

QUICK ANSWERS
TO YOUR MOST
URGENT QUESTIONS



FIRST
AID
FOR FAMILIES

PARENTING

TEENS AND UP

**The
First Aid for Families
Series**

Parenting Teens and Up

Quick Answers to Your Most Urgent Questions

From Focus on the Family

Foreword by Dr. Greg Smalley

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TO YOUR MOST
URGENT QUESTIONS



FIRST
≡AID≡
FOR FAMILIES

BY FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

PARENTING
TEENS AND UP



First Aid for Families: Parenting Teens and Up

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The information contained in this book provides a general overview of many health-related topics. It is not intended to substitute for advice that you might receive from your child's physician, whether by telephone or during a direct medical evaluation. Furthermore, health-care practices are continually updated as a result of medical research and advances in technology. You should therefore check with your child's doctor if there is any question about current recommendations for a specific problem. No book can substitute for a direct assessment of your child by a qualified health-care professional.

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How to Reach Us

Many issues discussed in this book are difficult ones. You and your family may need to address them in greater depth. The answers in this guide are intended as general advice only, and not to replace clinical counseling, medical treatment, legal counsel, financial direction, or pastoral guidance.

If you'd like to discuss your situation further, or need help putting these ideas into action, we invite you to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department and speak with a member of our staff. Our licensed Christian counselors are available to take your call Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time at 1-855-771-HELP (1-855-771-4357) or 1-800-A-FAMILY (1-800-232-6459). They'd be pleased to assist you in any way they can.

If you'd like to get in touch with a counselor in your area, Focus on the Family also maintains a referral network of Christian therapists. For information, just call the Counseling Department at one of the numbers above.

To reach a pastoral counselor at Focus on the Family, you can call 1-855-771-HELP (1-855-771-4357) or 1-800-A-FAMILY (1-800-232-6459) Monday through Friday between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time.

And for more advice and encouragement, please visit us at www.focusonthefamily.com.

Foreword

Dr. Greg Smalley

I'll never forget the day my four-year-old son, Garrison, walked into my office. My wife, Erin, was gone, and I had some work to get done. Garrison said, "Daddy, I need your help!"

I said, "Honey, I've got to finish this. I'll help you in just a little bit."

"No, no," he said. "I need your help now! Please? Gotta come help me now."

Garrison usually didn't ask for help. Now, though, he grabbed my arm, pulled me out of my chair, and led me toward our kitchen.

"Garrison, what's wrong?" I asked.

"I'll show you," he replied.

As we rounded the corner, I saw it. Stunned, I stared at our microwave oven—which was on fire!

Thick, dark smoke poured out of the appliance. "It's—it's on fire!" I stammered, once again demonstrating how perceptive I am.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Garrison said impatiently. "But, Daddy, can you reach in and grab my popcorn? I can't get it."

"Your *what*?"

"I made some popcorn," he explained.

I thought, *Popcorn? Where did he get that?*

It turned out that he'd climbed all the way up in the pantry, snatched the bag, climbed down, stood on a chair, and (with a sharp scissors, no doubt) cut the bag open, put it in the microwave, and set the timer ... on 99 minutes.

By the time I saw the result, it looked like a smoldering lump of coal. I grabbed it, ran outside, and threw it on the ground.

Garrison's response was to throw *himself* on the ground and yell, "*I was gonna eat that!*"

Engulfed by the horrible smell of burnt popcorn, I realized I had to get rid of the stench before Erin returned. She'd want to know what the odor was, and how our son had managed to do this when I was supposedly watching him so vigilantly in her absence.

To purge the smell, I put out cups of coffee grounds. They absorbed the odor—most of it, anyway. I cleaned up the mess and hoped for the best.

That might have been the end of the story. But this was my family, remember—and in families, one crisis is never enough.

After I'd gone back to working in my office, Garrison showed up again. "Daddy, I need your help," he declared.

I frowned. "Did you cook any more popcorn?"

"No," he answered. "I was listening to my music, and I'm done."

"Good."

"But I don't know how to turn the car off."

I was baffled. "What?"

"I was listening to my music, and I don't know how to turn the car off."

Suddenly an awful realization dawned. "Garrison, please tell me you haven't been in the car."

"Oh, yeah," he said.

I groaned as he dragged me into the garage. This time, instead of gagging at smoke from scorched popcorn, I was choking from toxic exhaust fumes. He'd been sitting in the car with the garage door closed and the motor running, listening to his music.

I shut down the engine.

Fortunately, the garage door began to open at that moment. Unfortunately, it was opening because Erin had just arrived.

She pulled in and shut off her car. Quickly the poisonous fumes (and what was left of the popcorn smell) reached her nostrils.

She gave me a suspicious look. "Do you want to tell me anything?" she asked.

I decided to take the optimistic route. "I think you're gonna like this," I said. "It's really funny."

I told her the whole story. She was not amused.

On the other hand, she did not restart her car and run over me. I was lucky that day.

Perhaps she'd come to expect that sort of thing from our son—and from me. Maybe experience had taught her that families are always getting into some kind of trouble. That's what happens when you put very different people in close quarters in a fallen world. You end up needing help with fires, carbon monoxide, curious kids, and irate spouses.

You end up with a lot of pressing problems, and needing a lot of first aid.

As someone whose occupation and passion involve helping families, I wish I could say that my fellow advice-givers and I have always done a great job of providing first aid for urgent problems. But sometimes we seem to spend most of our time trying to prevent them.

In a way, that makes sense. You've probably heard the old saying: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

It's usually true. After all, which would you rather do:

- Circle the date of your wedding anniversary on a calendar or spend the next six months apologizing because you forgot it?
- Change the oil in your car or buy a new engine?
- Put childproof caps on your prescription bottles or rush your toddler to the emergency room once a week?

But prevention has limits. Most of us keep finding ourselves in sticky family situations that weren't prevented. When that happens—when your baby won't sleep, or your teenage daughter announces that she's pregnant, or your mate's gambling addiction has you teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, or your frail and aging mom refuses to consider a nursing home—an ounce of cure looks a lot more valuable than a *ton* of prevention. Urgent problems need urgent care, not a list of tips that might have helped if only you'd known about them yesterday, last year, or a decade ago.

Don't get me wrong: Prevention is good. But when you've already stepped in the quicksand, a rope is better.

At Focus on the Family, we try to prevent family problems every day—helping parents and spouses build thriving families who can avoid and withstand today's and tomorrow's challenges. But we also offer right-now help through our Counseling Department, broadcast, online resources, print and film and audio tools, and other channels. You might call it “first aid for families.” And in this book, that's *exactly* what we call it.

This series is the place to go when you need our latest, most carefully considered advice on your most pressing, most vexing family problems. Parenting, marriage, and family crisis—you'll find these addressed quickly and practically. Though many of the issues are complex, we're aiming to give you what you need to know *now* to take your next step.

The advice is vetted by trained, professional Christian counselors; most of it comes from our experience in helping the thousands of family members who ask us for guidance every year. And if you need more insight, our Counseling Department is available to talk further with you personally (see the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book).

In addition to the questions and answers, you'll find encouraging, informative sidebars and lists of books, articles, websites, organizations, and other resources to help you go deeper.

If you're facing parenting challenges with adolescents and young adults, you've come to the right place. *First Aid for Families: Parenting Teens and Up* tackles topics ranging from conflict to dating to the Internet, and from sex to college to grown-up prodigals.

Not every pressing problem is a major crisis, of course. Sometimes it's about burnt popcorn, overly adventurous kids, or clueless caregivers. But

every question deserves an answer—one that's consistent with God's Word, practical, and easy to understand.

I hope you find that the answers in this book fit that description. May God bless you and your family as you seek His wisdom—and, as a result, thrive.

—Dr. Greg Smalley

Dr. Greg Smalley is vice president of Family Ministries at Focus on the Family. Before joining Focus, he worked for the Center for Relationship Enrichment at John Brown University and as president of the National Institute of Marriage. He is the author of twelve books.

After receiving his doctorate at the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in Southern California and a counseling degree from Denver Seminary, Greg and his wife, Erin, led intensive marriage seminars around the world and trained pastors, professionals, and lay leaders on how to effectively work with married and engaged couples.

Married since 1992, Greg and Erin have one son and three daughters. Greg is the son of Dr. Gary Smalley, the popular family counselor and author of forty books on marriage.

Part 1: Relationship Rifts

1

Parent Can't Connect with Teen

Question

I'm a mom who's always been close to my daughter. But our relationship has changed dramatically since she entered the teen years. I can't connect with her anymore; she's always texting or talking to friends on her cell phone. I feel as if I've lost something precious. Is this normal?

Answer

Yes, it *is* normal. When a child enters the teen years, he or she often begins to pull away from parents and other family members while simultaneously identifying more closely with friends and peers. Psychologists call this process *separation and individuation*. It's part of what prepares a child to enter adulthood. Your daughter is exploring what it means to become her own person.

Naturally, this process can be hard on parents. Mom in particular sometimes feels as if she's losing the closeness she's enjoyed with her child since birth and infancy. These changes can be especially difficult for single mothers or women who don't have good relationships with their husbands. In the absence of warm and supportive adult companionship, they may look to their children to meet all their needs for emotional intimacy.

Only you know the details of your situation. If there are explainable sources of tension in your relationship with your daughter—if, for example, she's engaging in rebellious or dangerous behavior—you'll want to spend time dealing with these issues directly. If, on the other hand, you feel that your pain is out of the ordinary or that you're struggling unnecessarily during this transition, it might be worth asking yourself if you've become too dependent upon your daughter. In that case, you need to understand that this isn't healthy

for you *or* your child. It may even be part of the reason she's pulling away from you.

If your marriage isn't satisfying and fulfilling, this could be a big part of the problem. If you suspect this may be a factor, we'd encourage you to seek professional help to work on your marital relationship. Strengthening your marriage will not only benefit you and your husband, it will help your daughter as well. Focus on the Family's counseling staff will be happy to discuss your marital issues with you over the phone. We can also provide you with a list of referrals to licensed Christian therapists in your area. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

If you're a single parent, it's crucial that you begin to pursue close, nurturing relationships with other adults. Perhaps you're acquainted with a few women at church who could help meet this need. If you don't have any close female friends, we'd urge you to ask the Lord to help you find some.

As a side benefit, you may actually end up improving your relationship with your daughter by turning to your peers for affirmation and support. It's possible that all she wants is to be released from the necessity to act as your sole confidant and support. Once that pressure is removed, the door may suddenly open to a healthier parent-teen relationship in the future.

In Other Words ...

"If you're having a hard time getting your teen to talk, changing locations can help. Go shopping or to a favorite restaurant together, or take a drive or hike. Or stay at home and try an activity that allows you to talk but doesn't require that you look at each other constantly, like playing table tennis, air hockey, or chess, helping him develop a skill or hobby, or putting together a puzzle."¹

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Tips for Parenting Teens](#)," a series of articles on parent-teen relationships by Joe White and Lissa Johnson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)

Distant Relationship with Adult Child

Question

A certain coldness, distance, and separation has crept into my relationship with my adult daughter. I have a hunch that her spouse may have something to do with it, and this only makes me feel worse. What have I done wrong? How do I show my concern and express my desire to stay connected while giving them room to make their own decisions?

Answer

Your longing for a warm, close, emotionally safe relationship with your daughter is completely understandable. God designed moms and dads to feel this way about their children, and when the relationship doesn't turn out as they'd hoped and expected it's only natural to grieve. At the same time, appropriate boundaries are an absolute necessity in relationships with adult children, especially when they have spouses and families of their own. The challenge you face is to respect those boundaries while remaining available and assuring your daughter of your continuing love.

Those boundaries are in place not just for your daughter's sake but for your own protection. Parents in your position often blame themselves and assume full responsibility for any tension or estrangement in their interactions with an adult child. This isn't necessarily fair or accurate. Be careful, then, to avoid reacting out of fear or false guilt. Respect the boundaries and, as far as possible, learn to relax and take refuge on your side of the fence. Express your love and offer your help as opportunities arise. Extend invitations on appropriate occasions. Pray often for your daughter and her husband and seek God's wisdom and comfort when you feel overwhelmed or confused. But don't push or plead or whine. That will only make matters worse.

Remember, nobody is perfect. Every parent makes mistakes. You may have committed all kinds of errors, but that's not what makes your daughter who she is. She's defined by her own choices, not by your shortcomings. This is

particularly true in the case of a married daughter whose attitudes and actions are shaped in part by the influence of a spouse. There's nothing you can do to change that side of the equation.

So don't blame yourself for the decisions of other adults. If love has been your guide throughout the parenting process—and the tone of your question leads us to suppose that's the case—then cut yourself some slack and leave the situation in God's hands. If you go around carrying a burden of false guilt, that will only hinder you from reflecting His love in the most effective way.

If you'd like to discuss these issues at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our counselors would be more than happy to serve you in any way they can. They also can provide you with referrals to qualified family therapists in your area who can help you sort out and work through situations like this. Please see [“How to Reach Us”](#) for more information.

In Other Words ...

“No, my mother and main role model in the annals of parenting history wasn't perfect, and neither was I her perfect daughter. She failed to love me perfectly. I failed to love her perfectly. But eventually I came to understand that the sum total of our imperfect love for each other was more than enough for both of us.

“It's such a relief to say this to you because, as fellow parents of adult children, I know you know what I'm talking about regardless of how our parents raised us and what our grown children are doing with their lives these days.

“None of us are perfect, and that's okay. Our imperfect love is enough.”²

—Debra Evans

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Conflict with Teen Taking a Toll

Question

Help! I'm a parent of a teenager, and the constant conflicts, mood swings, and challenges to my authority are taking a serious toll on my emotional and mental health. Can you recommend any survival techniques?

Answer

Conflict is “business as usual” during the teen years. It's to be expected. Your adolescent is a person with a mind of her own and a strong and growing desire for increasing amounts of freedom, independence, and self-determination. You have certain goals in mind for her future, and she has ideas of her own—very different ideas in many cases.

You shouldn't back down when a disagreement involves a difference of opinion about beliefs and values that you consider essential. But neither should you drive yourself to the brink over something you're ultimately in no position to change or control. The important thing is to get through this experience with as little damage as possible to the parent-child relationship and your own sanity.

Bear in mind that *how* you react to conflicts with your teen will probably be driven by your own needs and desires as much as by any consideration of what's best for her. At a time like this the familiar phrase “Know thyself” takes on a special significance. As your child moves through the teen years, you need to take time to stay in touch with your own feelings, examine your own issues, and remember who you are. Here are some basic questions that may help:

1. *Where are you looking for fulfillment and contentment?* Does your identity depend on your adolescent's appearance, grades, performance in sports, or other accomplishments? Are you invested too heavily in your growing child—in other words, is she the intellectual and emotional center of your life? Has your sense of personal significance been built on the rock of a deep relationship with your Creator or on the shifting sand of your teenager's

behavior or opinion of you? The answers to these questions will affect your ability to accept and appreciate your child on a day-to-day basis. Knowing that your worth doesn't hinge on the ebb and flow of teenage opinion will help you avoid irrational reactions and keep your feet on solid ground.

2. *Does your life have any margin?* Is your calendar jammed? Are you physically, emotionally, and financially spent most of the time? Many parents arrive at mid-life neck-deep in responsibilities and commitments—just as their kids are entering and passing through adolescence. A parent's concerns can be so overwhelming that a teen's anxiety about a date or an overdue homework assignment may seem trivial. If this is your situation, you need to take steps to alter it. Years from now, your grown children will not care nearly as much about your accomplishments, career track, or net worth as they will about the quality of the relationship they had with you while growing up.

3. *Are you nurturing your marriage?* If you're married, are you and your spouse still on the same team? Do you build one another up in front of the kids, or do you unleash verbal attacks for all to witness? An intact, stable marriage in which affection and mutual respect are openly demonstrated is a valuable asset for raising teenagers. If either partner believes that the marriage needs a tune-up, both should by all means set aside whatever time is necessary to work things out with the help of a counselor or pastor. If your marriage is troubled and you've been thinking that this might be a good time to escape and start over (after all, the kids are older now and can "handle it better"), think again. With very rare exceptions a divorce will create a profound sense of loss and insecurity in a teenager's mind. (The only exception is when it's absolutely necessary to get away from a spouse whose behavior is abusive and destructive.)

4. *If you're bringing up one or more adolescents as a single parent, are you maintaining a healthy balance between love and limits?* Raising teens is a major undertaking for two parents and a far tougher assignment if you're on your own. If at all possible, enlist another mature person (a relative, a friend, or a member of a support group) to spend time with your adolescent. Someone who knows you and your child(ren) well can be particularly helpful in providing another viewpoint if you reach an impasse in your relationship.

Through it all, maintain an attitude of genuine interest and respect toward your teen. Adolescents despise being treated like little kids. Even though your child may be light-years away from grown-up maturity and responsibilities, you will build strong bonds and smooth your path over the next few years by talking to her as you would to another adult you respect. This, like anything else in life that's worthwhile, takes time and energy.

If you need more help, Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of referrals to professional therapists practicing in your

area. They'd also be happy to discuss your situation with you at greater length over the phone. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.³

In Other Words ...

"The famous Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi said, 'Fatigue makes cowards of us all.' We might amend his adage slightly to say, 'Fatigue makes quitters of us all.' The point is, parents who are chronically depleted and drained of energy can offer little to their teenager. Therefore, it's vital that you guard your spiritual, emotional, and physical health. Do whatever you must to recharge your batteries: Get plenty of rest, set aside time for fun, exercise regularly, pray, and meditate on God's Word."⁴

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Teen Rebellion](#)," a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the

Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Teen Says Parents Don't Listen

Question

Our teenager complains that we never listen to him. We don't think the accusation is fair, but we also want him to know that his concerns are important to us. How can we prove that we're really paying attention when he talks?

Answer

Before you try to convince your teen that you're listening, make sure you really are. Practice listening until you've perfected the skill. Why? Because it's easy for parents to assume they're listening to their child when in actuality their brains are busy thinking about other things, making assumptions, or planning what they're going to say in reply. Genuine, meaningful communication requires that you put distractions aside, empty your mind of preconceived notions, and devote yourself to hearing what the other person has to say.

What this means in practical terms is that when your teen starts talking, you turn off the TV, put down the newspaper, set the laptop aside, and give him your full attention. Wait to hear the whole story before jumping to conclusions. Stay focused and try to be a careful fact collector. Ask questions instead of rendering an opinion. This will naturally require a significant investment of time and energy. Remember, teenagers can be every bit as demanding as toddlers, only in different ways.

As you tackle this challenging task, it will be worth bearing in mind what listening is and what it isn't. Listening isn't the same as agreeing. It's a demonstration of respect for another person's feelings and ideas, not necessarily an endorsement of them. It's also important to remember that there's a vast difference between a conversation and an argument. A conversation, like a dance or a duet, is a delicately balanced two-way operation. It's an interactive blend of speaking, listening, and thinking. Arguing, on the other hand, is mostly speaking (with the volume turned up). If

you find a conversation morphing into an argument, end it immediately. Go your separate ways for the time being and agree to revisit the issue when you both cool down and feel you can return to a civil discussion of the facts.

If you want your teenager to be “quick to listen” and “slow to speak” (James 1:19), you need to set the example. As you practice these principles, take time to point them out and discuss them with your son. That will prove you’re making a serious effort to learn the art of true communication.

If you’d like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you’re welcome to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“To make sure your teen knows you care about his concerns, try matching emotion for emotion. If your teen is describing an incident, opinion, or feeling with sadness, let your face mirror that sadness; talk softly. If she is speaking with great enthusiasm, lean forward and reply with excitement. If he’s angry, express understanding of that anger even as you respond as a loving, guiding adult.

“To show further that you care, follow up on your conversation. Ask later whether a problem was resolved. How did the teacher react to your son’s request for a deadline extension? Is that former friend still refusing to speak to your daughter?”⁵

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Conflict with Your Teen](#)” by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, a series of articles on parent-teen communication
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

5

Teen Is Disrespectful but Wants Respect

Question

Our teen says we don't treat him with respect, but from my perspective the shoe is actually on the other foot. *His* behavior toward *us* is extremely dismissive and smart-alecky. How do we resolve this conflict?

Answer

The first step is to define your terms together. What does “respect” mean to you? What does it mean to your teenager? If you can find a time to sit down and discuss this question rationally—preferably when the air is clear and everyone's in a fairly good mood—you'll have begun building healthier communication and a more positive parent-child relationship.

Respect doesn't mean giving your son his way. Nor does it imply that he has to see everything from your point of view or do everything according to your specifications. To respect someone isn't necessarily to agree with him or trust him automatically.

According to Webster's Dictionary, respect is “a courteous consideration of another person.” To put it another way, respect is something separate from decisions, rules, or actions. It's how you *treat* the other person while making your decisions, enforcing your rules, and sticking to your guns.

Many teens fall into the trap of thinking that if you don't agree with them or do what they want, you're not “respecting” them. Not true. Unfortunately, parents can sometimes fall into the same trap. The fact of the matter is that you *can* be respectful toward your son while grounding him or depriving him of some privilege—provided the punishment is warranted. By the same token, he can voice disagreement with you while still demonstrating “courteous consideration.”

