- Children should not have a social media account unless parents are a part of that community. Though adolescents need their privacy, social media is public and therefore should not be private to parents. Following a young person on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter allows parents to know how much information can be accessed about where they live, what they are wearing, where they are going, etc. As young people first explore the great expanse of social media, we must give them guidelines for what is safe to share with the world about themselves and others.

- New apps become popular very quickly. It's hard to keep up, especially since these apps can be downloaded for free any time a teenager is connected to a wireless network. While these apps can be excellent tools for education, connection, and entertainment, many are not age appropriate, are sexually explicit or contain violent images. Others are intended for innocent use, but can easily be manipulated to transmit harmful images and words. We advocate for parents checking their child's phone regularly. The "world" surrounding a teen's phone is big, broad and viral – too big for a young person to navigate alone. Be aware of your teen's contacts, accounts, purchases, and networks.
- Sleep is essential for brain development and for our bodies to regenerate. Text messages and access to the web can and does happen at all hours of the day and night. Gone are the days when a phone call after 9 p.m. is considered disrespectful. Parents should consider setting a time and communal space each night where a phone or other technology must be "turned in" and turned off, so teens are not awakened at all hours. Common spaces are the best places for technology to be used. This helps eliminate opportunities for illicit use of technology.
- Model what you want your child's technological life to be—by living that life yourself. Do not check email, texts and sites on your phone while talking to others. Practice the "power down" time before bed. Consider having a family nighttime charging station. Everyone's phone is placed on a charger in a common area during sleeping hours.

"There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven. A time to tear, and a time to mend. A time to be silent, and a time to speak." Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is closely tied to how adolescents view their place in the world. The barrage of unrealistic media images for both males and females mean we can all be constantly unsatisfied with our looks, clothing, and lifestyles. Though peers can become a more primary influence in how teens see their self-worth, a parent's constant affirmation can be more vital to a healthy self-image. Our teenagers need to frequently hear from us that they are loved, gifts from God, and that we are proud of them in a variety of ways. Parents can:

- Take opportunities to tell their young person they love them as they walk out the door each day and as they go to sleep each night.
- Ensure they are at school events in which their child is participating, even if they tell the parent not to attend.
- Remind their teenager that God created them unique and beautiful by affirming their gifts and talents that society may not recognize as valuable.
- Utilize technology as a way to remind their teen they are unconditionally loved by sending a text message, especially on stressful days where rejection or acceptance may be looming.
- Listen to their teen and not dismiss their emotions. Recognizing the emotional life is an important piece to giving them a healthy self-understanding.
- Encourage a community outside of school that is a safe place full of caring adults and peers. This is important for a teenagers' self-esteem. Regularly participating in church activities provides young people with a sense of community that may not be fulfilled elsewhere.
- Give teenagers space to be independent, space to succeed without a parent's intervention, and, if necessary, space to fail. Learning resiliency is a key to adulthood and feeling good about their place in the world.

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm 139

Faith

Teens in our church are likely to have faith, but it may be different than the parents. Many teenagers have thought about and can articulate what they believe better than adults in our churches. Teenagers also have doubts. They have synthesized some unorthodox teachings, along with some very orthodox doctrine. None of this is worrying. They will continue to explore and discover their faith. One of the ways parents can aid their teen on this journey is to regularly participate in the life of a local church. Even after the driver's license is obtained or after they make a particular team or club, parents should continue to expect their teenagers frequent and regular participation in church. This allows a young person to continue to mature in their faith within a supportive community. Parents can help teenagers by making church a priority, by introducing them to other church members who are positive role models, and by encouraging friendships with peers at church. We also suggest that parents:

- Have conversations with their teenager about their faith.
- Ask their teen what they believe and for what and whom they pray.
- Don't leave conversations about faith only to church professionals and volunteers. Teens are interested in what their parents believe and value their opinion.
- Parents should encourage teenagers to have faith experiences outside the regular worship hour (camps, mission trips, service opportunities, Sunday school, youth group).
- Serving/helping others as a family can be a significant faith-forming experience and a place for shared conversation.
- Parents should pray for their young person each day.
- Parents should pray, speak of faith, and practice faith and discipleship visibly.
- Verbalize how family decisions are made based on how parents are trying to live out their faith.

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it." Proverbs 22:6

Dating

Dating looks completely different for teens today due to the use of technology and social media in relationships. The ease of devices to connect to one another changes the speed with which relationships are started or ended. Romances often bud via text messages, keeping parents unaware of their child's growing attractions and interactions. Being unfriended on Facebook or no longer being Facebook official in a relationship makes a relationship's ending very public. Once again, parents must be diligent in monitoring social media and engaging their teen in conversations. Parents can:

- Talk with teens about what a healthy relationship looks like, emotionally, and physically. Teens are craving guidance and looking for relationships to model. Show them positive interactions even in the midst of disagreements. If parents don't feel like they can do that in their relationship, they can point out other relationships that are healthy.
- Include what is appropriate regarding sexual exploration for the teen's developmental stage and the maturity of their relationship. Parents should give clear expectations on how they want their child to interact.
- Teenagers have questions about sex: mechanics and emotions. If parents are not willing to discuss this with them, parents should give them other trusted adults with whom to have these conversations. The class their teenager took in school or the book they were given by their parent does not answer all the questions. Parents should grab hold of opportunities when watching movies or listening to music showcasing sex and sexual relationships to follow up with a conversation.

- Media glamorizes sex, exposing teenagers to pornography, images, and/or jokes about oral sex, anal sex, group sex, etc. A teenager’s question may reflect what they see in the media. Parents should try not to respond negatively to these questions, but respond in a way that expresses their opinions about how sex is to be experienced, in a healthy, loving relationship.

“Love is patient and kind.” 1 Corinthians 13:4

Rituals

We recognize that today’s families are busier than ever, and that the evening meal may not include all family members at the table. This makes communication with teens challenging. Teenagers crave attention and conversations with their parents. Parents are encouraged to create space for major and minor interactions to occur by putting cell phones away, turning off the radio/TV, taking them for ice cream, paying attention when they ask a question, capitalize on one-on-one time, eating breakfast with their child, setting a family date for uninterrupted mealtime, etc. All of these suggestions and more can help parents stay engaged in the lives of their increasingly independent teenager.

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