As the adult, you should be the first to extend respect by making reasonable rules and enforcing them fairly and consistently. Be as clear as you can about your expectations and don't try to micro-manage your adolescent. In the

process, point out exactly how you're demonstrating "courteous consideration" (whether he wants to hear it or not). Don't yell, manipulate, name-call, attack his character, get physical, "Bible-thump," or threaten. If you can discipline yourself to moderate your speech according to these standards, he'll have no reason to accuse you of being disrespectful.

But what about his "dismissive" and "smart-alecky" behavior? The key is to address the issue at hand and the disrespectful attitude—while keeping the two separate. Lay this distinction out on the table by asking questions like, "How might you disagree with me and still show respect?" or "How can you be angry at your mother and still treat her respectfully?" or "What would it look like if I respected you, yet disagreed with you?"

It's crucial to give your teen permission to dislike or disagree with you. You can't expect an adolescent to follow all the rules *and* agree with them. He has to accept your decisions, of course, but you aren't in a position to control his mind or dictate his feelings. It's enough to focus on his compliance and the respect he needs to demonstrate toward other members of the family. Beyond that, he's entitled to "like" or "dislike" his circumstances as he sees fit. As adults, we do many things we don't really "like" to do. This is a good lesson for teens to learn if they want to function in the real world.

Bottom line: Respect isn't something to be demanded. It has to be earned, and for the most part we earn it by giving it to others. For the time being you may need to deal with the disappointment, hurt, and embarrassment of living with a disrespectful teenager. You may have to come to terms with being "disliked" even when you're convinced you're doing the right thing. To a certain extent it just goes with the territory.

Instead of striking back, try to sort out your emotions prayerfully with your spouse, a friend, a pastor, or a professional counselor. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of referrals to professional therapists practicing in your area. They'd also be happy to discuss your situation with you at greater length over the phone. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Let's say your teenage daughter doesn't want to be seen with you and your spouse. At the mall, she walks twenty paces behind you. After church, she waits for you in the car. Is this a form of disrespect?"

"This behavior is probably not a sign of disrespect—unless it's accompanied by disparaging remarks toward you, which should not be

tolerated. Chances are that your teen is making the normal, healthy move from childhood to young adulthood and doesn't want to be perceived as your 'little girl.' ...

“What should you do? Wait it out. Unless there is clear disrespect involved, try to accept this behavior as a phase of growing up. In a few years, when your teen accepts herself as an adult and doesn't need to prove it to everyone else, she won't mind walking beside you and being with you.”⁶

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Handling Disrespect](#)” by Alice Crider
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “How to Raise Respectful Kids, Parts I and II,” *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Jill Rigby (Focus on the Family, 2008)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Why Aren't My Rules of Respect Working?

Question

I've come up with some rules to help keep my kids respectful. But my teenage son has developed what I consider a "mouthy" way of responding to other members of the family. Last night, when I asked him to take out the trash, he said, "I'll do it later, Mom." That really bothers me, especially since we have a rule against it. Why aren't the rules working?

Answer

It's important to have rules regarding respect because respect is about safety—emotional and mental safety. When people treat one another disrespectfully, chaos ensues. This chaos is destructive to the family because it erodes the bonds of love and trust that make up the very foundation of the home.

Having said this, we should hasten to add that it's crucial to define *respect* and *disrespect* carefully before attempting to promote the one and discourage the other by means of rules. Some parents seem to define *disrespect* as "anything my teen is doing that I don't want him to do." In other words, they try to turn this issue into grounds for seizing total control of their teenager's attitudes and behavior. This is a mistake you want to avoid if at all possible.

We mention this because we're not entirely sure it would be fair to characterize your son's reaction to your request (you *did* say that you "asked" him to take out the trash) as disrespect. He may have had reasons of his own for putting off his chores until later in the evening. As long as he takes care of his responsibilities within a reasonable time frame, there's no need to raise the stress level by demanding immediate obedience. Nor is it necessarily "disrespectful" for a teen to disagree with his parents or express anger in an appropriate way.

Here's an exercise that you and your teen may find helpful. Each of you take

out a piece of paper and write clear definitions of respect and disrespect. For starters, note that *disrespect* is:

- physical violence, or threats of physical violence
- physical posturing or bullying
- destruction of other people's property, or threats thereof
- cursing at someone
- name-calling
- condemnations ("I hate you!")
- mockery, insults, or belittling
- blatant defiance

Once both of you have finalized your lists, open up the dictionary and compare its definitions with yours. When you do, you'll probably discover that disrespect can be both an action and an attitude.

Here's the point: If you're going to make rules, remember that they're effective only in addressing disrespectful *actions*. Rules function primarily to keep safety in and chaos out. They can't completely control another person's thought processes. For this reason it's far better to counter disrespectful *attitudes* with advice, teaching, mentoring, and modeling. Both approaches are important in parenting teens, and you need to develop your skills in both areas if you want to maintain a respectful and orderly atmosphere in your home.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. They can also provide you with a list of referrals to trained therapists practicing in your area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁷

In Other Words ...

"If you feel disrespected at home, working your head off to pick up after a teenager who doesn't seem to care, how can you change that? By developing the trait of 'honoring.' Your teen may not realize that undone chores make you feel so undervalued, so dishonored. Gently but firmly, tell your teen that virtually *everything* he does communicates honor or dishonor, respect or disrespect....

"In addition to honoring, make sure you aren't inadvertently encouraging your teen to take you for granted. During the next week, stop picking up after him and see what happens. Over the long term, it probably will be best to let him take responsibility for cleanups—or to let him live with the

consequences.”⁸

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[When Kids Run You Over](#)” by Dr. Bill Maier
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Why Christian Kids Rebel* by Dr. Tim Kimmel (Thomas Nelson, 2004)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Part 2: Resolving Conflicts

7

Why Is It So Hard to Give Up Control of My Teenager?

Question

I understand that parenting teenagers is a process of gradually letting go, granting them more independence, and setting them free to become the adults God wants them to be. But there are days when I just can't put this into practice. Even though my teens are good kids who basically have their heads on straight, I keep finding myself swooping in and seizing the reins despite my determination to take a more "hands off" approach. Is this normal? Why is it so hard to stop taking control?

Answer

Why? Because life is like that. It's never a question of implementing ten easy steps or taking the shortest route between two points. It's always convoluted, unexpected, surprising, and messy. Especially when it involves other people. Especially when those people happen to be adolescents. Especially when those adolescents are growing up amid the challenges, temptations, and perils of the 21st century.

To put it another way, raising teens isn't simply "a process of gradually letting go." It's a lot more like a whitewater rafting trip. If whitewater rafting were just a matter of floating downstream, it wouldn't be much of an adventure. The same thing can be said about the journey to adulthood. Just as every interesting river contains rocks and waterfalls and "strainers" that threaten to trap you underwater, the path you and your teens are trying to navigate includes some hefty obstacles. That's truer than ever today. Here are five such obstacles that make it especially hard for parents to keep their fingers

off the “control” button:

1. *Teen brains aren't finished yet.* Teenagers can and do act like adults at times. This is normal. And they can and do act childishly at times. This is also normal. Why? Because their brains are still in the process of growing and maturing. According to Abigail Baird of the Laboratory for Adolescent Studies at Dartmouth, the human brain continues to grow and change into the early 20s. This doesn't mean that your teens have an automatic excuse for wrong behavior or poor decision-making. But your relationship will be less troubled if you realize that this yo-yo behavior and these thought patterns are to be expected.

2. *We're overstimulated.* We live in an overconnected society. You can take the entertainment industry with you wherever you go. You can surf the Internet on your cell phone, or just talk or text on it constantly. Thanks to cable, satellite dishes, digital video recorders and websites, you never have to miss a TV show, and the assault of advertising is relentless. And that's not to mention after-school sports, scholarship contests, piano recitals, and laser tag parties. The point is that too much of a good thing can be a bad thing. Overstimulation is a formula for agitation, rudeness, “edginess,” irritability, and impulsivity. And when people react on impulse, they lose control of their own behavior. Not a good idea, whether you're a teen or a parent.

3. *We're tired.* The mayhem of modern life keeps many of us from getting enough rest. Sleep deprivation leads both adults and teens to exhibit chronic mental and physical fatigue. It wears down a person's ability to reason. In extreme cases, it can even lead to psychotic episodes. If you think that either you or your kids may be sleep-deprived, talk to your family physician about how you might handle that problem. Ignoring your need for rest affects the level at which you can make sound judgments and control your own reactions.

4. *Young adults have been granted permission to stay irresponsible.* Due to the number of people in the workforce, there's a certain perspective from which your teenagers' generation might be considered unneeded. The workplace is already so crowded and competitive that there's no rush to bring young people aboard. This is just one of several factors contributing to the acceptance of a much longer stage of adolescence. Our culture now grants teens permission *not* to grow up. It encourages them to avoid independence while you're trying to guide them to become responsible adults. No wonder you're encountering some tension.

5. *The culture doesn't support your values.* “Growing up” isn't the only subject on which teens are hearing mixed messages. Parents try to steer them away from drugs and alcohol while sports celebrities pitch beer. Youth groups teach them to abstain from sex before marriage while TV shows present premarital sex as the norm. This issue isn't new, and the tension between Christianity and culture has always existed. But the impact of overstimulation

and the permission to remain immature make the problem much worse.

Obviously, you're not going to eliminate these obstacles simply by reading this response to your question. But recognizing them will give you an advantage as you seek to guide your teens through these difficult years. The currents may be making your job harder, but it's important to resist the urge to fight the river. To some extent you'll have to go with the flow, so keep paddling in the right direction.

For further help, it might be worth your while to make an appointment with a family counselor who is experienced in dealing with these issues. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁹

In Other Words ...

"Get into the mind-set that everything you do as a parent ultimately is part of validating or nurturing your children, especially during their teen years—preferably in ways they don't consider offensive or embarrassing. And don't forget that it's not about being perfect or exactly 'right.' It's about 'enough.' ...

"Remember, the results aren't in your hands. The clearer you are about this job description, the more able you'll be to maintain a balanced approach to this thing called control."¹⁰

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Your Teen Needs You](#)," a series of articles by Tiffany Stuart and Lindy Keffer
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Choosing Your Battles Wisely

Question

We seem to be embroiled in conflict with our teen over every imaginable subject under the sun. You name it, we've butted heads over it: grades, tattoos, music, movies, hairstyles, study habits, politics. If only for our own peace of mind we'd like to eliminate as much of this fighting as possible. Can you help us choose our battles more wisely?

Answer

The principle you want to bear in mind is stated clearly in Ephesians 6:4: "Do not exasperate your children." You have to expect a certain measure of conflict during the teen years, and you shouldn't back down when a disagreement involves a difference of opinion about beliefs and values that you consider essential. At the same time, you have to be careful about exerting too much control in areas that are relatively inconsequential. If you don't figure out the difference, you may end up alienating your child unnecessarily. The important thing is to get through these turbulent years with as little damage as possible to the parent-child relationship and your own sanity.

Your basic rule of thumb, then, should be, "Avoid major conflicts with your teenager if at all possible." Some things just aren't worth it. For instance, you should think carefully before starting a war over any of the following:

- a mess in his own room (unless the health department pays a visit)
- hair length
- earrings (for either gender)
- music style
- music volume
- choice of everyday clothing
- fast food
- sleeping in when there's no specific reason to get up
- how, when, and where homework is done (provided it's getting done)

There are, of course, a number of other areas—some related to the issues listed above—in which you'll need to state your case and hold your ground. So let's add a few qualifiers:

- Don't fight over the mess in your teen's room. But if it extends *beyond* his room, it's time to put your foot down. Make it clear that you've resigned from unpaid janitorial duties and that unclaimed valuables left lying around the house will be confiscated for an unspecified period. You can be humorous about it, but be sure to follow through.

- Don't make an issue of hair length. But if it's a matter of *extreme* alterations to hair—something bizarre like giant green spikes—a heart-to-heart talk is in order. Extreme styles are a way of saying to the world, "I don't care what anybody thinks of me!" If this is your teen's attitude, you need to find out why.

- Don't obsess over earrings. But if your teen wants to move beyond earrings to aggressive body piercings (nose, tongue, navel, etc.) or tattoos, sit down and let him know that it's extremely unwise to do anything to his body with permanent physical consequences at a time when his life is still in a state of flux. Tell him that he can have all the tattoos he wants—*after* he's eighteen and living on his own. He should also be aware that serious viral infections, as well as bacterial skin infections, can be spread by contaminated tattoo needles or piercing instruments.

- Don't nag your teen about the volume of his music—*unless* it's bothering other people in the house or neighborhood. He needs to understand the importance of being considerate of others. And *do* make an issue of lyrics. Talk about what the words are saying and how she feels when she listens to them. You'll need courage to separate your adolescent from music that's toxic, an open mind to endure the stuff that isn't, and wisdom to know the difference. You should also be prepared to suggest alternatives.

- Don't exercise too much control over your teenager's wardrobe. But if garments sport words or images that are violent or offensive, they need to go. You should also veto attire that is blatantly sexually provocative.

- Don't make too big a deal of your adolescent's love for fast food. But if his or her food choices become extreme—either excessive or too limited in variety or amount—don't hesitate to point out the health risks involved. Obesity, anorexia, and bulimia are conditions with serious consequences.

Other issues that require a definite parental response should be fairly obvious: tobacco, alcohol and drug use, disrespectful comments and actions, sexual activity, and toxic friends, for instance, are problems you can't afford to overlook. You should also insist that your teen keep you informed of his whereabouts at all times. This doesn't mean you're treating him like a child. It's simply a matter of common courtesy, and it may be critically important in

the event of a family emergency.

If you'd like to talk about this issue further with a counselor, Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of referrals to professional therapists practicing in your area. They'd also be happy to discuss your situation with you at greater length over the phone. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.¹¹

In Other Words ...

"Every family has to choose its own issues that are worth fighting over, and these issues may even vary among different children from the same household. Obviously, drug and alcohol abuse always qualifies because of the life-and-death nature of the situation.... Some conflict areas can create significant spiritual and emotional struggles.... But remember that discernment is the ultimate goal in dealing with these issues. As parents, we can't and shouldn't make every decision for our children throughout their lives, so we must use these situations to help them develop critical-thinking skills and awareness enough to make wise choices on their own."¹²

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Conflict with Your Teen](#)" by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, a series of articles
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the

Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)

- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

My Teens Don't Obey the Rules

Question

As our children move into the teen years it's becoming harder and harder to enforce the household rules we came up with when they were younger. For example, I can't get my middle son to keep his room clean no matter what penalties I impose. Any suggestions?

Answer

Let's begin by doing some thinking about what rules are and what they are not. Parents of teenagers need to hold on to the principle "my house, my rules," but they also need to understand the purpose of rules and have a clear idea of what they can and can't accomplish.

As your kids move through the adolescent years, it's increasingly important that you grasp the distinction between rules, advice, and suggestions. *Rules* represent the voice of authority—the one that says, "This is the way it is, and there will be no further discussion about it." *Advice* is wise counsel. It's the voice of experience seeking to influence a young person by saying, "Here's what I would do if I were in your situation." *Suggestions* are even less forceful than advice, since they avoid absolute statements and merely offer "good ideas" designed to encourage positive choices.

Generally speaking—and this is hard for some moms and dads to accept—skillful and effective parenting of teens involves a deliberate movement away from rules (total control), through the realm of advice (firm guidance), and on to the final destination of suggestion (caring emancipation). The ultimate goal is to set your son free to think for himself so that he's prepared to become self-directing when he enters the adult world.

This doesn't mean there's no place for rules in the life of a teenager. Rules are essential wherever people share living space, but it's vital to understand their purpose and how they work. There are two main reasons for implementing rules: (1) to keep safety in, and (2) to keep chaos out. In other

words, rules are intended to protect and to preserve order. They cannot control anybody, and outside a meaningful relationship may only invite rebellion.

Here are seven principles that can help you devise effective rules and avoid common problems in this area:

1. *Have as few rules as possible.* The more rules you have, the more you'll have to remember and the more you'll have to enforce. It's hard to stay consistent when the system becomes too complicated.

2. *Make the rule specific and quantitative.* The more vague the rule, the more room there is for your teen to wiggle out of it. That's not to mention that parents often *like* nebulous rules, since they control the process of interpretation.

3. *Make sure you can enforce the rule.* The consequences for breaking a rule should also be clear and limited. If you don't have the power to impose the consequence, don't make the rule in the first place.

4. *Ask yourself, "Is this a hill worth dying on?"* In other words, pick your battles carefully. A solid understanding of the two main purposes of rules—protection and preservation of order—can help guide you in this area. Your son's messy room is a case in point. Does his slovenliness pose any kind of danger to himself or the rest of the family? Does it introduce chaos into the lives of other family members? If not, it might be a good idea to shut the door and leave him alone.

5. *Be sure your motive or reason for this rule is a good one.* Generally speaking, your goal in devising rules and enforcing consequences is to make it "ouch" a bit when your teenager makes foolish choices—not to "control" him.

6. *Realize that some rules will morph into advice as your teenager gets older.* Rules change as kids mature. This is a natural part of the process of growing up. Wherever and whenever possible, look for opportunities to downgrade rules to advice or suggestions. It's to your advantage to be a mentor, teacher, and encourager rather than a "policeman" or "bad guy."

7. *Remember that rules need to be reviewed, updated, and sometimes even dumped.* Keep your rules clear and current. If there are any that can be expunged from the books—for example, "No feeding oatmeal into the VCR" isn't particularly relevant when your former toddler is a high school senior—then by all means get rid of them. It will make life simpler and easier for everyone in the family.

For further help, it might be worth your while to make an appointment with a family counselor who's experienced in dealing with these issues. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see "[How to](#)

[Reach Us](#)” for more information.¹³

In Other Words ...

“Here are some key principles that can help you avoid common problems in this area:

- “1. Have as few rules as possible.
- “2. Make the rule specific and quantitative.
- “3. Be sure you can enforce the rule.
- “4. Ask yourself, ‘Is this a hill worth dying on?’
- “5. Be sure your motive—your reason for this rule—is a good one.
- “6. Realize that some rules will morph into advice as your teenager gets older.
- “7. Remember that rules need to be reviewed, updated, and sometimes even dumped.”¹⁴

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Boundaries with Teens* by Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2007)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg

- Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Fighting Over Son's Long Hair

Question

There's constant conflict in our household over the length of my son's hair. My husband and I always have to tell him to go and get his hair cut; if we didn't, I think he'd let it grow down over his shoulders. He usually complies, but not without a lot of resistance and foot-dragging. We've told him over and over that the Bible specifically forbids men to wear long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14), but he doesn't seem overly impressed with that argument. What should we do?

Answer

We suggest that this is one of those situations in which you'd be astute to "pick your battles wisely." In general, we don't think it's wise to start a war over issues like hair style or length unless the alterations are extreme.

In particular, we'd advise you to stay away from the biblical argument. That approach might backfire; you don't want to turn your son off to the Christian faith over something as trivial as hair length. Besides, when Paul says that "the very nature of things" teaches us long hair on a man is a "disgrace" to him (1 Corinthians 11:14), we have to realize that *context* is critical to an accurate interpretation of the text. In an important sense, it really isn't fair to use this statement against a boy who's reluctant to visit the barber.

The passage in which the verse in question occurs—1 Corinthians 11:3-16—is difficult to apply because it was written to a very specific audience within a very specific cultural setting. In New Testament times, it was common practice for women to cover their heads in public and during worship as an expression of submission and commitment to their husbands. If a woman went out with her head uncovered, it was considered a sign of loose morals or public disgrace. Long hair, as should be clear to any reader of this text, was looked upon in that society as a type of "covering." A man, according to the apostle, needs no such "covering," since "he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man" (verse 7). What "nature" teaches us, then, is

simply that men and women are different and have different roles. In other words, Paul is underscoring the importance of the distinction between male and female. Hair length is a secondary issue, since the means of acknowledging or signifying this distinction can differ from culture to culture. But the principle remains the same.

If you'd like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you're welcome to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“‘When my son initially came home having tinted the top of his head,’ one father said, ‘I have to admit I was a little startled and began to call him “Golden Boy” (or “Margarine Head” in my less sensitive moments). But as I grew used to it, I realized it wasn’t a point worth arguing over, just a phase he was going through.’

“A mom said, ‘Who really cares if their hair is shaved funny or dyed a pretty color that you see only on rainbows? I’d rather have my kid come home with hair that makes me cringe than to rebel through the use of drugs. The rule I’ve had in our house is that I will pay for a standard haircut, but anything else comes out of their own pockets.’”¹⁵

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Finding the Best Solution to Any Conflict](#)" by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Handling Fashion Battles with Teen Daughter

Question

Clothing and fashion are becoming a real battleground for me and my teenage daughter. She insists on wearing outfits that reveal way too much. I won't even begin to tell you what we go through when it's time to shop for bathing suits. What can I do?

Answer

As the parent, you're the boss. This doesn't mean you should be harsh or uncaring with your daughter, or that you don't need to listen carefully to her opinions. But in cases like this it's entirely appropriate to say, "My house, my rules."

Remember, the family is not a democracy. Teens have to understand that this is not a question of a simple difference of opinion between equals; when push comes to shove, there are times when the only correct response on their part is to get with the program and bow to parental authority. Our sex-saturated society has created a situation in which moms and dads have no choice except to take decisive action. They simply *must* set guidelines and see that they're followed.

If they're to be effective, those rules will have to be reasonable and defensible. "My house, my rules" isn't necessarily the same thing as "Because I said so!" Your daughter will be more likely to cooperate if she can see the logic of your position. So take some time to sit down with her and discuss what your family believes and what the Bible has to say about humility, modesty, chastity, integrity, temptation, lust, and the importance of preserving her sexual purity. Get her to think about the reasons behind the rules. Ask questions such as, "Why do you suppose I have objections to that bathing suit?" or "How does your choice of clothing reflect your self-image and the way you

want to be perceived by other people?”

Keep the conversation congenial and two-sided, but don't give your teen the impression that you're negotiating or bargaining with her. The discussion should conclude with the establishment of some clear and mutually understandable guidelines for acceptable clothing choices. State plainly what the consequences will be if those guidelines are disregarded. If necessary, write down those guidelines and consequences and post them on the refrigerator or the door of your daughter's closet.

Once the rules have been set, don't make the common mistake of assuming they'll be followed automatically. It's up to you to take an active role in upholding them. This means being prepared for some fights; like it or not, conflict is part of the job description of every parent of teens. When your daughter pushes back, stand your ground. If she buys inappropriate clothing in direct defiance of your standards, don't be afraid to confiscate and return or dispose of it. If she hits you with, "Amy's parents let *her* wear this kind of top," or "Jody's mom isn't as strict and old-fashioned as you are," simply remind her that Amy and Jody don't live at your house. Don't fly off the handle or lose your cool. Just keep your word and quietly implement the consequences you put in place at the time of instituting the program.

Remember to be sensible, patient, and fair throughout this process. Don't pass any *ex post facto* laws. In other words, if your daughter bought immodest clothing prior to having this discussion with you, don't punish her for breaking rules that didn't exist at the time of the purchase. Demonstrate your good faith by buying the clothes back from her before disposing of them. Then say, "From this point forward, these are the guidelines we'll be following in this household."

To sum up:

- Clarify what's acceptable and what isn't.
- Buy back any inappropriate items your daughter purchased prior to the agreement.
- Set guidelines for the future.
- Be ready to put up with the guff when it comes (as it certainly will).

If you're a single mother, you'll probably need some help and support along the way. Talk to other moms of teens who are dealing with similar issues. If necessary, set up an appointment with a pastor, a church youth leader, or a professional counselor. You can also contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department for an over-the-phone consultation if you think it might be useful to discuss your questions with a member of our team. Our counselors will be happy to speak with you. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Should you be concerned about the clothes your daughter is wearing? Absolutely! First of all, it’s important to explain to your daughter how men and women are different. Explain that women are generally “turned on” by relationships, courtship, and romance. Men, on the other hand, are visual and are aroused by what they see....

“The discussion of how men are visually attracted allows you to explain to your daughter that wearing revealing, sexy clothing turns boys on. It could lead to date rape or sexual involvement for your daughter—though it would never excuse such a response. At the very least, wearing immodest clothing can cause sexual temptation or frustration for the guys she encounters.”¹⁶

—The *Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Prevent the Sexualization of Your Daughter](#),” a series of articles by Vicki Courtney
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the

- Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Should I Let My Teenage Girls Wear Pants?

Question

I was raised in a conservative Christian home where modesty in behavior and apparel were always stressed as matters of the highest importance for young girls. In particular, my mother made sure I understood that women should never wear pants, since “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this” (Deuteronomy 22:5). Nowadays women wear pants all the time—not only around the house or in the yard but even at church. This really bothers me, especially when my teenage daughters act like my concerns are crazy. How do I teach my teenage daughters to dress appropriately in a society like this?

Answer

With all due respect, we can’t help feeling that you’re “majoring in minors” and missing the point of the biblical passage you quoted. As we see it, “appropriateness” in men’s and women’s clothing is a concept that changes from culture to culture and from one historical period to the next. Garments meant for a man in one time and place may not be the same as those meant for a man in another context. This is one of those instances in which the Bible has to be read and interpreted against the background of the culture and historical period in which it was written.

A quick historical survey of male and female dress should be sufficient to illustrate the point. Among ancient peoples only the Celts seem to have developed trousers as a standard item of apparel for men. In Israel, Greece, and Rome, males generally wore garments we might describe as “skirts.” We can safely assume, then, that when Moses spoke of “men’s clothing,” he was *not* thinking of pants. From a scriptural perspective, the important thing is the principle—i.e., men should be men and women should be women—not a

particular garment or the specific style of clothing that is predominant among any group of people at any given moment in history. And it's been a long time since pants were perceived as an exclusively male item of clothing in American society.

Where your teenage daughters are concerned, we'd suggest that you keep in mind the principle in Ephesians 6:4: "Do not exasperate your children." Don't back down when a disagreement involves beliefs and values you consider essential, but be careful about exerting too much control in areas that are relatively inconsequential.

Avoid trying to exercise too much control over your girls' wardrobe. If garments sport words or images that are violent or offensive, then of course they need to go. The same thing can be said about attire that's blatantly sexually provocative. When it comes to pants, however, we feel pretty strongly that you need to set your upbringing aside and find a way to compromise with contemporary culture. You don't want to rock the boat unnecessarily.

If you'd like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, Focus on the Family has a team of counselors who would love to speak with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with a counselor. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"If you're concerned that your teen's clothes are sending the wrong message to others, sit down and talk about it. Ask questions like these:

- “• ‘If you wear a shirt that shows a particular band or product (beer, for example), would people think you are endorsing it?’

- “• ‘What do you think when you see a guy wearing his pants way too low?’

- “• ‘When you see a girl who's dressed in a provocative or revealing outfit, what thoughts about her go through your mind?’

- “• ‘What do you want people to think about you?’ ...

“In general, issues surrounding a teen's clothing choices and hairstyle can be clarified by answering one question: Is this a matter of preference, or is there a moral issue here?”¹⁷

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Why Christian Kids Rebel* by Dr. Tim Kimmel (Thomas Nelson, 2004)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Lazy Teenagers

Question

My two teenagers are extremely lazy. They won't help me around the house, and they consistently wait until the last minute to do their homework. As a single parent, I usually don't have the energy to make them get down to work. How do I break this negative pattern?

Answer

You may think this sounds simplistic, but there's really no way around it: The best thing you can do for your teens is to establish clear house rules on chores and homework, and then follow through. You'll need to be consistent and firm, even when you're tired or frustrated. If you're not, you're basically teaching your kids that it's okay to be selfish and irresponsible.

Unless you make some major changes in your parenting style now, your children are going to have a difficult future ahead of them. In a few short years they'll be out of the house and living in the "real world." If you haven't taught them personal responsibility and self-discipline, how are they going to succeed in college or hold down a job?

One method you might use to encourage your kids to be more helpful and responsible involves something psychologists call "Premack's Principle" (originally identified by David Premack in 1965). This principle states that preferred behaviors can be used to reinforce unpreferred behaviors. This means that a less desirable activity needs to be completed before a person engages in a more desirable one—as in "You have to finish your vegetables (unpreferred) before you can eat any ice cream (preferred)."

Here's how you might apply this principle with your teens. Hold a family meeting, perhaps after dinner when everyone is in a good mood. Tell your kids how much you love them. Explain that, as their mother, you are responsible to prepare them to be successful in life. Admit that you haven't been doing a very good job of that lately, and make it clear that you're going to try to fix that by

establishing some new household rules. One will be that all homework and chores must be done immediately after school, before your kids are allowed to engage in “fun” activities, such as talking on the phone, chatting online, watching TV, listening to music, or going out with friends.

You can also build in some extra incentives using a point system. Each time your teens complete a chore to your satisfaction or receive a good mark on their homework, they earn points. These can be cashed in for privileges or enjoyable activities like going to a movie on the weekend or a trip to the mall.

Remember that it’s not enough to set up rules and establish a point system. Everything depends on your willingness to follow through. Stick with it even when you don’t feel like being tough. And don’t allow yourself to get sucked into arguments about the finer points of the new standards. Put everything in writing; draw up a contract that clearly spells out the rules and the rewards. Each of you should sign your names to the contract and post it on the refrigerator. If you adhere to the plan faithfully for a few weeks, you should start to see some positive changes in your teenagers’ behavior.

For further help, it might be worth your while to make an appointment with a family counselor who is experienced in dealing with these issues. Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“The following factors may fuel your teen’s reluctance to seek employment.

“• Being intimidated by the process. He’s inexperienced and has no idea what it takes to get a job. Gently walk him through the steps and remind him of the qualities he has that will make him an asset to an employer.

“• Not recognizing the value of hard work. This may be especially true for bright teens who are used to succeeding with minimal effort....

“• Following your example. Consider the signals your son may be picking up from you about the working world. Do you complain about your job? If so, he may be reluctant to subject himself to the same misery. Try to present a more balanced view of what it’s like to work.

“• Downright laziness. If you’ve dealt with the other possible causes and your teen still refuses to seek employment, maybe he’s just committed to

avoiding labor.... It may be time to tighten the purse strings. Let his need for spending money, car insurance, or other items motivate him to get a job.”¹⁸

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Motivating Kids to Clean Up](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Teen Spends Too Much Time with Friends

Question

Our teenager has been spending all his time with friends. He's never available to take part in family activities. What should we do?

Answer

Relax. A good portion of your teen's behavior is part of the normal developmental process. Between the ages of six and twelve a child's need to identify with his peer group starts to take precedence over his sense of identification with parents and family. This continues through the teen years and usually concludes with complete separation and independence by age eighteen or twenty. To resist this natural pulling away only hinders growth and creates unnecessary tension in the household.

You can make your son's transition from childhood to adulthood smoother and more navigable if you keep the following suggestions in mind.

First, as difficult as this sounds, you need to reassess your own motives. Is it possible that you have selfish motives for wanting your child to stay close to you? Do you have a hidden emotional need that you're expecting him to fulfill? Are you afraid of letting go and seeing him make mistakes on his own? If so, you need to realize that these are *your* problems, not his.

Once you've settled these questions, you need to find a way to embrace and affirm the shift that's occurring in your teen's outlook. In other words, allow for separation while simultaneously helping him realize that he's wanted at home, too. It's better to bend with the winds of change than snap under their pressure. Since his peers are so important to him, you should start thinking in terms of encouraging him to develop a positive social life and form healthy friendships. You can't actually choose his friends for him, of course, but you can increase his chances of making good choices by shaping his environment. Help him get involved with a solid, interesting church youth group. Urge him to take part in its missions trips, sports, or other activities. If he enjoys music or

drama, he may benefit from working with the church worship team if you have one.

Another way to have a positive influence in this area is to host activities for your son's friends. For instance, you could throw an after-homecoming party or organize a summer barbecue. This will provide you with a window into your teen's peer group as well as a discreet and relaxed opportunity to chaperone his interaction with friends. You might also encourage him to invite friends to take part in family events. While there's certainly a place for "family-only" activities, there's no reason why you can't devise additional outings that are more inclusive. If you go on a ski trip, let him bring a couple of buddies along. He'll be less resistant to family outings if you design them to be more attractive from his point of view.

If you'd like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you're welcome to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.¹⁹

In Other Words ...

"When our son, David, turned 16, he started driving and spending more and more time with his friends and away from home. At that point, my wife and I just—I don't know—*backed off*. No, we didn't just back off, we *checked out*. ...

"In essence, we relinquished our influence to his peers.... In his junior year of high school, his grades started slipping and he got into a few fights at school. He quit the basketball team when he didn't think he was getting enough playing time. And he all but dropped out of the church youth group, where he'd once been on the leadership team....

"Now I'm pretty sure our lack of involvement, encouragement, and prodding had a lot to do with it. I really regret that."²⁰

—Steven, age 52, quoted in *Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Family Time and Relationships](#)," a series of articles by various authors

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Teen Doesn't Want to Move with Family

Question

A job change is requiring our family to move out of state. We have a teenager in high school who says he doesn't want to move with us; he'd rather move in with friends and graduate from the school he's currently attending. Should we let him stay?

Answer

Your son's reaction isn't uncommon. Neither is the plan he's come up with. There are a number of factors to take into account as you decide how to respond to his proposal.

As a rule, it's wise to avoid fragmenting your family if at all possible. We suggest that you sit down with your son and tell him that he's an important part of the household. Make it clear that you have no desire to be separated from him permanently—at least not until he's old enough to move out and establish a new life on his own. Help him face up to the fact that, for reasons beyond anyone's control, your entire family—of which he is a member—needs to relocate. He may not like it. He may be disappointed. He may protest loudly. But in the end he has to accept reality.

This doesn't mean you can't be flexible. You don't want to break up the family, but you may find it advisable to leave some members of the household behind *temporarily* if the move will happen when there's only a month or two left in the school semester. This is especially worth considering if it's your teen's senior year. In that case, one option would be to have the job-changing parent go ahead to the new city while the rest of the family waits for the school year to end. If this isn't possible, explore the possibility of putting your son's plan into effect. Find a family (preferably one you know well) that might be willing to take him on as a boarder until the term is over. If he's graduating, plan to return for the commencement ceremonies. Before leaving, make sure all medical releases and records, as well as all legal and financial issues, are

available to and understood by the host family. And make it clear when your son is expected to join you.

It's important to remember that a major move can be difficult for every member of the family. If you need assistance dealing with the emotional aspects of relocation, Focus on the Family's Counseling staff can provide you with referrals to qualified Christian therapists practicing in your local area. They'd also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Share the news [about your upcoming move] with everyone in the family as soon as possible. There will be at least three questions you will need to answer:

"1. Why are we moving?

"2. Where are we going?

"3. When will we move?

"Spend some time explaining each answer and give as much information as you can. The more time your children have to process everything you've told them, the better."²¹

—Susan Miller

Need More Help?

Online

- [Just Moved Ministry](#) provides "hope for the uprooted woman."
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* by Susan Miller (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1995)
- *But Mom, I Don't Want to Move!* by Susan Miller (Focus on the Family,

2004)

- “How Moving Impacts Kids,” *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Susan Miller
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

Teen Upset by Major Move

Question

We recently made a major move without realizing what a heavy toll it would take on our kids. We now have a teenager who's depressed and angry. She won't talk about anything but our old home, and her grades are beginning to slide. What can we do?

Answer

You can begin by making an attempt to get inside her head. Enter into her emotions. Try to understand how hard it is to be the “new kid in town.” Perhaps you had a similar experience during your childhood. If so, pull it up and see if you can get in touch with the feelings you went through.

Try picturing your daughter's situation in the following terms. Perhaps she's spent her whole life in the same place, has always earned great grades, is respected by her friends, and has built a good reputation at church and school. Suddenly she finds herself in a new city, and she's keenly aware that her parents are expecting a repeat performance. Unfortunately, it's not that simple—not from her perspective. In the new school, she has no identity. She's the new girl; no reputation precedes her. She's looking at rebuilding her life from the ground up, and she has to do it in the face of potential resistance from peers who don't know anything about her. Any way you look at it, it's a hard row to hoe.

It's not hard to see that your daughter desperately needs your help. If she's to avoid getting stuck in a slough of discouragement, you'll have to invest the time and energy required to come alongside her and walk with her through this difficult period of transition. You can do this by talking with her about your own pain and sadness at having to leave the old life behind. Express your feelings openly and invite her to do the same. By sharing these emotions, you can strengthen the family ties that bind you together. In the meantime, there's no reason why you can't maintain past friendships via phone calls, e-mails, online

social networking, and occasional visits. You can do all this while building a new life and seeking out ways to get involved in your new community—through sports, a church youth group, or a service organization, for example.

This is one result of the move you probably weren't anticipating, but it's also one of the most important. Handled appropriately, it could be a blessing in disguise. If you seize this opportunity and make the most of it, you may end up discovering a whole new dimension of intimacy, understanding, and friendship in your relationship with your daughter. If, on the other hand, she doesn't get the support she needs, she may be driven to seek social acceptance by following the path of least resistance with her peers. This could lead to the development of an extremely negative lifestyle.

It's possible, of course, that your daughter's condition is more serious than our suggestions would seem to indicate. If you have reason to believe that her depression is clinical in nature, we'd strongly encourage you to seek out professional counseling. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"When we moved, we encouraged our son to participate in both a team sport (or another group activity) and an individual sport (or activity) in high school. That gave him the opportunity to meet and interact with a number of other teenagers as well as one-on-one. It also taught him how to be a team player as well as build confidence in an individual sport.

"We made an intentional effort for our house to become 'the hangout' for Bill and Ginger's friends when we moved. Food and a listening ear were always available at the Millers' house, along with unconditional love and a nonjudgmental spirit.... Things haven't changed that much over the years; teenagers still want a safe place to be, unconditional love, acceptance, a listening ear—and food."²²

—Susan Miller

Need More Help?

Online

- [Just Moved Ministry](#) provides “hope for the uprooted woman.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *After the Boxes Are Unpacked* by Susan Miller (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1995)
- *But Mom, I Don't Want to Move!* by Susan Miller (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- “How Moving Impacts Kids,” *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Susan Miller
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

Setting Music Standards for Teens

Question

I spent some time on a car trip by myself the other day, and decided to listen to my teenage son's favorite radio station. I was stunned by some of the song lyrics. I know I need to do something, but what? How do I set a fair and reasonable music standard?

Answer

This is no easy undertaking, but it's extremely important. Your teen needs to understand the values, standards, and moral guidelines that define your family's beliefs and govern life under your roof. A frank discussion of music and entertainment choices can provide the perfect opportunity to broach this subject and lay some of these issues on the table.

We suggest that you sit down with your teen and speak candidly about your concerns. Try to do this in a non-threatening way. Enter into the conversation with an attitude that encourages rather than squelches communication. Don't lecture, blame, or condemn. Don't be too hard on anybody, including yourself. Be patient and ready to listen. And remember that there's something more important at stake here than entertainment choices—namely, your long-term relationship with your teen. You don't want to make your case about music at the cost of alienating your child.

When you've taken time to hear what he's thinking, state your own position as calmly and carefully as possible. Here are a few talking points you'll want to include.

First, as a parent, you have the right to limit what comes into your home (whether it's played openly or on headphones). This includes screening radio stations. Don't get sidetracked by arguments about privacy or rights. As a dependent minor living under your guardianship, your teenager has rights that are subject to limitation.

Next, state clearly what's in and out of bounds, and be sure to explain why.

This may require some in-depth research on your part. Be careful to focus on lyrics rather than musical style. You're entitled to your own biases—for example, you might not like rap or hip hop—but the standard you set should reflect content rather than stylistic preferences. Take time to read song lyrics together, consulting CD liner notes or websites; discuss them before making your final decisions.

Once you've established a standard, take pains to communicate it in plain English. Put it in writing if you think this might be helpful. In the beginning you may want to pre-approve music purchases until you think your teen understands and has had a chance to internalize the criteria. Be ready to return CDs that don't measure up (many music stores allow this). Later on, if your child buys a CD that fails the test, he'll be faced with the tough choice of exchanging it or simply losing the cash. Some of the music acquired prior to your setting the household standard could be handled as negotiable; as a gesture of good faith, you might opt to replace those CDs with approved discs or buy them back at a depreciated rate. This could be a difficult part of the process for both of you, so be patient and keep the lines of communication open.

Finally, realize your limitations. You aren't going to be able to reshape your child's entire music diet. You can't be with him everywhere he goes, and you certainly aren't in a position to dictate his likes and dislikes. So try to focus on the portions of his environment that you *can* control: your home and your car. The goal is to teach discernment, not enforce a legalistic code. Like every other task a parent undertakes, this one should be approached with patience, understanding, and love.

If you'd like to discuss these concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.²³

In Other Words ...

"Once, my son was being influenced by a friend to move into the punk scene. His music sounded more and more angry. His dress was becoming more and more symbolic of the culture. I pointed out that he was beginning to billboard the punk culture and not Christianity....

"We agreed that he wouldn't listen to any music with bad language, sexual immorality, or anger (see Colossians 3:5-10). And he was not allowed to wear clothes that could be viewed as promoting a hostile culture. As an example of respect for our agreement, he continued to wear a chrome bike-

chain necklace but hung a cross on it.”²⁴

—Jim Weidmann

Need More Help?

Online

- [Plugged In](#) provides reviews of music, movies, and other media from a Christian perspective
- “[The Family Media Guardian](#),” a series of articles by Rhonda Handlon
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Teen Wants a Tattoo

Question

Our sixteen-year-old has told us that he wants to get a tattoo. We've held off on any serious discussion of the matter, in part because we're so shocked that we don't know what to say. Doesn't the Bible forbid tattoos? How should we, as responsible Christian parents, react to this request?

Answer

Let's tackle the biblical aspect of your dilemma first. Our view is that the Bible has nothing specific to say to Christians on the question of the permissibility of tattoos. It's true that the practice was forbidden in the Old Testament law. Leviticus 19:28 says, "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD." The difficulty is that it's not exactly clear how this commandment relates to the modern situation, since, in its day, it was probably directed against practices associated with pagan idolatry. (Something similar seems to be behind the injunction laid down in the previous verse, Leviticus 19:27—"Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.") The custom of making "cuts" in the body was a heathen way of attracting the gods' attention by arousing their pity. In our culture tattoos are generally viewed as being cosmetic or aesthetic.

That's not to mention that Christians are called to live by grace, not by the law. The epistle to the Hebrews makes it clear that the purely cultural and ceremonial aspects of the Old Testament law—rules having to do with burnt offerings, dietary restrictions, agricultural methods, capital punishment for witches, and the pagan associations of customs such as tattooing or cutting the edges of the beard—were merely "shadows" of the reality that was to come in Christ (see Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). As such, they are no longer to be regarded as binding upon New Testament believers.

In more ways than one, then, it would be a big mistake to resolve this issue by hitting your teen over the head with the Bible. Apart from the theological

weaknesses of such an approach, its authoritarian harshness most likely would only squelch meaningful dialogue between you and your son. It might even inspire a rebellious backlash. You'd be better advised to get him talking about his reasons and motivations for wanting a tattoo. Ask questions like, "What would a tattoo mean to you? When you think about getting one, how does it make you feel? Would you be angry or disappointed if we said no? Why?"

The point, of course, is to understand your teenager's heart. Some teens want a tattoo in order to be "cool" or to feel accepted by their peers. Others think it will make them appear stronger, tougher, more self-reliant, and capable of facing their fears. Still others see it as a way of proving that they're grown-up—in which case a lecture from mom and dad about rules and regulations will only aggravate the situation.

As parents, you can impose your will if you want to; in some instances, if a child is unreasonably belligerent and self-willed, this may be the only thing you *can* do. But in most cases a hard-line approach is almost certain to prove counterproductive. It's far preferable to get a handle on the deeper issues—for example, insecurity, poor self-image, a desire to be liked by others—and then explore several ways of addressing them together.

If the conversation is kept reasonable, conciliatory, and mutually respectful, then at some point you should have an opportunity to express *your* feelings and explain your reasons for not wanting your son to get a tattoo. Perhaps the most sensible way of doing this is to point out that tattoos are permanent. Once they're on, they won't come off unless they're removed by a painful and very expensive process. Urge your teen to think seriously about this. Ask him, "How do you think you might feel about having a tattoo when you're thirty, forty, or fifty years old? How do you suppose it might affect your life and your career?" From here you can move into a discussion about the basic idea of permanency—a concept increasingly foreign in modern culture—and the connection between present actions and future consequences.

If your teen won't budge, you might suggest a compromise: A temporary henna tattoo could be a way of making a trial run without taking on a permanent commitment. If he's willing, you could agree to revisit the question when he turns eighteen. Remember, when dealing with adolescents there are times when you have to know how to give a little in order to maintain influence over the long haul.

It's important to add that there are medical and legal considerations that need to be discussed with your teenager as you navigate this question. In the first place, tattooing is a procedure that can have some troubling health consequences, including the following:

- local bacterial infections of the skin
- allergic reactions (e.g., rash or itching at the tattoo site)

- other reactions, such as granulomas and keloids, that can disfigure the skin
- more serious infections, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and HIV, that can be spread when tattoo needles are contaminated with infected blood

In light of these health hazards, it goes without saying that do-it-yourself tattoos—the kind your son might get in a makeshift “tattoo parlor” (read: a friend’s garage or basement)—should be avoided. And that’s not to mention the cost, discomfort, and potential ineffectiveness of attempts to remove unwanted tattoos in the future.

In the second place, you should be aware that, precisely because of the aforementioned medical issues, commercial tattoo parlors are subject to a variety of legal regulations. This usually includes restrictions on the age of the customer. In nearly every state, tattooing an individual younger than 18 is either illegal or requires written parental consent. This means that you, as the parent, have the legal authority to veto your child’s decision to get a tattoo. We’d encourage you to exercise that right freely.

One final thought: Where tattoos are concerned, we would have serious concerns about any teen or young adult who is tempted to go to extremes—by covering his or her head, neck, or face with tattooed images, for example. From our perspective, there’s a point at which this ceases to be “body art” and crosses a line into self-mutilation, an issue that would need to be addressed by a trained psychologist or counselor. Parents should also take steps to educate themselves about images and patterns that are associated with gang membership or that carry drug-affiliated meanings.

If you’d like to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“As difficult as it may be, try to get your youngster to see things from a long-range view. Ask how she thinks her future husband would feel about the flower near her belly button. What would your son’s future wife think about that heart on his shoulder (especially if it contains someone else’s initials)? Talk with your daughter about what will happen fifty years down the road when her grandchildren ask why Grandma has that little butterfly by her ankle.

Encourage your children to weigh the cost of eventual embarrassment.”²⁵

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Conflict with Your Teen](#),” a series of articles by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, MD, primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

“Forcing” Teen to Attend Church

Question

Our teenager used to like attending church with us, but now has no interest in going at all. We want to respect his independence and give him the freedom to make age-appropriate decisions, but it also worries us to think that he may be drifting away from his faith. Should we insist that he come with us?

Answer

A great deal depends on the precise age of your teen. As you probably know, the challenges facing parents of middle schoolers are very different from those confronting moms and dads of high school students. In fact, the distance between seventh and twelfth grade can sometimes seem astronomical. Since you didn't provide details, we'll consider both possibilities.

If your child is a middle schooler, it's fairly easy to put your foot down and say, “You *will* attend church with us because that's what we do in this family.” But this may not be the wisest course of action. It's usually far more effective to identify the reasons for a child's dissatisfaction with church. Instead of laying down the law, try to draw him out with a few questions: “What is it that you don't like about church or Sunday school? What do you think the leaders should do to make it better? Can you imagine a situation in which you would get excited about going to church on Sundays?” If you can get at the root of the problem, you'll be in a much better position to address it.

At this age it's unlikely that your child is grappling with serious intellectual questions about the validity of the Christian faith. Most middle schoolers tend to focus on peer group issues. They want to have friends, to be liked and accepted, to fit in with the crowd. If your church doesn't have a strong youth program, or if your teen has been unable to penetrate the group's “inner core,” you may want to look for another congregation where conditions are more conducive to his involvement—a place that sponsors lots of fun social gatherings, weekend outings, home Bible studies, summer camps, service

projects, and other events that draw teens in and motivate them to stay around.

This doesn't have to mean breaking all ties with your home church. If nothing else works, think about dropping your teen off at another location on your way to Sunday morning worship. But be sure to get personally acquainted with the new group, its leadership, the denomination it's associated with, its doctrinal orientation, and the quality of the teaching it offers.

If your teen is older—say 16, 17, or 18—the case is somewhat different. Scary as it can be for parents, it's sometimes a good, normal, healthy, and desirable thing for adolescents on the verge of young adulthood to re-evaluate their church experience, question their childhood beliefs, and even wrestle with doubts about the meaning of life and the existence of God. This is all part of the process of maturation and individuation. Each of us has to go through it if we're to reach the place where Christ becomes real to us in a personal way and where our faith is genuinely our own.

If something like this is going on in your teenager's mind, an iron-fisted approach could have the effect of turning him off to Christianity for good. This is a delicate situation and requires an artist's touch. We'd suggest that you initiate a dialogue, but on a deeper level this time. See if you can figure out what your teen is thinking and why. Is he in spiritual crisis, or is he merely bored? If it's a case of simple disinterest, what can be done to turn things around? If, on the other hand, he's grappling with serious doubts, spend some time hashing out his questions with him. If you don't have the answers he needs, direct him to someone who does—a pastor, a youth leader, or another strong Christian adult. Where spiritual matters are concerned, it's a good idea for older teens to have adult friends and mentors besides Mom and Dad with whom they can discuss their deepest feelings.

If you have additional questions or need help applying these suggestions, Focus on the Family's staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"If I could sum up the problems with teenagers and church attendance, it would be this: relationships. With teenagers, relationships are essential to everything. When asked to attend a particular function at church, a teenager will never reply, 'What doctrinal truths will you be teaching?' Instead, they want to know, 'Who's going to be there?' (And will there be food?)

"Many teenagers wonder, *Does anyone like me? Am I her friend? Will I be rejected? Am I cool? Am I popular?*

“Nowhere is it more important for them to feel loved and accepted than at church. If they feel rejected by their peers within their youth group, they’ll also feel rejected by God. Work with your youth leadership to try to minimize cliques within the youth group.”²⁶

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Preventing Runaways

Question

We're afraid that our teenager might run away. Is there something we can do to prevent it?

Answer

It would be helpful to know exactly why you think your teen might want to run away. Not being familiar with the situation in your home, it's hard for us to respond specifically. The fact that you're coming to us with this question, however, indicates that there may be a serious lack of parent-child communication in your household.

Instead of operating on the basis of anxieties and suspicions, start by addressing the issue openly. Why not come right out and ask your teenager if he's been thinking about running away? You may not get an honest answer, but the non-verbal aspects of his response may give you some idea about whether you're on the right track.

If your fears are validated, you might want to ask yourself a few questions before going further. Is there something about your home that might inspire an adolescent to dream of escape? Would your teen accuse you of being unfairly critical, strict, unloving, or unsupportive? If so, are his feelings justified in any way? Where there's room for improvement on your part, be humble and sensitive enough to admit it. If you can confess your own shortcomings honestly and openly, you may be able to defuse the situation and put your relationship with your child on a new footing before it's too late.

On the other hand, if you're dealing with a kid who's simply rebellious, strong-willed, and unreasonable, and if you have sufficient cause to believe that he's at the point of putting his plan into action, do what you can to make it harder for him to succeed. Limit access to vehicles and financial resources. Restrict him from associating with any friends who might be in on the plot. Depending on the severity of the case, you may also want to enlist the help and

support of a trusted pastor or youth leader.

In the meantime, lovingly tell your teen that, should he ever decide to run away, you hope he'll be wise enough to keep himself safe. Make it clear that if this happens, you will immediately report him to the police as a runaway. Educate him on the results of involving the authorities. This may sound heartless, but he needs to be aware of the potential consequences.

For further help, it might be worth your while to make an appointment with a family counselor who's experienced in dealing with these issues. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Advice [I would give] to teens who struggle in their relationship with their parents and authority in general....

"When [you] move out of your parents' house, all that freedom you could hardly wait for ... will not exist.... I've been there, and I know....

"Besides jobs and landlords, there will still be lots of rules to follow. Life will always carry with it people who are in authority over you....

"When I was rebelling I broke every rule—twice! But in doing so, I made life for myself very, very difficult. I fought the law—and the law won....

"God puts it plainly: 'Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.... The authorities that exist have been established by God' (Romans 13:1).

"Why fight it? God always wins. And we win too, when we obey Him."²⁷

—Wendi Hayden English

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Teen Rebellion](#)," a series of articles by various authors

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Why Christian Kids Rebel* by Dr. Tim Kimmel (Thomas Nelson, 2004)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Should Adult Child “Obey” Parents?

Question

The Bible says that children should “obey” their parents (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20). Now that our son is past eighteen he says this commandment no longer applies to him, and pretty much ignores what we say. But the Bible doesn’t make eighteen a magic number; our society does. At what point does an adult child become fully independent of his parents’ control?

Answer

There comes a time in every child’s life when he or she crosses the threshold into adulthood. In some ways this moment is culturally defined. In the Jewish tradition, for instance, a boy is considered a man at age thirteen. In contemporary America a young person comes of age and is empowered to vote at eighteen. The precise line of demarcation differs from society to society, and obviously an individual’s level of maturity plays an important role in this journey. But the basic idea remains the same, and the principle is biblical (see 1 Corinthians 13:11).

Once this line is crossed, the parent-child relationship is supposed to change in some ways. Your child is on the road to becoming your peer and equal rather than a dependent minor. He graduates into a position of self-responsibility, in which he becomes accountable to a higher authority—God Himself. In His eyes and under His jurisdiction, your child becomes a separate entity. Whether or not he takes immediate advantage of the opportunity, he has the right to leave home and make his own way in the world.

His personal decisions become something more than a matter of simple submission to Mom’s and Dad’s injunctions. He chooses whether to act on the basis of the wisdom you’ve imparted over the years, and out of an awareness of his personal responsibility to God. If he attends church, it should be because he wants to serve Christ and connect with His people—not because you “make him go.” If he avoids drugs and alcohol, it should be because he understands

the toll of substance abuse and wishes to honor his body as the temple of the Holy Spirit—not because he’s trying to “obey” his parents’ commands.

Does this mean it’s okay for him to adopt a dismissive attitude toward you or to disparage your values and opinions? No. There’s never any justification for treating another person with disrespect. What’s more, as your peer and equal, your child remains obligated to “submit” to you not as his parents but as fellow human beings and as his brother and sister in Christ (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5). There’s also no time or age limit attached to the biblical command to *honor* one’s parents. As Paul writes (quoting Exodus 20:12), “‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth’” (Ephesians 6:2-3).

On the other hand, “honor” does not necessarily imply that an adult child must do whatever his parents want him to do. For instance, a parent may wish that an adult child would accept every piece of advice the parent offers—plainly an unrealistic desire. He or she may also ask the adult child to behave in ways that are unhealthy, inadvisable, or downright damaging—for example, by requiring the child to have Sunday dinner at the parents’ house every week in spite of potential conflict with the child’s spouse. In cases like these, we believe it’s important for adult children to stand their ground firmly but lovingly.

If you’re finding this transition in the parent-child relationship a bit rocky or bumpy, you may need to step back and reassess your approach. It might be a good idea to sit down with your child and talk openly about your mutual expectations. Sometimes a ceremony or “rite of passage” (parallel to the Jewish Bar- or Bat-Mitzvah) can be helpful in redefining roles and establishing new boundaries.

If your child is still living at home, it’s particularly important to spell things out as clearly as possible. You need to be able to say, “As you approach adulthood, here’s what changes and here’s what stays the same.” Above all, resist the temptation to manipulate or control. You’re free to make as many rules as you like, but make sure they’re reasonable and deal with significant issues.

Speaking of control, it seems significant that you gave this word a prominent place in your question. Where there’s a struggle for control between parents and adult children, there are usually deeper issues beneath the surface—issues having to do with respect and boundaries.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our staff, we’d like to invite you to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“So the time has come. Now it’s time for us to become wiser parents who are aware of the new risks that the entry into adulthood brings but who trust that our heavenly Father’s good plans and purposes for our grown children will not fail.

“It’s time to believe they really do belong to God, not to us.

“Time to step back so our sons and our daughters can step forward with authentic freedom under God’s authority....

“It’s time to recognize and celebrate the passing of the proverbial torch to our adult children, and to bless our loved ones along the way.

“It’s their time, their turn, their journey now.”²⁸

—Debra Evans

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Defining ‘Successful Parenting.’”](#) a series of articles by Tim Sanford
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Setting Boundaries with Your Adult Children* by Allison Bottke (Harvest House, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Part 3: Health Matters

22

Teen Feels Sick on School Day Mornings

Question

Our teenager routinely complains of not feeling well on school day mornings. Interestingly enough, his symptoms usually disappear by mid-afternoon and rarely surface at all on weekends. How do we know if this is hypochondria, a scheme to get out of school, or a serious health problem?

Answer

There are no easy solutions to this, which you've probably learned the hard way. Maybe you've struggled with guilt upon discovering that your adolescent really *was* sick after you overruled his protests and sent him to school. Or perhaps you've extended compassion in the morning only to end up feeling "had" when he took off on his bike at the end of the day. Whatever the precise details of your situation, your experience is more common among parents of teens than you may realize.

If symptoms are frequent, ask your health-care provider to help sort things out. To get the most out of this consultation, spend time before the visit talking over the problem with your teenager, listing the problems (fatigue, headaches, etc.) and their characteristics (how often, how long, what helps, what makes it worse). Pinning down details in this way will help to provide some definition and eliminate unhelpful vagueness.

While you're at it, try to get a feel for the social weather at school, in the neighborhood, and at church. Questions with no obvious right or wrong answer ("Who do you like to hang around with?" or "What's your least favorite class?") may open the window to some current events and possibly tip you off about pressures contributing to the symptoms.

Ultimately, your teen's doctor will need to ask some questions, too,

including perhaps a little gentle probing into the issues of the patient's daily life. If the medical evaluation uncovers a specific diagnosis, be sure that both you and your adolescent understand what should be done about it—including the criteria for going to school versus staying home. If the problem doesn't appear to be an ongoing physical illness, all of you together should develop a game plan for dealing with mornings when he doesn't feel well and agree on the ground rules for school attendance.

If you do uncover personal or psychological issues that are contributing to the physical symptoms, don't back away from working toward solutions. Whether it's a hard-nosed teacher, local bullies, an acute absence of friendships, or some other emotion-jarring problem, your teenager needs to know that you're on his team and that you weren't born yesterday. Making progress in one or more of these areas will actually go a long way toward shortening his symptom list.

If you feel you need professional assistance to deal with this situation, don't hesitate to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our staff members would be more than happy to discuss this with you or your teen over the phone. They also can provide you with a list of professional therapists in your area who specialize in working with youth. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)"²⁹ for more information.

In Other Words ...

"If it looks as though the situation is out of hand (for example, your teenager is obviously upset, developing physical symptoms, or doesn't want to go to school because of the pressure) or the deck is stacked (points and grades in the class appear to depend on agreement with a teacher's ideology), you'll need to enter the arena.

"Schedule an appointment with the teacher to get his or her perspective on the situation. Ask an open question: 'Teresa seems to be having some problems in your class. I wonder what we can do to smooth things out.'"³⁰

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Every Child Can Succeed* by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, MD, primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Helping an Overweight Teen

Question

We have a teenager who's seriously overweight. How can we help him shed his excess pounds and shift his lifestyle and eating habits in a more healthy direction? We're afraid that if we do or say the wrong thing, he'll just feel worse about himself and maybe even eat more.

Answer

This is an area in which you need to proceed with caution. The wrong attitude and approach can generate a great deal of pain, shame, guilt, and anger. In particular, beware of putting a child or teenager on a “diet”—especially one that involves a significant number of food restrictions—without consulting a professional who is knowledgeable in this field.

The first thing you should do is determine whether your child is genuinely overweight. Among other things, this will involve calculating his body mass index (BMI), a number expressed as a ratio between an individual's height and weight. We strongly suggest that you see your physician or a dietitian for an expert analysis of your child's condition. You can also find BMI calculators on several websites, such as [this one](#).

Assuming that there is a real problem with your child's weight and its physical and emotional consequences, there are several action items to consider and a number of pitfalls to avoid if at all possible. We propose that you begin by taking the following steps.

1. *Get professional assistance, preferably from a registered dietitian who works with children and adolescents.* The kind of help you should seek from the dietitian is not a lecture about overeating and a highly restricted diet for your child, but information for the entire family as well as some positive engagement with and encouragement for your teen. A specialist in this field will be able to help you identify emotional, psychological, and family-based issues that may be contributing to the problem.

2. *Don't make a specific restrictive diet the focus of your efforts, except under unusual circumstances involving professional supervision.* The key to overcoming a weight problem is not diet but comprehensive change in attitude, behavior, and daily habits.

3. *At all costs, avoid nagging, name-calling, insults, or other forms of negativity as a tactic to "encourage" weight loss.* If he is truly overweight, your teen is probably receiving a heart-wrenching amount of this kind of treatment outside the home. It's crucial that he understands that your love and his worth as God's child and yours do not depend on what he weighs.

4. *Accentuate the positive.* What you are promoting is not endless deprivation but a whole new way of enjoying food. So go out of your way to praise good eating decisions instead of focusing on blocking bad ones.

5. *The whole family should be eating from the same meal plan, which can be healthy without being austere.* What's good and healthy for your overweight teen is good and healthy for everybody.

6. *Remember that gradual changes in eating habits (and thus weight) are more likely to succeed than "emergency" measures and drastic commando tactics.* An incremental approach will be more effective in the long run.

7. *While you can't ultimately force an overweight child to watch what he eats, you can take a number of steps to encourage better habits.* For example, you can plan regular meals and eliminate snacks. You can encourage your teen to eat slowly. You can phase out meals in front of the TV. And you can encourage physical activity in which everyone in the family participates.

Remember that, as with influencing your children in any area, there is no surefire, detailed plan that works for everyone. There are, however, some fundamental goals and principles that should give you a basic sense of direction as you work out the specifics for your own family. You'll find some helpful resources on the following list.³¹

In Other Words ...

"Attempting to drastically whip your teen's diet into shape is a high-risk strategy I'd caution against. Getting too strict at this age is likely to ignite resistance.

"This doesn't mean you can't lead by example, however. And it doesn't mean you can't keep your home free of the unhealthy, fat-producing fare so many have grown to love.

"Focus on reinforcing the benefits of eating healthful food, rather than nagging your teen about bad food. Parental proscriptions often make a banned

item all the more desirable; the simple act of saying ‘No’ often leads a youngster to look harder for ways around the barrier.”³²

—Robert S. Andersen, MD

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Eating Disorders

Question

I think my sixteen-year-old daughter has anorexia. It seems to me she's been on an extreme diet for at least a year—maybe longer—practically starving herself. I try to get her to eat more, but she's not interested—just very annoyed with me. She's still able to function, going to school and all that, but I'm afraid she's going to end up in the hospital or worse. A friend of mine says it could be a spiritual problem. What should I do?

Answer

There's a reason you've found it so hard to break this pattern. The starve-binge cycle—if that's the case with your daughter—is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual disorder that actually changes body chemistry, interfering with normal serotonin and endorphin levels. Change can be difficult and slow under these circumstances, but it's not impossible.

As your friend notes, there can be a spiritual component to this condition—as with many conditions. This isn't to say that it can be resolved by means of a simple regimen of prayer and Bible reading. But when confronting a challenge like an eating disorder, it can only help to confirm and strengthen your grasp of biblical truths concerning God's love for you and your daughter, His plan for your lives, and your identity in Christ. Yet it's also crucial to realize that knowledge by itself won't bring the full healing your daughter needs. It's going to take some serious work and professional help to apply this knowledge to your situation and put it into action. In addition to focusing on the spiritual part of the problem, you need to look at the mental, emotional, and physical factors as well.

As a first step in this direction, your daughter should be evaluated by a physician to determine the nature and extent of her problem. Depending on the results, the doctor may refer you to a therapist who specializes in eating disorders. If your daughter is in imminent physical danger, hospitalization or an

inpatient treatment program may be recommended.

If these specialists decide that your daughter's condition is serious but hasn't reached the crisis stage, counseling will still be needed. A therapist will want to explore the question of how and why your daughter's mind has become so intently focused on her weight. What are the origins of her eating disorder? Are there serious challenges in her life that she's not facing because they're too emotional or too overwhelming to think about? Is her extreme dieting an effort to control chaotic events or protect herself from frightening ones? Identifying these issues can sometimes be the key to the recovery process.

It's possible that your daughter has suffered a multitude of losses or a single significant loss that's never been dealt with. Perhaps she has experienced abuse or neglect. Relationships in your family might contribute to the problem. If those are in disarray, this may have something to do with the underlying causes of an eating disorder.

A skilled Christian counselor can help you sort through these issues. If you need assistance locating such a therapist, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our staff can provide you with a list of qualified counselors practicing in your area. They'd also be more than happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"While it is impossible to predict who might develop an eating disorder, parents can help reduce the risk in the following ways:

- “• Beware of perfectionism, especially in regard to weight or physical appearance....

- “• Beware of demands on an adolescent to ‘make weight’ for an athletic team, slim down for cheerleading or ballet, or subject the body to stringent dietary restrictions for any other reason....

- “• Eliminate—from your own and your family's conversations—jokes or demeaning comments about the appearance of others.

- “• Point out to your children how advertising and other media put forth images of beauty and body image that are out of reach for nearly everyone.

- “• Be a good role model in your own eating and exercise habits, and be careful about openly criticizing your own body appearance.

- “• Focus on relationships and building emotional intimacy in your family, rather than on food-related issues. Be aware of the purposes—beyond

relieving hunger—that food might be serving in your home.”³³

—*Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Eating Disorders and Kids](#),” a series of articles by Focus on the Family’s Youth Culture Department
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, MD, primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

What Should I Say About STIs?

Question

My 17-year-old daughter and her boyfriend have been going together for almost two years. They're good kids, and I've done what I can to teach my children that premarital sex is off limits. But I'm not naïve enough to think they couldn't be sexually active. The thought of pregnancy is scary enough, but sexually transmitted infections—at least some of them—can kill you. What can I tell her about those? I'm not looking forward to that conversation, but I feel like I have to say something.

Answer

You're right—it's not easy to talk about this subject. You're also right in saying that it's important to talk about it anyway.

If you're concerned that discussing STIs will give your daughter the impression that you assume she's sexually active, or that you don't trust her, you needn't be. Explain upfront that you're imparting information everyone needs to know, and that the danger of STIs is just one more reason why sex outside of marriage isn't part of God's plan.

Given the complexities of this subject, you may want to supplement your words with those of some experts. We recommend *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex* (Revell, 2013), which includes advice on how to wisely address sexuality as well as extensive details about STIs. In the meantime, we offer the following summary that might inform your conversation. It's a list of the most common sexually transmitted infections and the symptoms that usually accompany them. This data is provided only as a very general introduction; we *don't* recommend self-diagnosis on the basis of this information.

Chlamydia. This infection is now the most common bacterial STI in the United States. More than 900,000 cases are reported every year, but experts estimate the actual number is more than three times that many. In men,

chlamydia can cause a discharge from the penis that tends to be more watery and less profuse than with gonorrhea. Pain with the passage of urine is also less severe. In women, chlamydia may produce vague pelvic discomfort or pain with urination. Half of men and three out of four women experience no symptoms whatsoever. Whether or not symptoms are present, the disease can infect and damage a woman's reproductive organs and create a significant risk of infertility later in life. Assuming it's detected, a chlamydia infection normally responds to antibiotics.

Gonorrhea is another bacterial infection that is estimated to affect well over 600,000 Americans each year. Symptoms in males tend to be dramatic: a thick discharge from the penis accompanied by significant pain during the passage of urine. Many infected women have no symptoms, while others experience problems ranging in severity from mild discharges to abscesses in the pelvis requiring surgical treatment. In some cases extensive scarring of a woman's fallopian tubes may occur; depending on the extent of the damage, infertility may result. Once uniformly responsive to penicillin, gonorrhea must now be treated with other antibiotics.

Syphilis. Caused by a spiral-shaped organism known as a spirochete, syphilis is usually curable with penicillin—but resistant strains are now emerging. The initial sign of infection is a single painless ulcer, or chancre, which appears in the genital area (or wherever the initial point of contact was made). The chancre heals in two to six weeks without treatment and may even go unnoticed by the infected individual. A secondary phase occurs in six weeks to six months, producing a mild, non-specific rash or more serious changes in various parts of the body. If untreated, a third stage may develop years later, with life-threatening heart disease, central nervous system disturbances, and even insanity. Syphilis can be detected by a blood test. If the initial screen is positive, additional tests will be necessary to confirm the diagnosis and determine the proper course of treatment.

Herpes simplex virus (HSV). HSV Type 1 causes cold sores or fever blisters around the mouth or nose, though it can also cause genital infections through oral-genital contact. HSV Type 2 is most commonly spread by genital sexual contact. The first outbreak is usually the worst, with an irritating, sometimes painful cluster of blisters that gradually crust and fade over ten to fourteen days. Men usually see an eruption on the penis, though they may not realize its significance because it resolves without treatment. Women are frequently unaware of the infection, but some suffer extreme discomfort in the genital area. The virus is commonly transmitted through the skin or mucous membranes even when no blisters are present. This undoubtedly contributes to its high prevalence: About one in five sexually active single people acquires this virus every year in the United States. Once it enters a person's body, HSV

has the capacity for re-occurrence. Recurrent outbreaks may take place over months or years. Antiviral medications can limit the severity of herpes outbreaks. HSV is rarely life-threatening for adults, but for an infant infected during vaginal delivery it may produce serious long-term consequences or even death.

Human papillomavirus. Many who are infected with HPV never have any problem with it, and in 70 to 90 percent of women, HPV infections clear up within 12 to 24 months of detection. However, some types of the virus can cause soft, wartlike growths in the genital area, most of which respond to topical chemical treatment. But other varieties are associated with cellular abnormalities that can lead to cancer of the cervix and have also been implicated in cancers of the vulva, vagina, anus, and penis.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). This is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The virus is transmitted through semen, vaginal secretions, blood, and breast milk. Most HIV infections are transmitted during sexual contact, through contaminated needles, or by transfer from mother to baby during pregnancy. Careful screening of donated blood has now reduced the likelihood of infection from transfusions to less than 1 in 100,000. After causing an initial flu-like illness, HIV multiplies quietly within the immune system for years. The infected individual may feel perfectly well during this period but will be capable of transmitting the disease to others. Eventually the virus destroys the competence of the immune system, resulting in full-blown AIDS. Without adequate defenses, the body becomes vulnerable to a variety of devastating infections and some forms of cancer. At highest risk for this disease are people who have many sexual partners (especially male homosexuals) and those who are intravenous drug users. But HIV infections are not limited to those with high-risk lifestyles.

Hepatitis B. This is a viral infection of the liver transmitted through the same mechanisms as HIV. The majority of cases in adults resolve completely following a flu-like illness that includes fever, nausea, and jaundice. However, between 2 and 6 percent develop a chronic infection that can lead to cirrhosis or even cancer of the liver. Hepatitis B is one of two STIs—the other is HPV—for which a reliable vaccine has been developed. Current recommendations call for immunizing all infants, children, and adolescents against this virus.

You daughter needs to know that—fear, embarrassment, and shame notwithstanding—she would need to see her doctor right away if she had reason to believe she had contracted a sexually transmitted infection. As the above summary shows, STIs can have very serious consequences if not treated properly. She also needs to know that the only way to completely avoid contracting an STI is not to have sexual intercourse—oral, vaginal, or anal—outside of a lifelong, mutually faithful, monogamous relationship with an

uninfected partner. If that sounds like marriage, it is.

If you need help mustering the courage to discuss this with your daughter, please don't hesitate to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department for moral support. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.³⁴

In Other Words ...

"If a person is willing to have casual sex with you, chances are very good that he's had many sexual partners before you and could easily have one or more STIs. Since most STIs have no symptoms, it's almost impossible to know if your potential partner has such an infection....

"One of the biggest risk factors for becoming infected with an STI is having multiple sexual partners. Having sex with only one faithful, uninfected partner for a lifetime is the best way to avoid STIs. This scenario is seldom found outside of marriage."³⁵

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- The [Medical Institute for Sexual Health](#) provides "science-based information that changes behavior and influences lives."
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Parenting a Bipolar Teen

Question

Our teenager has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. We've tried everything we can think of to help her, but so far our efforts haven't had much impact. We're beginning to think things are never going to improve. Is there any reason to think otherwise?

Answer

Don't lose heart. There's nothing wrong with you or your efforts to help your teen. Some children simply have severe psychiatric problems that don't respond to normal parenting techniques. This includes kids who are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional-defiant disorder, pervasive developmental disorders like autism, and bipolar disorder.

Children who fall into one of these categories need specialized treatment from a qualified mental health professional. Many of them also require medication. They're suffering with disorders that are physiologically based, and as a result they need something more than simple encouragement, discipline, or a good talking-to. That's why parents who have a child with undiagnosed ADHD or bipolar disorder often feel frustrated and defeated. That frustration can be compounded when well-meaning friends, relatives, or teachers imply that the child's problems are due to poor parenting. Because the underlying disorder hasn't been identified, these moms and dads often become hopeless and even begin to resent their child.

You're fortunate, then, to know exactly what you're facing. Many parents actually feel as if a heavy weight is lifted from their shoulders when they finally receive an accurate diagnosis of their child's condition. Armed with the knowledge that your daughter is struggling with bipolar disorder, you can pursue the appropriate treatment. In the process, you can also learn some specialized behavioral interventions and incorporate them into your parenting. With the proper medication, your daughter should be able to manage her

depressions and mood swings quite well. The result can include a new outlook on life and a new level of efficiency at school, at work, and in her interactions with family and friends.

We suggest you begin by calling Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our staff can provide, if you need it, a list of family counselors and psychiatrists in your area who specialize in treating adolescent bipolar disorder. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"While symptoms of bipolar disorder may be triggered by stress or traumatic events, the underlying disturbance is biochemical, and treatment—especially the stabilization of manic episodes—involves medication regimens that nearly always require the expertise of a psychiatrist. Counseling can be very helpful in coping with this problem and managing its fallout, but it should be done in conjunction with appropriate medical management."³⁶

—*Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006).
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)

Teen Has a Cutting Habit

Question

I recently discovered that my teenage daughter is cutting herself. I've tried to express my concern about this and have even asked that she let me "monitor" the situation, but she's very sensitive and sees this as criticism and lack of trust. I promised I wouldn't pry anymore, but I did ask her to talk to me whenever she feels the compulsion to cut herself. Do you think we can work this out between ourselves? Or is that a naïve assumption?

Answer

With all due respect, yes—we do think it's a naïve assumption. Cutting is a serious problem, and it usually has deep and complicated underlying causes. Instead of promising not to "pry," you should insist that your daughter get professional help; it would probably be best if that took the form of counseling that involves the entire family. If you need referrals to qualified Christian therapists practicing in your area, Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide them.

Meanwhile, it would be a good idea to equip yourself with at least a rudimentary understanding of cutting so that you can have some idea of what's going on in your daughter's mind. It's difficult to grasp exactly what motivates a person to become involved in this kind of self-abuse, but it seems to be a response to overwhelming feelings of anxiety or depression. Cutters basically want control. If a teen is being abused or otherwise hurt by someone else, cutting may represent an attempt either to release her pain through bleeding or to drown it out by incurring even more intense suffering. In other cases, she may be so numb that she's desperate to feel something. Cutting can also be a way of expressing anger—by taking it out on oneself rather than running the risk of exposing it to others.

In every instance, cutting is a coping mechanism. It's a method of managing pain. The cutter can't be set free from this self-destructive habit until she finds

a way to replace the cutting with a healthy coping mechanism. And cutting often becomes addictive, due to the endorphin rush that normally accompanies the body's self-healing response to wounds.

Precisely because it is a coping mechanism, it would be a mistake to interpret cutting as a suicide attempt. The cutter isn't trying to kill herself—on the contrary, she's groping for a way to get through life. But it's crucial to realize that, intentions notwithstanding, cutting can sometimes prove fatal; it's always possible that kids will accidentally cut themselves too deeply and run the risk of bleeding to death. That's why professional assistance is so critical in a situation like the one you're facing.

It's also a good reason to ask your daughter lots of questions. Try to find out how deeply she's cutting herself. See if you can discern her motivation for engaging in this kind of behavior. Is she a serious cutter who wounds herself in concealed areas of her body and tries to cover it up? Or is she just a “wannabe” who displays superficial scratches on her arms and legs as a way of getting attention? If she falls into the latter category, exactly why does she crave attention, and how can you help meet that need in a healthy way? These are the basic issues that you and your counselor need to get hold of if you want to help your daughter overcome her cutting problem.

For further help, make an appointment with a family counselor who's experienced in dealing with these issues. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“In middle school I discovered that cutting myself brought more instant gratification. Over time, the cuts got deeper; there would be more, on different parts of my body, and from all different kinds of tools....

“Sometimes the injuring was to punish myself for not being good enough; sometimes it represented the aggression I wanted to take out on others; sometimes I wanted to stop the panic attacks; sometimes I just wanted the scars....

“In middle school ... I messed around with pot, alcohol, acid, pills, cocaine, speed, and boys....

“In June of 2007, I was admitted into a drug rehab program... Getting sober was what made me look at myself and my relationship with God. It made

me realize I did want a relationship with Jesus Christ. And because of that, I have accepted my identity as a precious daughter of Christ, regardless of my actions or past decisions.”³⁷

—Shannon, quoted in *When Moms Pray Together*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Cutting and Self-Injury](#),” a series of articles by Shana Schutte
- [S.A.F.E.](#), Self Abuse Finally Ends, offers a treatment program for self-injurious behavior.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Inside a Cutter’s Mind: Understanding and Helping Those Who Self-Injure* by Jerusha Clark with Dr. Earl Henslin (NavPress, 2007)
- *Hope and Healing for Kids Who Cut: Learning to Understand and Help Those Who Self-Injure* by Marv Penner (Zondervan, 2008)

Part 4: Dating

28

Worried About Teenager Dating

Question

My teenager wants to start dating. I was hoping to put this off a little longer, but I'm starting to think it won't make any difference. Today's world is just a dangerous place no matter what. Given that, what are some reasonable rules I can pass along to my teen for interacting with the opposite sex?

Answer

Most Christian parents tend to fall into two main camps when it comes to teen dating. Some, believing that dating is never appropriate, encourage their children to follow the “courtship” model. Others believe dating can be a positive experience for teens, provided they're mature enough and the parents know and trust the dating partner.

Before deciding how you'll proceed, keep in mind that contemporary dating is radically different from the way it was when most of today's parents were kids. Sexual promiscuity is rampant, even among Christian teens, and many young people receive little or no moral guidance from their parents. Binge drinking, date violence, and date rape are far too common. In light of this, we'd suggest that boys and girls under the age of seventeen shouldn't be allowed to go out on one-on-one dates. There are simply too many dangers associated with this kind of activity. Instead, they should be encouraged to participate in group dates with a number of Christian friends who share their moral and spiritual values. Even then, Mom and Dad should be well acquainted with the other kids in the group *and* their parents.

Some parents may feel comfortable allowing a mature, responsible seventeen- or eighteen-year-old to go out on individual dates. It's their call, of course, but we believe that even then it's important for Mom and Dad to know

well their child's dating partner and his or her parents. They should also remember that while eighteen-year-olds may be legally considered adults, the fact remains that many of them haven't developed the maturity to monitor and control their own actions in a dating situation. If an older teen displays maturity, common sense, and sound moral judgment, dating can play a key role in his or her growth and development. It can also teach young people how to relate to the opposite sex in a healthy way and to recognize the character qualities that matter most in a marriage relationship.

If your child is under seventeen years of age, we'd recommend sitting down with him or her and mapping out some specific guidelines for relationships with the opposite sex. Encourage him or her to mingle with both boys and girls in a mixed group setting, such as a church youth group. Talk about pursuing a commitment to sexual purity and make it clear that, for the time being, there can be no question of unsupervised dates. Then you can promise to revisit the dating question after he or she turns seventeen if your child displays the necessary signs of maturity and sound judgment at that time.

If you need to talk about this further, our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Think seriously about adopting a stepwise approach [to dating]. Especially for your adolescent's first socializing experiences with the opposite sex. Many parents have a policy that is if someone wants to spend time with their son or daughter under age eighteen, the first step will be an evening at home with the family or joining in a family activity such as dinner and a movie or a ball game. This gives everyone a chance to get acquainted and broadcasts an important message: The one you want to spend time with is deeply cherished by a family to whom you are accountable . . . If the first step goes well, group dating can be a good way to continue the process."³⁸

—The Focus on the Family Parents' Guide to Teen Health

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

Abusive Language Between Boyfriend and Girlfriend

Question

My daughter acts like it's no big deal, but I'm alarmed at the put-downs and insults she and her boyfriend toss back and forth. Am I being too sensitive?

Answer

We don't think so. As a matter of fact, we'd suggest that your feelings are right on target. Some teens, deprived of positive role models who can show them how to treat members of the opposite sex, are in serious need of remedial training in this area. As a caring parent, you're in an excellent position to counter this negative trend.

There's been a great deal of discussion recently about "sexual respect," but there's an important sense in which much of this talk misses the mark. "Sexual respect" between husbands and wives, engaged couples, and even dating partners has to be rooted in something more fundamental—namely, basic *human* respect. The more effective approach is to foster decency and regard for other people's feelings in all kinds of relationships. So-called "sexual respect" will follow as a natural consequence.

Perhaps you need to begin by encouraging your daughter to develop a stronger sense of self-respect. As a person of worth—a young woman created in the image of God—she does herself a disservice if she allows her boyfriend (or anyone else, for that matter) to insult her. When she tolerates nasty put-downs by laughing them off, she's sending a signal that she considers this kind of behavior acceptable. She may think this is "no big deal," but how would she react if the jokes were suddenly to turn mean or cruel? What would happen if the verbal disrespect were to escalate into physical or sexual abuse? As an object lesson, you might ask your daughter if she's seen other teens put up with a little verbal abuse only to endure more serious emotional hurt later on.

Chances are she'll know exactly what you're talking about; many schools are full of relationships like these.

If your daughter is the kind of person who has trouble setting boundaries in personal relationships, she may find it helpful to look at some of the resources on the following list. In the meantime, if either of you would like to discuss this matter at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Some teens stay in unhealthy long-term relationships because they don't see how bad the relationship is. That's why they need parents to help them out of it.

...

"Often teens stay in long-term relationships simply because they can't get out. While some parents might fear that injecting themselves into a child's relationship could be met with protests or even hostility, now is not the time to shrink. Stay engaged and pray for her. Help her evaluate the health of her relationship. Keep the lines of communication open by asking questions and staying quiet long enough to hear the answers."³⁹

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Boundaries in Dating* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2000)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)

- *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

“Why Do We Need a Marriage License?”

Question

My twenty-year-old son and his girlfriend say they're both Christians and intend to spend the rest of their lives together. But they keep asking why they have to make their relationship “official” according to the requirements of the state. They say marriage is a private, personal agreement—and imply that if they move in together and start having sex, that will make them married in the eyes of God. I'm stunned by this. How can I convince them that they need a church wedding and a marriage license?

Answer

Your son and his girlfriend have brought up an interesting point: Does the Bible give us grounds for defining marriage in terms of anything other than the act of becoming “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24)? To put it another way, does Scripture recognize civil marriage contracts and the state's role in granting them?

On one level we'd have to answer, “No, not in so many words.” You'll search the Bible in vain for a verse that says, “Thou shalt not consider thyself married or engage in sexual relations until thou holdest a piece of paper from the state authorities in thy hand.” But there's another sense in which the legitimacy of the state's involvement in the business of marriage is hard to escape.

We can't go along with the idea that marriage is just a private, personal covenant. There's a distinctly communal aspect to genuine marriage. It involves a couple's public commitment to build a strong and lasting relationship. This is implied in the decision to “leave” parents and “cleave” to one another (as the King James Version puts it in Genesis 2:24). The couple begins a new family unit as part of the larger community. Marriage, including the sexual act that results in becoming “one flesh,” is anything but a purely private affair.

It's also apparent that while the spiritual aspect of marriage is of crucial importance to the believer, this doesn't mean matrimony is valid only for believers or that it should be viewed only as an ordinance of the church. Marriage, like the sunshine and rain that fall upon the just and unjust alike (Matthew 5:45), is, according to most theologians, part of the "common grace" God has poured out on mankind for the good of the race as a whole.

This explains why even pagan and secular societies have traditionally sought to preserve the uniqueness of the marital relationship by surrounding it with certain legal sanctions, privileges, and protections. Human societies of every kind and the state in all its various forms have always had a vested interest in supporting, maintaining, and regulating the marital relationship. Romans 13:1-7 implies that this is according to God's design. For all these reasons we'd suggest that, unless it should for some reason become absolutely impossible to do so, believers should continue to marry in accord with the requirements of the state.

All of this raises some important questions you could pose to your son:

- "What's your motive for questioning the validity of the marriage license and the wedding ceremony?"
- "If you and your girlfriend are serious about spending the rest of your lives together, why not proclaim your intentions to the world in an open ceremony? Why *not* make it official with 'a piece of paper from the state'?"
- "Isn't marriage a way in which a couple goes public with its vow of lifelong fidelity, so that other people can help hold them accountable? Do you have a problem with that? Is there some reason why you would prefer to be secretive about your commitment to one another?"

For more detailed information on this subject, you may wish to look at the resources on the following list.

If your son and his girlfriend don't find this rationale convincing, or if you need additional help understanding these concepts, Focus on the Family has a staff of pastoral counselors available who would love to discuss your questions and concerns with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Unfortunately, some teens treat a long-term relationship as a 'pseudo-marriage,' wrongly appropriating the intimacies reserved by God for marriage. Others fall into the trap of thinking that their dating partner must be 'the one'—

the person they'll eventually marry. Given this assumption, many young people reason that if they're going to get married anyway, it wouldn't hurt anyone if they started getting physically intimate a little early. Teens who think this are getting the cart before the horse. It's common for teens in dating relationships to end up not marrying the person they felt certain would be their marriage partner. Besides, even if the guy and girl eventually got married, being in a long-term relationship never negates God's plans for people to remain sexually abstinent before marriage."⁴⁰

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Test-Driving Marriage](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, M.D., and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- “Why You Shouldn't Live Together, Parts I and II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Dr. David Gudgel
- “Cohabitation vs. Marriage: Why the Ring Matters,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Glenn Stanton (Focus on the Family, 2011)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Does the Bible Really Prohibit Marrying a Non-Christian?

Question

Our college-student son is involved in a serious relationship with a girl who isn't a Christian. We've been telling him it would be wrong to marry her, based on 2 Corinthians 6:14—"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." But he read somewhere that this passage has nothing to do with marriage. He says it's about "freedom from idolatry," judging from the context and the original language. This argument is wearing us out, and we're concerned about how marrying this girl could affect our son's future.

Answer

Your son is to be commended for looking into the meaning of 2 Corinthians 6:14. Unfortunately, we can't help feeling there's a sense in which his findings are beside the point.

Let's set aside for a moment the question of whether it's a sin for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. We can say without reservation that it's *unwise* to marry a non-Christian for a number of compelling reasons—mainly because it doesn't bode well either for the success of the marriage or the health of the believing partner's relationship with Christ.

Your son is probably right to assert that Paul wasn't thinking *primarily* of marriage when he wrote, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." But that doesn't mean the principle stated in this verse shouldn't be given a broader application. It's always important to ask ourselves, in every area of life, what kind of partnership a believer can have with an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:15). This is particularly true where marriage is concerned. After all, how can you expect to follow a Master who demands absolute allegiance—who says, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34)—if you choose to become "one flesh"

(Genesis 2:24) with a person who disregards His claims?

It's not our place to tell your son whom he can or cannot marry. The choice of a lifelong mate is a matter of profound importance—second only to that of a person's relationship with God—and it's a decision your son must make for himself. For that very reason we would urge you to share these thoughts with him, to keep affirming your love for him, and to pray for him and for his girlfriend.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss your situation at greater length with a member of our team, Focus on the Family has a staff of pastoral counselors available who would be glad to talk with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Many Christian teens who find themselves attracted to a non-believer adopt a fig-leaf strategy sometimes called 'missionary dating.' The stated goal is to 'evangelize' the non-Christian (while allowing the Christian to enjoy dating a person he wants to be with). Unfortunately, in many cases the believer ends up being negatively influenced by the non-believer, while the non-believer is moved no closer to Christ.

"Don't try to use dating as a tool for evangelism. In fact, given the spiritual dangers and potential heartache, believers should avoid dating anyone who doesn't share their faith."⁴¹

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- Part 8, "Spiritual Issues," in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of*

Marriage, Phillip J. Swihart, PhD, and Wilford Wooten, LMFT, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids About Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

Should Our Son Marry His Pregnant Girlfriend?

Question

Our son's girlfriend is pregnant. It's a really hard situation for all of us, but at least she's planning to keep and raise the baby. Both our son and his girlfriend are emotionally immature, financially dependent, and basically ill-equipped to establish themselves as a family. In spite of this, many of our Christian friends have suggested that our son should marry this girl and "make an honest woman of her." Are they right?

Answer

Let's back up a minute. Before discussing marriage, we need to spend some time thinking about what it's going to take for your son and his girlfriend to grow up and become marriageable adults. It's all well and good to talk in terms of making the girl an "honest woman," but let's see if something can't also be done to turn the boy into an "honest man."

That process begins when your son is urged to take full responsibility for his actions and choices. He needs to do this in any case, whether marriage is part of the equation or not. Having fathered a child, he ought to assume the duties of a father by getting a job (if he doesn't already have one) and dedicating a substantial portion of his earnings to the financial support of mother and baby. He should also make an intentional and committed effort to stay engaged as a dad to the greatest extent possible. Obviously, this piece of the puzzle will have to be re-evaluated if the girl chooses to move away and raise their child elsewhere.

To put it another way, your son's first assignment is to accept and embrace the real-life consequences of the choice he's made. Your assignment is to allow this to occur. Why do we say this? Because we know how hard it is for parents in your position to resist the temptation to rush to the rescue. If our

hunch is correct, you're probably feeling a strong sense of "ownership" for your grandchild, along with an undeniable inclination to seize the reins and make sure everything is done properly and everyone is adequately provided for. This could be the reason you're willing to take a closer look at the option of a so-called "shotgun wedding." If that's the case, we'd advise you to stop, take a deep breath, and think again.

Look at it this way: Your son's actions have triggered a very real loss for everyone concerned. All of you need to be prepared to accept that loss for what it is and spend some time grieving over it. On your side this may mean letting go, relinquishing control, and recognizing that you are not necessarily in a position to influence the destiny of the child or determine the shape of the parents' future relationship. There are aspects of this unfortunate situation that are simply out of your hands.

To a certain extent, what you've lost can't be recovered. Some things have been forfeited that can never be regained no matter what you do. This is why you need to be very careful about grasping at marriage as a "quick fix" for your son's dilemma. Quick fixes rarely work, and they're never a substitute for genuine redemption of a bad situation. That takes grace, courage, and creativity. It may even require a certain amount of redemptive suffering.

If you and your son want to start moving in this direction, we suggest you begin by getting some professional counseling. Don't rush the process. Take as much time as you need to face the situation squarely and come up with some workable solutions. You may also want to talk to the staff of a local pregnancy resource center to find out what kind of support is available to the young couple and the child.

As circumstances permit, sit down together and sift through the practical implications of this pregnancy. Where will mom and baby live? How will expenses be paid? Who will cover them? What about balancing jobs and financial responsibilities with educational requirements? How will you establish appropriate roles and suitable boundaries for parents and grandparents? Are you and your son prepared to face the social pressures that are likely to arise as you travel this road together? Don't underestimate the power of peer-group opinion—it can place formidable obstacles in the way of righteous, responsible action.

Once you've talked all this out—and only then—it *might* be appropriate to broach the subject of marriage. Naturally, there's a long list of important considerations you'll want to include in this discussion. Do your son and his girlfriend genuinely love one another? Are they ready to commit themselves to the task of building and maintaining a solid marriage and a stable home? Are their families capable of mentoring them and supplying practical assistance along the way? Are they both believers, or do they have spiritual differences

that need to be worked out before moving ahead? No marriage can be expected to go the distance unless it's firmly grounded, both spiritually and logistically. It goes without saying that an unintended pregnancy doesn't qualify as a reliable foundation for a lifelong relationship.

If the necessary elements of a strong Christian marriage are present—and we realize that this may be a very big “if”—then there's no reason why the young couple shouldn't take a closer look at matrimony. But they should be prepared to face some struggles in the process and to seek outside help when the road gets rough.

One last thought: A hasty marriage isn't necessarily the only way to provide for the future of this child. Your son and his girlfriend may want to consider making an adoption plan for their baby. As you probably know, there are many Christian families who are in a strong position to adopt. In lots of cases they are willing to cooperate and communicate with the birth family. We think it would be a good idea to pray about this option and explore the possibilities as the Lord leads.

If you, your son, or his girlfriend feel you need professional assistance, our staff would be happy to provide you with referrals to qualified marriage and family therapists practicing in your area who can help you sort out your options. Our counselors would also consider it a privilege to discuss your situation with you over the phone. If this appeals to you, please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“This is a good time to talk with your son about the value of each human life. Some boyfriends respond to an unplanned pregnancy by suggesting or demanding that their girlfriend get an abortion. Even if you're confident that your son is not abortion-minded, initiate the discussion and get a sense of where he stands on the issue. Does he fully understand that this pregnancy involves a child, a distinct human life made in the image of God, and not just a mass of cells? Let him know that this baby is important to you, and that you're prepared to provide or find whatever help is needed for this baby to be given a chance at life.”⁴²

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“What If Your Adolescent Son Is Involved in a Pregnancy?”](#) is an article for parents facing this dilemma.
- [American Pregnancy Helpline](#) provides information for those experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. The site includes a [“Guy’s Corner”](#) for fathers-to-be.
- [Bethany Christian Services](#) offers adoption-related help.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Mom, Dad, I’m Pregnant: When Your Son or Daughter Faces an Unplanned Pregnancy* by Jayne E. Schooler (NavPress, 2004)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)

Talking to a Daughter About the Danger of Date Rape

Question

I've been reading and hearing a lot about the threat of date rape, and it's making me nervous. My daughter is about to start dating, and I want to know what I can do to keep her from becoming a victim. How should I bring this up? I don't want to make her paranoid, but I don't want her to be defenseless, either.

Answer

You can start by explaining that the baton will soon shift from parent to child in several key areas, one of the most important of which is the realm of safety. Help your daughter understand that in the years ahead you won't always be around to take care of her and shield her from danger. As a result, it will increasingly be up to her to give serious thought to safeguarding her own security and well-being. It's all part of developing a healthy measure of "street sense"—of becoming, in the words of Jesus, "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

At that point, since your daughter plans to start dating soon, you can transition into a discussion of safety in the dating context. Say something like, "You know it's important to wear a helmet when you ride a bike. What do you think you'd need to do in order to stay safe while on a date with a boy?"

Without being alarmist or graphic, explain that contemporary dating is radically different from the way it was when you were a teenager. In light of this, it's important for a girl to think ahead and have a specific plan in mind if she's serious about protecting herself from violence and sexual abuse.

As part of this conversation, you might sketch out some hypothetical scenarios and ask, "What would you do if this happened?" In the process, get your daughter to think out loud about such things as the most typical personality

traits of untrustworthy individuals, the earmarks of an unhealthy relationship, and some potential warning signs of dangerous situations. Role-play a couple of situations. Spend time wrestling with the problem of distinguishing the truth from a lie. Urge her to take a cell phone along whenever she's out with friends and to contact you immediately if she ever finds herself in uncomfortable circumstances.

Here are several specific points you may want to bring to your daughter's attention as you go through this process together:

- You're much better off dating someone you know fairly well rather than someone who's a casual or chance acquaintance.
- Know yourself. The better you understand your own needs, likes, and dislikes, the better you'll be able to choose trustworthy companions.
- Remember that family game nights at home can be a good alternative to dates.
- In general, group activities are less risky and more fun than single dates.
- Single dates—especially the first time—should take place in public places.
- A blind date should be accepted only on the strong recommendation of someone you trust, and it should never be a single date.
- Bring your own money and pay your own way in the early stages of a relationship.
- Stay sober. This is extremely important, since inebriation is a common factor in many cases of date rape. Alcohol and drugs cloud judgment and put you off guard. Be aware of the danger of being “slipped a mickey.” If you feel such precautions are warranted, bring your own refreshments and don't eat or drink anything that's offered to you.
- Stay alert. Music headphones or earbuds can compromise your safety by cutting you off from your immediate surroundings.
- Never leave a restaurant, party, or other get-together with someone you just met.
- Trust your instincts. If you don't feel right about the way a date is progressing, bail out.
- Avoid situations in which you don't feel on an equal footing with your companion.
- Beware of expensive gifts and lavish dates. Too many guys still have the Neanderthal notion that picking up the tab for a nice evening entitles them to a sexual thank-you.
- Watch out for the control freak—someone who insists on his way and ignores your likes and dislikes. This type of behavior indicates a potential abuser.
- Beware of the person who tries to isolate you from your other friends and

your family or who constantly bad-mouths them. This is another red flag for potential abuse.

- Steer clear of guys who tell raunchy jokes, listen to sexually explicit music, enjoy pornography, or make degrading comments about women.
- Don't waste your time with anyone who won't accept your limits. Any guy who pressures you for sexual favors is a loser and an abuser and most certainly doesn't love you.
- Remember this basic rule of thumb: If you have to do something in secret, behind closed doors, or under cover of night, it's probably not healthy.

You should probably discuss these things with your daughter long before her first "suitor" comes knocking at the door.

If you'd like to talk about this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you're welcome to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department.

Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁴³

In Other Words ...

"One example [of a 'date rape' drug] is rohypnol. It's a derivative of Valium, but ten times more potent. It's also called 'roofies' or 'roaches.' Rapists use it to take control of their victim and eliminate any memory of the abuse. Under its influence, a person can't move or yell.

"Rohypnol can be taken orally and dissolves in liquid. To protect yourself from it, don't go to parties where alcohol or drugs are being used. At other parties, drink only beverages when you've seen them poured into a glass directly from the bottle or can. Avoid punch bowls. Keep your glass in your hand at all times; never set it down where someone can slip a drug into it without your knowledge."⁴⁴

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Interviewing Your Daughter's Date: 30 Minutes Man-to-Man* by Dennis Rainey (Familylife, 2012)
- *Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*, Paul Reisser, MD, primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1997, 2007)

Part 5: Teens and Sex

34

Why Does God Give Teens Unfulfilled Sexual Desires?

Question

I've got a normal, healthy teenager, and I remember what it was like to be one myself—frustrating. It seems like God is extremely unfair. Why has He given young people such strong sexual desires and no healthy, acceptable way of satisfying them? In Bible times people got married at a younger age, and it was normal to have sex and start raising kids before you reached the age of twenty. It doesn't work that way anymore, and all of us are paying the price. Christian teenagers struggle with temptation, and Christian parents wear themselves out trying to get them to wait until marriage. Why has God done this to us? I'm sure my teenager wonders about this, too—but it's not the kind of question a kid asks a parent.

Answer

You've raised an excellent question. If anything, the problem you've pinpointed is bigger than you suggest. Teens and parents aren't the only ones caught in the tension between sexual desires and sexual prohibitions; single adults of all ages are in the same boat.

Part of the answer is that we aren't necessarily expected to enjoy or cultivate the gift of sexuality simply because it's been given to us. On the contrary, we're supposed to steward it wisely by learning how to exercise self-control. According to God's plan, there's only one appropriate context for sexual activity: marriage (see Genesis 2:24). This is a hard truth; after all, some will never have the opportunity to marry. Yet sexual restraint is the Bible's approach not only for teenagers but for unmarried individuals at every

age and stage of life. Even within marriage the rule isn't unbridled sexual indulgence, but loving and disciplined regard for the needs and wishes of one's spouse.

You're right to note that teens are at a special disadvantage. The option of marriage is virtually closed to them at a time when hormones are particularly potent and sexual feelings are running especially high. In modern society, there's a stretch of almost ten years between puberty and what our culture considers "marriageable" age. What's more, the problem is getting worse: Recent statistics indicate that the average age of marriage in the United States, for example, is 28 for men and 26 for women. No wonder so many young adults seem to regard premarital sex as an inescapable given.

But has this come about by God's design? No.

As you pointed out, there was a time—not so long ago in some parts of the world—when people did get married and start raising a family while still in their teens. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was probably no more than 13 or 14 years old when she was betrothed to Joseph. What has made this kind of arrangement impractical for most of us today is not the will of God nor the implications of Christian morality, but a complicated web of social and cultural factors, financial considerations, technological innovations, educational requirements, career-oriented thinking, and occupational demands.

So what's the answer? That's not easy to say. Unless your teenager has a prospective spouse in mind, and unless the two of them are mature enough, wise enough, skilled enough, and educated enough to come up with a workable plan to provide for their financial needs and set up married housekeeping on their own, it seems they have only one choice: to go back to square one and learn what it means to exercise sexual self-control, at least until they're in a position to overcome these obstacles.

If you (or your teenager) would like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our team, Focus on the Family has a staff of counselors available who would love to talk with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with one of them. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"The reality is that nobody 'needs' to have sex to stay alive, be happy, have a productive life, or be loved and cared for. Even married couples go through periods when they aren't having regular sex—during late pregnancy, travel, illness, or emotional distancing, for example.

“The urge to have sex isn’t all-powerful either, for one gender or the other. Controlling your sexual urges takes self-control and discipline, the same traits required to be an excellent athlete or student.”⁴⁵

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Abstinence Before Marriage,”](#) a series of articles for parents
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Teaching Girls the Truth About Modesty and Purity, Parts I-III,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Dannah Gresh and Leslie Ludy
- “A Message to Teens About Sex,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Fran Sciacca
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)

Helping Teens Stay Sexually Pure

Question

When it comes to sexuality, what can we do as parents to help our teenager stay on the right path? I'm not sure she wants our help, but when every TV show, movie, singer, advertisement, text message, friend, and pop psychologist seems to be urging her in the wrong direction, she needs all the help she can get.

Answer

It all begins at home, and preferably as early as possible in a child's life. Children should be introduced to age-appropriate sex education and biblically based instruction in God's design for marriage and human sexuality while still very young. If this hasn't been the case in your household, just remember that it's never too late to begin. Here, as in so many other areas of life, an ounce of preparation and prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Your relationship with your teen is the key to the entire process. Psychologists tell us there are strong connections between dysfunctional family relationships and all kinds of sexual problems. The best place to start, then, is with creating an environment in which your child feels comfortable talking to you about the entire scope of his interests and concerns. Within that context, healthy discussions about sex and sexuality can be encouraged to blossom and grow in a natural way. Research shows that teens who have a close, warm relationship with their parents, and whose parents clearly communicate their expectations regarding sexual behavior, are less likely than others to engage in pre-marital sex.

If and when your child gets involved in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex, it would be a good idea to take the same approach in monitoring it that Ronald Reagan adopted in his dealings with the Soviet Union: "Trust, but verify." In other words, if your daughter has a boyfriend, let her know you'll take her at her word when she says she's not engaging in any kind of

inappropriate behavior with him. But don't stop there. Make it clear that you're going to help her avoid temptation by placing firm limits on the amount of time the two of them spend together. Specify, for instance, that it's fine for her to go on supervised group dates and to invite her boyfriend over when you're home, but that you don't want her spending one-to-one time with him alone. This might mean she won't be allowed to use the car without you or another adult along for the ride.

It would also be important to have a conversation with the boyfriend's parents. If possible, both Mom and Dad should take part in this discussion. Perhaps you could invite the other couple out to dinner on the grounds that, since your kids are dating, you'd really like to get to know them. Ask them about their values and the type of guidelines they've established for their child regarding sexuality. If you don't like their response, don't allow your teen to spend time at their house.

Besides discussing sexual purity with your teenager, it would be a good idea to talk about discerning another person's character. Make sure your daughter understands the qualities God would want her to look for in a dating partner and eventual spouse. Read Galatians 5:22 and 23 together and spend some time explaining the "Fruit of the Spirit"—love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Underscore the point that while physical attractiveness may initially draw us to a person of the opposite sex, the quality of that individual's character is going to be far more important in the long run.

If you have further questions in this area or would like to discuss your concerns in greater depth with a member of our staff, feel free to call our Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“• Encourage your teen to have a close friend or two commit to helping him abstain. They can confide in each other about their struggles, which will lend him tremendous support.

“• Encourage your teen to carry a visible symbol as a reminder of his commitment. Some teens wear a ring, bracelet, or necklace to remind them of their pledge to remain abstinent until they're married.

“• Address the issue of trust up front. Many teens complain to parents that the reason parents don't want them alone with a girlfriend is because the parents don't trust them. Clarify for your teen that helping him avoid periods of

being alone with a girlfriend isn't an issue of trust. It's about helping him avoid situations where he's tempted to do something he may regret."⁴⁶

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [True Love Waits](#) “challenges teenagers and college students to make a commitment to sexual abstinence until marriage.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Bloom: A Girl's Guide to Growing Up* by Susie Shellenberger (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)
- *Boom: A Guy's Guide to Growing Up* by Michael Ross (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids About Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Helping Teens Draw Sexual Boundaries

Question

I think I've made it pretty clear to my teenage son that premarital sex—intercourse, anyway—is out of bounds. But I know from experience that you can do some of the “lesser” stuff and find yourself going too far before you realize it. I don't know how to tell him where to draw the line without sounding ridiculous. What should I say?

Answer

Both sons and daughters need to think through this issue, preferably before dating begins. We suggest talking to your son as soon as possible and help him set clear standards. But don't panic; if he's already dating, it's not too late. You can still take the initiative to sit down and discuss physical limits.

There are three basic principles you'll want to stress:

- Sex outside of marriage is not an option.
- Stay in control of your own body.
- Always show respect for your body and your date's.

Still, there's a bigger issue at stake here than “How far is too far?” It's the question of timing. Sexuality is a powerful thing, and sexual intimacy is progressive in nature. Tell your son that God designed sex to be between husband and wife, and that when it's separated from this context it leads to frustration and pain.

Experts in the study of human sexuality have identified seven progressive stages of physical intimacy:

- hand-holding
- arm around the waist
- kissing
- French kissing
- fondling
- intimate foreplay

- sexual intercourse

The important thing to notice is that conscious, willful control tends to give way to passion after stage three. After that point, our hormones start calling the shots.

Practical application: Prudish as it may sound, we'd suggest that dating teens need to set the physical limit at modest kissing. No French kissing. No lying down together (even to watch TV). Such behaviors encourage the hormones to kick in.

We'd also point out that the longer two teens of the opposite sex are together and the more physically affectionate they allow themselves to become, the more difficult it will be to resist temptation. At that point, any rules and guidelines we might be able to offer aren't going to be of much help. As a general rule, adolescent couples should also avoid being alone. If they want to be together, they should do it in a setting where other people are present.

Naturally, your son won't be able to put all this into effect unless he can muster up a certain amount of assertiveness and self-determination. Remaining pure means taking a stand. Kids have to choose for themselves between wisdom and foolishness. To encourage the right choice, you might buy your child a "purity ring" to represent his or her commitment before God to abstain from sex until marriage. Present the ring within the context of a formal ceremony. Talk about the importance of staying true to the promise it represents. And when you discuss the reasons for resisting temptation, don't dwell on the negatives. Instead, emphasize the benefits of waiting: deeper trust and enjoyment of sex in marriage, enhanced physical and emotional health, self-respect, and a stronger relationship with God.

If you'd like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you're welcome to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Here are several dating standards you and your child may find helpful for the healthiest early dating relationships:

- "1. Set your physical intimacy boundary *before* you go on the date.
- "2. Boys and girls are jointly responsible for setting and maintaining limits.
- "3. Verbally communicate your boundary to your date.
- "4. Exercise self-control.
- "5. Consider your manner of dress, as it will communicate a lot to your

date and may send signals you're unaware of. Modesty should guide clothing decisions.

“6. Use nonverbal and verbal refusal skills if needed.

“7. Avoid dangerous or tempting situations like being alone in a house.

“8. Remember that your body and your relationships belong, ultimately, to God. Consider Him in every decision you make.”⁴⁷

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Boundaries in Dating* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (Zondervan, 2000)
- “Teaching Girls the Truth About Modesty and Purity, Parts I-III,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Dannah Gresh and Leslie Ludy
- “A Message to Teens About Sex,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Fran Sciacca
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (*Focus on the Family/Revell*, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (*Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers*, 1996)

Talking to Teens About Risky Behavior

Question

My teenagers seem to think they're invulnerable, that nothing really bad could ever happen to them. That makes it pretty hard to warn them about danger, whether it's from premarital sex, drug use, or texting while driving. How can I talk to them about "risky business" without sounding like a hand-wringing worrywart who deserves to be ignored?

Answer

Your teens should be hearing advisories on these subjects from responsible adults everywhere—at school, church, and in your extended family. But you can't count on these people to do the job for you. You may need to muster enough courage to tell your kids about poor decisions that turned out to be costly in your own life. You may even have to help them navigate back from a bumpy side road or pull them out of a ditch.

To encourage healthy choices and offer effective help, you'd be wise to educate yourself on the risks associated with activities like substance abuse and premarital sex. Focus on the Family makes available a number of helpful resources in this area, most of which can be ordered via our online store. But knowledge will be of little value if you don't know how to use it in ways that will mold your adolescents' attitudes and decisions. Finding the best approach to talking with your kids about these sensitive subjects takes forethought and patience. The following ideas can help you lay the groundwork for this vital task.

- It's easier to talk about difficult topics if you have good rapport with your children in other areas. So spend time building and strengthening the parent-child relationship in other ways, too. The effort will pay major dividends later on.
- Parents often worry that if they discuss certain topics (especially sex) in any detail, it will "give the kids ideas." Here's a late news flash: The kids

already have plenty of ideas. What they need now is to hear your viewpoint about them. But don't expect them to ask; you need to take the initiative.

- Warnings about behaviors that threaten life and limb will be more effective if they aren't diluted by nagging about less serious matters. Accentuate the positive and what you say about the negative will carry more weight.

Remember that it's easier for an adolescent to stay away from dangerous detours if the main highway is clearly marked, well lit, attractive, and enjoyable. Another way to say this is that you can protect your children against harmful behaviors by providing healthy alternatives. Encourage and support positive goals, commitments, friends, and activities—all of which are strong deterrents to destructive activities.

- Don't expect to communicate all your values in a few marathon sessions. Brief but potent teachable moments crop up regularly throughout childhood and adolescence. Seizing these opportunities requires spending enough time with a child to allow them to take place.

- Your actions will reinforce (or invalidate) your words. The misguided commandment, "Do what I say, not what I do," has never worked and never will. This doesn't mean, of course, that parents can't legitimately warn their kids not to do what they did as teenagers. Heartfelt confessions, cautionary tales, and lessons learned at the University of Hard Knocks can have a profound impact on young listeners.

- Don't shift into "lecture gear" very often, if at all. Your teens' desire for independence and to be treated as adults will cause eyes to glaze and attention to drift if you begin sermonizing. Just say what's on your heart without beating the point into the ground.

- Don't give up if your efforts to broach tough topics aren't greeted with enthusiasm. Even when your tone is open and inviting, you may find that a lively conversation isn't easy to start. Be patient, don't express frustration, and don't be afraid to try again later. If your spouse has any helpful suggestions about improving your delivery of the message, listen carefully and act accordingly.

- While you need to articulate your perspective on sex, drugs, and other important matters with consistency, conviction, and clarity, your adolescents must also understand that they can come to you when they have a problem. They need to know that you, like God, are "a refuge and strength, a help in time of trouble."

If you need help applying these principles or would simply like to discuss them at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁴⁸

In Other Words ...

“Before tackling tough topics, it’s best to establish rapport by discussing easier ones. If you discuss only difficult subjects with your teen, he’ll run every time he sees you coming. If your discussions about mundane items are casual, nonthreatening, and respectful, it will be easier to discuss more sensitive issues.”⁴⁹

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Tips for Parenting Teens](#),” a series of articles by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Concern About Teen Masturbation

Question

My thirteen-year-old son hasn't asked me about this subject, but I know he must think about it. He probably feels guilty about it, too. I wish I could help him deal with that, but the truth is I'm not sure what to think about masturbation in the first place. Is it a serious sin, or just a harmless and natural way of releasing sexual energy? What can a teenager do to break the habit if he or she is feeling guilty about it?

Answer

As you probably know, masturbation is a highly controversial topic. The Bible never directly addresses it, and Christian leaders differ widely in their understanding of its spiritual and moral implications. It's crucial to acknowledge these differences of opinion before saying anything further on the subject. This is an area where we have to be careful about laying down hard and fast rules or making definitive statements about the mind of God (though Scripture does clearly address behaviors that are often related to this activity). In particular, it seems to us that there's little to be gained by labeling the act of masturbation itself a sin. In fact, in some ways, we think it misses the point.

The point, as we see it, is the larger meaning and purpose of human sexuality. The Bible has two important things to say on this score: First, sex is central to the process by which husband and wife become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24); and second, sex and marriage serve as a symbol of the union between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Sex, then, isn't intended to be "all about me." It's designed to be part of the give-and-take of the marriage relationship.

That should shape our approach to the problem of masturbation. We should avoid heaping guilt on teenagers who find the urge to masturbate almost uncontrollable, and who might be driven to spiritual despair as a result. At the same time, we should do everything we can to help adolescents, young adults,

and married couples see that self-gratification is inconsistent with the purpose of sex. We shouldn't condemn anyone for masturbating, but neither should we encourage anyone to continue in the habit. Why? Because God has created men and women to experience sexual fulfillment on a much higher level—within the context of a marital relationship—and we don't want anything to jeopardize their chances of knowing that joy to the fullest extent.

It's important to add that masturbation, due to the powerful hormonal and psychological components of human sexual behavior, can often become profoundly addictive. Individuals who fall prey to this addiction may end up carrying it with them into adult married life, where it can become a serious obstacle to healthy marital intimacy. Further, masturbation is frequently accompanied by indulging in sexual fantasy—which, if we're to believe the words of Jesus (Matthew 5:28), represents a serious breach of a person's mental and spiritual purity.

What can be done to break this pattern? In many cases, masturbation originates as a self-soothing behavior. It's a way of coping with pressures and seeking to meet the basic human need for peace, security, comfort, and reassurance. If your teen has a problem with masturbation, you may want to ask yourself what might be going on at home, at school, or in his social life that could be giving rise to this behavior. You should also start thinking creatively about ways to help your teen replace this behavior with a more legitimate method of addressing the underlying need—for example, by talking things over with you or a trusted friend, reading an engaging book, listening to music, or tackling a constructive project such as serving other people. Ultimately, the pain a person is trying to anesthetize through the practice of masturbation is just another manifestation of the “God-shaped vacuum” that exists at the center of every human heart. Only a relationship with the Lord can fill that empty space in a deep, lasting, and satisfying way.

If you need help working through these concepts, our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“If you walk in on your child while he's masturbating, it would be appropriate to excuse yourself and talk to your child about the issue later if it hasn't been previously discussed. Even if you've discussed masturbation in the past, it might be good to broach the subject again and acknowledge what happened—

though most teens will be mortified by the experience and would probably prefer to let the incident be forgotten.”⁵⁰

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Preparing for Adolescence* by Dr. James Dobson (Gospel Light, 2006)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

Parents Discover Teen Is Sexually Active

Question

Yesterday we discovered an entry in our teenager's journal describing a sexual encounter with her boyfriend. We're somewhere between angry and numb. We can't let this go unaddressed, but we don't want to create a wedge and close the door to future communication. What's the best way to confront her about this?

Answer

You're right to take measures to preserve your relationship with your daughter and to maintain open lines of communication. But you're also wise to take an active and aggressive role in addressing this situation. Besides the threat it poses to your daughter's future welfare, this is a very painful discovery for you and involves a certain amount of grief. It's in the best interests of all concerned that you confront it openly and honestly.

There are several questions you might want to consider as you ponder the best way of approaching your daughter about this sensitive issue. Have you noticed any significant changes in her behavior recently? Does she appear to be under an unusual amount of stress? How did you happen to read her journal entry?

You can use all of these as possible starting points for your conversation with her. Take one question or sentence at a time and listen carefully to her response. Depending on how this incident has actually unfolded, you could begin with something like, "We notice that you seem to be more anxious than usual. Are you under some kind of stress?" You might also say, "You left your journal out the other day; are you trying to tell us something?" Or, "You deserve to be honored. Are you feeling honored by your boyfriend?"

The idea is to nudge her gently in the direction of bringing up the subject on her own. Another effective way of doing this is to begin by expressing your love for her and reminding her of God's love. You might want to direct her

attention to a Scripture like Isaiah 43:4, which states, “Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you ...” If you can encourage her to think of herself as a precious and honorable human being, she may be motivated to confess actions that aren’t worthy of a beloved child of God. But before she can do that, she needs to be assured that you won’t reject her because of her failures.

Once the truth is out in the open, you’ll want to proceed to a discussion of consequences. It would be entirely appropriate to require that she discontinue her relationship with the boy in question. You should also have a serious conversation with his parents, too.

Meanwhile, encourage your daughter to explore better ways of interacting with the opposite sex—group dates, for example, or a higher level of involvement in a church youth group. Talk about the importance of pursuing a commitment to sexual purity and make it clear that, for the time being, there can be no unsupervised individual dates.

If you’d like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you’re welcome to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“What if you find birth control pills in your daughter’s room? First, allow yourself some reaction time before you talk to your daughter....

“Ask when she got the pills, where, and who gave them to her. Ask whether she’s been sexually active; if she says yes, ask how long this has been going on....

“Ask why she’s sexually active—and listen. Ask with whom she’s been sexually active.... Remind her that you love and care about her and don’t want her to get hurt.

“When she’s finished talking, let her know that while everyone around her may feel that sex isn’t a ‘big deal,’ it is. Emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually, sex can have very painful consequences at her age; your job is to help her avoid getting hurt. Explain that sex is an incredible gift—and if she continues to be sexually active, she risks ruining this gift for the rest of her life....

“If she listens, keep going. If she balks and storms off, reopen the issue in a day or two. But don’t let up. Pray for her and keep praying. If you don’t

fight for her, who will?”⁵¹

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Teen: “Oral Sex Isn’t Sex”

Question

To our dismay, we recently discovered from a text message that our daughter has been involved in oral sex. Even more shocking was the answer we got when we confronted her about it. She argued that oral sex isn’t really sex! She says it’s “safer” than vaginal intercourse. She even claims that she’s still a virgin. How do we handle this?

Answer

Unfortunately, your daughter’s ideas on the subject aren’t unusual. In the midst of the high-profile political scandals of the 1990s, it became abundantly clear that a surprising number of people in contemporary society don’t perceive oral sex as sex. Worse, this view is often accompanied by a dangerously mistaken belief that it isn’t particularly risky.

This conviction is especially common among teenagers. In a study of twelve- to fifteen-year-olds, one in six reported having tried oral sex; many of these denied ever having vaginal intercourse. A more recent study from the National Center for Health Statistics found that more than 50 percent of the fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds surveyed had engaged in some form of oral sex (giving, receiving, or both). Not surprisingly, alcohol and drug use increase the likelihood that a teenager will try oral sex.

Like your daughter, some adolescent girls who practice oral sex consider themselves to be virgins or sexually abstinent. As a matter of fact, healthcare providers and counselors attempting to obtain an accurate sexual history from teenagers must routinely ask not only “Are you sexually active?” but also “Are you giving or receiving oral sex?” It’s not uncommon for a teen or young adult to answer “no” to the first question and “yes” to the second. Even significant numbers of college students—as many as one in three according to one study—consider the practice of oral sex to be compatible with a sexually abstinent lifestyle.

This idea is emotionally and morally naïve. As Christians who draw their beliefs about human sexuality from the Bible, we're committed to the perspective that virginity is a matter of both body and mind. That's why we recommend that dating couples draw the line at holding hands, hugging, and light kissing and look for creative, nonsexual ways to show their feelings. Biblically speaking, premarital sexual purity entails a lifestyle that refrains from any and all sexual contact that seeks to arouse. In Matthew 5:28 Jesus places lustful thoughts on the same level as adulterous behavior. Given that context, it's impossible to see how two unmarried people could engage in oral sex while maintaining a real concern for the purity of their hearts and minds.

The view that oral sex is risk-free may also be medically uninformed. While it's true that pregnancy will not result from oral sex, a number of sexually transmitted infections can be transmitted through oral-genital contact—including syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes simplex virus, human papillomavirus (HPV), chlamydia, and even HIV. The potential consequences can range from a sore throat (from gonorrhea) to serious systemic illness (syphilis) and even death (HIV/AIDS). Estimates of the number of HIV cases that result from oral sex range from 1 to 7 percent.

We would strongly advise you to discuss all the dangers associated with oral sex—moral, emotional, and spiritual as well as physical—with your daughter at the earliest opportunity. If you need help in coming up with a plan or advice about the most effective way of introducing the subject, we'd like to invite you to call and speak with a member of Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁵²

In Other Words ...

"Many young people falsely assume they're virgins if they've 'only' had oral or anal sex. This is simply not true. In the broad sense of the term, the word *virgin* means that a person is without experience. By having oral or anal sex a teen has definitely gained sexual experience....

"The Bible talks a lot more about our thoughts and attitudes than it does about which specific acts may cause us to 'lose our virginity.' [It's better] to remain sexually pure in your thoughts and actions than it is to see just how far you can go sexually while still technically remaining a virgin."⁵³

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Pure Excitement: A Godly Look at Sex, Love, and Dating* by Joe White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)

Teen Sees Nothing Wrong with Premarital Sex

Question

My son is an intelligent, responsible, and pretty mature high school student. He's not dating anybody at the moment. But he says he sees nothing wrong with engaging in sexual activity before marriage, provided his partner is someone he genuinely loves. He says most of the arguments he's heard against his position—including mine—are “just religious,” and he doesn't buy them. I've run out of things to say to him. Is there something I'm forgetting?

Answer

From our perspective, the arguments your son calls “religious” are more than sufficient. We take the teaching of the Bible very seriously; Scripture declares that sex is exclusively for marriage. That's because sex isn't just a matter of recreation or even emotion. It's all about two people becoming “one flesh.” As we see it, this isn't just a question of one person's “religious” views against those of another. It's a matter of understanding the Designer's best plan for the people He's created. Like anything else in life, sexuality is most enjoyable and satisfying when one follows the “owner's manual.”

But since your son isn't inclined to accept these arguments, we'll bypass them and point out that there are a number of other good reasons to put off sex until marriage—pragmatic, down-to-earth reasons that also support the biblical point of view. They can be grouped under at least five different headings.

1. *Sex is how babies get started.* Every year in America, for example, nearly 625,000 teenagers become pregnant; approximately three in ten of these pregnancies end in abortion. The vast majority of these pregnancies are unplanned, and a sizable percentage begin even though a contraceptive is used. But statistics don't begin to communicate the profound effects of a pregnancy

on a young woman's life. It changes everything. Whether the child is born, miscarried, or aborted, the emotional impact of the experience will remain fixed in the mother's heart and mind. There's no quick fix where human life is concerned—no way to “rewind the tape” and start over as though nothing happened.

2. *Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a constant danger for those who engage in extramarital sex.* More than twenty significant diseases can be transmitted skin to skin or by exchange of body fluids during sexual activity. Some are fatal, a few are relatively harmless, and many have long-term physical and emotional consequences. Prominent among the potential physical consequences is the risk of infertility. If you want to have children once you get married, don't have sex ahead of time.

3. *“Safe(r) sex” really isn't.* This idea has been widely downplayed as unrealistic by many cultural pundits, but there's really no way around it: Statistically and scientifically speaking, only sex kept exclusively within the context of marriage is truly safe. It's as simple as that.

4. *Premarital sex distorts premarital relationships.* Adding sex to a nonmarital relationship, especially when adolescents are involved, is like throwing a one-thousand-pound weight into a rowboat. The center of gravity shifts drastically, forward motion becomes difficult, and the whole thing may eventually sink. Sex never enhances a teenage romance. Instead, it almost always overwhelms and stifles it. Arguments, secrecy, stress, and guilt usually replace laughter, discovery, and meaningful conversation.

5. *Sex is too good and too wonderful to be treated lightly.* The idea that sex should be kept within the boundaries of marriage is not based on notions that intercourse is “dirty” or “unholy,” but on a true appreciation of the value of sex as God's fine art. If the *Mona Lisa* were entrusted to your care, you wouldn't leave it in your backyard, use it as a TV tray or line a birdcage with it. In the same way, to relegate sex to the category of casual recreation is to demean it and to devalue one's own sexuality and identity. What's more, while movies and television often portray casual sex as the epitome of sensual excitement, the truth is that a healthy, committed, long-term marital relationship is actually the best setting for satisfying sexual experiences. Within marriage, sex becomes a comfort, a natural stimulant (or relaxant), a playground, a special means of communication, and a bridge that can connect individuals to one another after a difficult time. Short-term relationships provide few if any of these benefits, and those involved in casual sex can't claim—or in some cases even comprehend—them.

There's a great deal more that could be said on this subject. The resources on the following list may help. If your son is open to discussing these ideas at greater length, we'd like to invite him to call and speak with a member of our

counseling staff. If you'd like to talk to us further about your role in this situation, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁵⁴

In Other Words ...

"Once your teen chooses to accept Christ as Savior, he faces a multitude of other forks in the road. If you tell him that premarital sex is off limits, for example, your teen can choose to ignore that belief, to adopt it in theory but not in practice, or to internalize it as a personal conviction. The same is true of beliefs about God's nature, how to interpret the Bible, and what God wants of us....

"Convictions must grow from the inside out. As parents, we can instruct and encourage and guide and pray, but the process of developing convictions is largely an internal one. It happens when our teens struggle through their own questions, doubts, and trials."⁵⁵

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Boundless](#) addresses issues important to young adults, including singleness and sexuality.
- "[Abstinence Before Marriage](#)," a series of articles making the case against premarital sex
- "[Conflict with Your Teen](#)," a series of articles by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley on keeping the lines of communication open
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on

the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Dealing with a Sexually Active Teen

Question

We just found out that our teenager has been sexually active for the past several months. We're shocked, but want to handle the situation wisely. How do we deal with the problem without alienating our child? What should we do to make sure this behavior stops and doesn't start again? Should we give our teen contraceptives? I don't want to appear to be condoning premarital sex, but I don't want an unplanned pregnancy, either.

Answer

Since you seem to be a thoughtful, caring, and sensitive parent, you probably don't need us to tell you that blowing up, finger-wagging, lecturing, and name-calling aren't going to be particularly helpful. This is a significant family problem; it deserves a loving and thoughtful response. The goal is to contain the damage and coach your adolescent toward more healthy and rational decisions without driving a wedge into the parent-child relationship.

The first thing you need to remember is to think before you react. It's normal to feel upset and disappointed, and you'll probably need a couple of days to settle down. We suggest you take some time to cool off and then arrange a meeting to sit down and talk about what's happened. This will probably be more appropriate than risking a volatile, spur-of-the-moment confrontation.

When the time for this discussion arrives, try to ask open-ended questions ("Can you tell me about your relationship with ... ?") rather than judgmental ones ("How could you do this?"). Listen to the whole story before offering your viewpoint. Editorial comments will shut off communication in a hurry. Emphasize the big picture, explaining how premarital sexual activity jeopardizes your adolescent's goals and dreams. Whatever you do, don't tear down your teenager's sense of self-worth with comments like, "I am so ashamed of you!"

As you're having these discussions, don't neglect to emphasize the spiritual

aspects of the issue—especially if your teen professes to have a relationship with God. Your adolescent needs to understand *why* sexual purity is important. Explain that this isn't just a matter of "doing the right thing," "conforming to Christian standards," or "following Mom and Dad's rules." It's a question of living according to God's plan and devoting body and soul to the One who loved us enough to die on the cross on our behalf. Ultimately, everything revolves around your teen's relationship with Him.

On the physical side, get the necessary medical input. A doctor's evaluation should be on the agenda to check for STIs (and for girls, to obtain a Pap test or perhaps a pregnancy test). Be sure to select your healthcare provider carefully; your adolescent is less likely to choose abstinence in the future if he or she has a doctor who feels that teens can't control their sexual urges.

Be ready to deal with the logistical aspects of the situation—for example, to address the underlying issues behind the behavior, to prepare for a possible pregnancy, and to repair the emotional damage. You may also need to have one or more candid conversations with your teen's partner and with his or her parents. Dating and other socializing patterns that may have increased the chances for intimacy should be reassessed and restructured.

But what about supplying your teen with contraception? This, in our opinion, is the one thing you should *not* do. It's not just that such a move on your part would seem to imply tacit approval of teen sexual activity, as you suggest. It would also communicate the idea that "safe sex" is achievable, and that it can be attained simply by taking a pill, wearing a condom, or using a diaphragm. This is a lie we dare not propagate to the younger generation. As Christians, we know that the only kind of sex that's truly "safe"—emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and physically—is marital sex.

Finally, you should seriously consider getting your son or daughter (and yourself) into counseling. A wise counselor may be able to talk more candidly with your teenager about sexuality while simultaneously promoting a decision to remain abstinent in the future. Sexual activity may be a symptom of more basic problems that need ongoing work. Be prepared to put in time with the counselor yourself to deal with the causes and effects of this problem within your family.

Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified professionals practicing in your local area. Our counselors would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. Each is a committed Christian and a licensed family therapist. Please see

["How to Reach Us"](#) for more information.⁵⁶

In Other Words ...

“Can a doctor prescribe contraceptives to your teen without advising you? Yes. Both federal and state laws protect physicians who screen and treat minors for sexually transmitted infections as well as prescribe or dispense contraceptives. This is one reason why it’s important to choose a physician who shares your values and believes that abstinence before marriage is the healthiest choice—or who at least will support those values.”⁵⁷

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Teen Rebellion](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- “[Loving Your Teen Through Life’s Seasons](#)” by Tiffany Stuart
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Teen Rejects Faith Due to “Anti-Gay” Christians

Question

Lately my teenage son has been increasingly hostile to Christianity, saying that Christians don't care about gay people—and that they promote hatred against gays. It's not hard to see that he's been strongly influenced by curriculum at school, TV shows and movies, Internet comments, and knowing some kids who identify themselves as gay. I've always been careful not to say disrespectful things about homosexuals, though I haven't dropped my commitment to the Bible's view of homosexual activity. How can I convince my son that our faith is still worth following?

Answer

If we were talking to your son, we might say something like, “Forgive us if we've said or done something to give you the wrong impression. We don't hate gay people, nor do we claim—as some say we have—that homosexuals undermine the institution of marriage and corrupt children. We don't even believe it's impossible for two people of the same sex to ‘love’ one another (provided, of course, the word ‘love’ is properly defined). What we *do* say is that God intentionally created human sexuality to function according to a particular plan, and that both marriage and the physical union upon which it is based are necessarily heterosexual by nature and design.”

We find this idea clearly expressed, not in certain obscure passages of the Old Testament Law as some of our critics seem to suppose, but in the words of Jesus Himself: “Haven't you read ... that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’?” (Matthew 19:4-5, quoting from Genesis 1:27; 2:24).

We don't hold to this perspective out of a desire to hurt or reject anyone. On

the contrary, we're simply trying to remain true to the testimony of Scripture, which, as Bible-believing Christians, we regard as the authoritative Word of God.

Where "gay bullying" is concerned, we're opposed to bullying of every variety—period. We see no reason to single out any particular group for special attention or protection. We believe every individual is made in God's image, is loved by Him, and has innate dignity and worth as a human being. That's why we strongly support fair and objective bullying policies that defend all children against bullying of any kind for any reason.

But enough about our views. The real issues here are your pain over your son's hostility to your faith, and his misunderstandings about that faith. When you discuss this subject with him, you might explain that Christians do believe that God exists, that He has established certain clear moral standards, and that there is such a thing as right and wrong. But this doesn't imply that we advocate rejection or ostracism of family members for any reason. Christians are—or should be—genuinely sorry when anyone is forced to endure that kind of treatment, and we should want to help in any way we can. God loves every person unconditionally and He wants everyone to know His love in a deep and personal way. This is the Christian message in a nutshell.

If you need more help with this situation, or if your son has further questions, Focus on the Family has a team of pastoral counselors who'd love to discuss things with you—or with him—over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. See ["How to Reach Us"](#) for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Yes, God hates sin, but He reaches out to sinners!

"Unfortunately, the reality is that some Christians are judgmental. They look down on those who are engaged in sinful behaviors like homosexuality ... drunkenness, drug abuse, promiscuous sex, and other behaviors. They speak out against those issues, seeking only to condemn those who practice them, not to give them the hope of Christ....

"Kindly consider, though, that the greatest man who ever walked the earth, the One in whom 'all the fullness of Deity dwelt in bodily form' (Colossians 2:9, NASB), was the same person of whom it is written: 'When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things'

(Mark 6:34niv).

“Jesus loved sinners and had compassion on them. He wants us to do the same.”⁵⁸

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *101 Frequently Asked Questions About Homosexuality* by Mike Haley (Harvest House, 2004)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

Part 6: Your Teen's Emotions

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Strong-Willed Adolescent

Question

I seem to hear a lot about dealing with strong-willed toddlers, but not so much about strong-willed teenagers. If you think it's tough managing a defiant two-year-old, imagine what it's like when the kid is seventeen and six feet tall! He's totally unyielding, and I'm totally exhausted. Can you help me?

Answer

You're not alone. We often hear from weary parents who've nearly reached the end of their rope with a strong-willed adolescent.

Perhaps it would help to begin with a few general observations. In dealing with a strong-willed teen, it's essential to stay calm, maintain a sense of confidence, and have a carefully conceived plan of action. Make sure you're eating healthy meals, getting enough sleep, and taking care of your own emotional health; you need every ounce of strength, poise, and self-control you can muster to handle a challenge like this.

If your system of discipline is to be effective you'll need to lay out your expectations in advance and make sure everyone in the household understands them. Consequences for rebellious or disobedient behavior should be spelled out beforehand. Implementation of those consequences should be prompt and consistent. You can be sure that your strong-willed child will challenge these standards at every opportunity, but it's crucial to keep your cool in the face of his defiance. Don't give him an opportunity to seize control of the situation.

The task of parenting a strong-willed adolescent is complicated by the fact that teens of all temperaments are trying to form an identity. A quest for increasing independence is usually part of this process, and can often play itself out in behavior that defines "self" *in opposition to* the parent's values,

beliefs, wishes, and instructions. For this reason it's important not only to maintain clear and consistent guidelines and expectations but also to organize those guidelines into at least three different categories: non-negotiable rules, negotiable rules, and rules that can be discarded as your adolescent matures and demonstrates a growing ability to regulate his own behavior.

When rules are broken, take that opportunity to teach your teen about the reality of consequences. Talk about the ripple effect of the choices we make in life—on ourselves, our friends, our families, and the world around us. Help your adolescent connect the dots between your previous warnings and the unpleasant results of his rebellious behavior. Negative consequences at this stage should take the form of lost privileges—phone time, computer time, curfew limits, access to the car, and so on. Take care to match disobedient behaviors with appropriate consequences.

On the other side of the coin, it's equally important to stay vigilant enough to “catch your child being good” and to recognize and highlight any attempt on his part to cooperate and observe the rules of the household. One effective way to promote such cooperation is to establish a point system based on chores that need to be done around the house: Every job earns a certain number of points, which can be used to “buy back” privileges lost as a result of rebellious behavior. This is just another way of enabling young people to see the links between actions and outcomes.

If you're married, remember to keep an eye out for strategies designed to drive a wedge between you and your spouse. Most strong-willed teens possess a special talent for pitting the “softer” parent against the “stricter” one. You and your spouse must take steps to ensure that you're on the same page if you're to foil these “divide-and-conquer” tactics. We'd strongly suggest getting professional help with this aspect of the problem by seeking counseling for the entire family. Strong-willed kids often have at least one strong-willed parent, and it's difficult to work through the complex family dynamics associated with this clash of wills. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified Christian therapists practicing in your area. They would also be more than happy to discuss your concerns with you over the phone. See the “[How to Reach Us](#)” page in the front of this book for more information.

In the meantime, make a determined effort to stay in touch with your teenager's feelings and cultivate an awareness of the day-to-day details of his life at home and at school. Take time to talk about any fears that may lurk behind his defiant exterior. See if you can gain any insight into what's driving the disobedient behavior.

Let your child know you're on his team by expressing concern for his well-being and by teaching him some basic skills for managing negative emotions

and maintaining positive relationships with other people. With sensitive and skillful mentoring on your part, your strong-willed teen has the potential to grow into a strong leader and a powerful influence for good.

In Other Words ...

“We adults live with the Three Rules of Life every day. What makes it extra scary for us as parents is that the rules are true for our kids as well.

“• Your teenager will live and die by his or her choices, not by yours.

“• Your teenager has the power to choose stupid as well as smart.

“• You need to penalize poor choices, but life often does that anyway—and more harshly.

“We long to keep our teens from making stupid choices. But God has given them the power to do just that.

“That’s life. That’s reality. That’s why I keep coming back to Jesus’ words, ‘Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’ (John 8:32). When it comes to raising teenagers, the more your perceptions match reality the freer—and less frustrated—you’ll be.”⁵⁹

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Conflict with Your Teen](#),” a series of articles by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley on keeping the lines of communication open
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The New Strong-Willed Child* by Dr. James Dobson (Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World* by Jill Rigby (Howard Publishing, 2006)

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)

Adolescent Moodiness vs. Depression

Question

What's the difference between "normal" teenage moodiness and serious clinical depression? My teen seems to have more "downs" than "ups." Is this a normal part of adolescence, or should I be concerned?

Answer

It's certainly true that teens can be moody. That's partly due to the physiological changes they're experiencing. A reasonable degree of shuttling between emotional ups and downs can be considered a normal part of life during the teen years. Nevertheless, there's an important distinction to be made between adolescent mood swings and true clinical depression. Genuine depression is a deeper, more serious problem. It also can be passed from one generation to the next. So in evaluating your teen's situation, it's important to have a handle on your family's medical history.

Depression, along with substance abuse and various personality and mental disorders, is a major risk factor for teen suicide. Ninety percent of individuals who die by suicide display one or more of these risk factors. So if your teen seems to be struggling with depression, you'd be well advised to keep a close eye on him.

The major symptoms of clinical depression are as follows:

- *Persistent sadness and/or irritability.* This may include mood swings that seem out of proportion to the circumstances; episodes of moping and crying; withdrawal and isolation; fatigue and loss of enthusiasm or interest in favorite activities; poor school performance; and outbursts of anger and overt acting-out.

- *Painful thoughts* that reveal themselves in relentless introspection, a negative self-concept, persistent anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness.

- *Physical symptoms* such as insomnia, changes in appetite, headaches, dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, abdominal cramps, and episodes of

shortness of breath.

- In rare cases, a severe case of depression may also involve *delusional thinking*, including visual and auditory hallucinations. This is not merely depression but a form of psychosis, a serious disorder of neurochemical functions in the brain.

In teens, you can expect to see these symptoms unfold in three stages:

Stage One: Inability to concentrate, withdrawal from friends, impulsive acts, and declining academic performance. If you see these symptoms, encourage your teen to talk openly and honestly with you. Tell him you're concerned about what you see and want to help him avoid further struggles.

Stage Two: Acts of aggression, rapid mood swings, loss of friends, mild rebellion, and sudden changes in personality. If you see this pattern, seek outside assistance immediately from a trusted youth pastor or counselor.

Stage Three: Overt rebellion, visible depression, extreme fatigue, giving away prized possessions, expressions of hopelessness, and suicidal threats or gestures. These symptoms mean trouble. Get professional help right away; if your teen is clinically depressed, he can't pull himself out of it. He may need to be evaluated for hospitalization. Medication may also be necessary.

If you have reason to suspect that your adolescent might be seriously depressed or suicidal, seek appropriate help immediately. You may want to contact your physician for advice or a referral. Even if a present threat of suicide doesn't seem to be part of the picture, you should still take definite steps to deal with the depression. Listen carefully to your teen when he talks about his problems; take his feelings seriously. Pray with him and for him. Get a physician's evaluation of his condition and be willing to consider appropriate medication; antidepressants can normalize disturbances in neurotransmitter function in the brain and are neither addictive nor an "escape from reality."

We also recommend that you seek professional counseling for your teen and the entire family without delay. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified Christian therapists in your area who specialize in dealing with problems of this nature. Our counselors will also be happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁶⁰

In Other Words ...

"Every parent knows that adolescents don't sleep like the rest of us. Adolescent sleep is characterized by lack of consistency, irregular sleep

schedules, daytime sleepiness, and elevated risk for sleep disturbances. But when paired together, insomnia, nightmares, and sleep insufficiency are commonly associated with elevated risk for suicide in depressed teenagers [according to the *Journal of Sleep and Sleep Disorders Research*]. So if your teenager is depressed, fostering better sleep habits is one positive protection you can give him or her. And don't forget that modeling good sleep habits can go a long way toward encouraging your teens to do the same.”⁶¹

—Dr. Archibald D. Hart

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Depression](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) provides a helpline, information, and stories of hope and recovery.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Blue Genes* by Paul Meier, MD, Todd Clements, MD, and Jean-Luc Bertrand, DMD (Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Poor Body Image

Question

Our teenager seems to be suffering from a poor body image, but she won't talk about it. How do we bring this up without smothering her, alienating her, or otherwise hurting our relationship?

Answer

Where adolescents are concerned, forced discussions of deep emotional issues are usually counterproductive. Rather than pushing her to share her feelings, we think the best approach would be to spend more one-on-one “fun” time with your daughter. Invite her to take walks with you in the evening—a good way to get exercise while providing opportunity for natural conversation. You could also set up a shopping date or arrange to go out for lunch or bagels and hot chocolate on Saturday mornings.

Once the two of you are relaxed and having a good time, look for openings to delve into deeper issues. Don't try to force the discussion to move in a certain direction. Instead, ask open-ended questions. Your daughter needs to feel she can safely share her thoughts and emotions with you. If you're gentle and sensitive, there's a good chance she'll gradually open up. When she does, resist the urge to respond with advice. Hold your tongue and learn what it means to be a good listener.

Many teenage girls—even some you wouldn't suspect—have problems with a negative body image. Fathers can play an especially important role in helping their daughters overcome these difficulties. Every girl longs to feel loved and cherished by her father; if Dad gets into the habit of encouraging and affirming her on a regular basis, letting her know how special she is in his eyes and in the sight of God, it won't be long before her self-image begins to move in a positive direction. He should take extra care to compliment her on her character rather than simply on her looks or achievements.

If you're concerned that your daughter may have an eating disorder like

anorexia or bulimia, we'd encourage you to seek professional help immediately. Psychological treatment for eating disorders often involves a family-systems approach, in which the entire family goes to counseling together. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can refer you to a qualified Christian therapist in your area. For more information and a brief over-the-phone consultation, give us a call. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Your job here is a delicate one. Your teenager will need generous doses of reassurance that worth is not dependent on appearance, even when the culture around her says otherwise. You will have to endure the fact that any positive comments you make about looks, temperament, accomplishments, or inherent value may not be met with expressions of thanks. It may appear that what you say doesn't count, but it does—in a big way."⁶²

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Prevent the Sexualization of Your Daughter](#)," a series of articles by Vicki Courtney on true and false concepts of beauty
- "[Eating Disorders and Kids](#)," a series of articles by Focus on the Family's Youth Culture Department
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Bloom: A Girl's Guide to Growing Up* by Susie Shellenberger (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The No-Gimmick Guide to Raising Fit Kids* by Robert S. Andersen, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Change in Teen's Personality

Question

This past year has been difficult. I've watched my daughter make the transformation from a kind, joyful, cooperative little girl to a sullen, contrary, hard-to-get-along-with adolescent. She's moody and secretive about insignificant things. Our relationship used to be a source of enjoyment for me. Now it's the opposite. How can I turn this situation around?

Answer

People always do things for a reason. Your first item of business, then, is to ask yourself where these changes might be coming from. There are several factors that could be contributing to the problem.

To begin with, your daughter could be in the throes of the normal physical and hormonal upheavals that accompany the onset of puberty and adolescence. Depending on the individual, these shifts can have behavioral effects ranging from the relatively benign to the near-cataclysmic. It's pretty common for a person your daughter's age to experience dramatic emotional ups and downs, to become surly or withdrawn, or to display marked personality changes during this stage of her growth. The good news is that it's usually just a passing phase.

Closely connected with these hormonally driven changes is a psychological phenomenon that child development specialists call *separation and individuation*. When kids enter the teen years, they often begin pulling away from their parents while connecting and identifying more closely with their peers. This process is usually accompanied by a quest for new ways to express individuality and assert personal preferences. Not only is it completely normal, it's also an important stage in every kid's journey from childhood to maturity.

In many cases—like yours—a formerly happy, well-adjusted grade-schooler suddenly and inexplicably seems to transform into an entirely different person

who's dark, pensive, and non-communicative. This can be distressing to the rest of the family, but it isn't necessarily cause for alarm.

Without more detailed information it's difficult to know exactly what to say about the changes you've observed in your daughter's attitude and behavior. Is her secretiveness simply an expression of a desire to maintain privacy and establish her own identity, or is she actually telling lies and practicing deception? Is her moodiness merely an aspect of normal adolescent withdrawal, or do you have reason to believe she may be slipping into a serious depression?

If you aren't convinced that your daughter's attitude can be explained in terms of the normal maturation process, start looking for environmental factors that could be rocking her emotional boat. Has she been through any upsetting changes recently? A breakup with a boyfriend, perhaps, the loss of a loved one, or a drastic realignment within her immediate social group? Has your family relocated within the past few months? Is she attending a new school? Do you see any indication that she's tired of being "goody two-shoes" and wants to declare her independence by acting out? The possibilities are endless, but the point is that whenever parents notice a sudden shift in their child's behavior, they need to investigate the cause. If you don't think you have enough insight into your daughter's personal life to come up with the right answer, and you're married, your spouse may be able to help you fill in some of the gaps.

If and when you decide you've isolated the source of the difficulty, it might be a good idea to sit down and brainstorm potential solutions with your daughter. But be forewarned: Teen girls don't often respond favorably to parents who try to dive in and "fix" everything in the course of a single conversation. You'll find this to be particularly true if *you* have been part of the problem—if, for example, you've been an overcommitted, uninvolved, absentee parent up to this point and are suddenly trying to make up for past mistakes, or if you're uncomfortable with the idea of your little girl becoming a woman.

Whatever the details of your situation, you can't force your daughter to alter her mood. It may hurt deeply to see her pulling away, but there's nothing you can do to turn back the clock and revive the relationship you enjoyed with her back in "the good old days." You're going to have to accept things the way they are—at least for the time being. If she refuses to warm up to you, make up your mind to back off for a while. Maybe your spouse can maintain a strong connection with her as she moves through this transitional period in her life.

Meanwhile, your assignment is to stay in the picture, make your presence felt, remain available, and use the "touch and go" method ("Hi, honey, how was your day? You look nice tonight. Have fun at the party") to create opportunities for interaction. Make it your goal to question more and answer

less, listen more and talk less, relate more and “fix” less. In the process, take care of yourself and find appropriate ways to ease the pain in your own heart.

The teenage years can be emotionally turbulent, what with physical changes, hormonal changes, and the shifting demands of peer pressure. Research indicates that a significant percentage of young people will experience clinical depression at some point during this phase of their growth and development. If you fear that your daughter may fall into this category, we’d encourage you to talk with your family physician or a trained psychologist.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these suggestions at greater length, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. They also can refer you to a therapist in your area. To contact our Counseling Department, see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“With each passing day, Jim and Gina felt their daughter becoming more distant and withdrawn. Seeking some solutions, they met with their pastor and Amanda’s youth pastor.... But underlying everything else was Jim and Gina’s decision to be relentless in pursuit of their daughter....

“Amanda and her parents saw a family counselor for several months to sort out what had happened and to rebuild their relationships.... Toward the end of their therapy sessions, it was Amanda who pinpointed what had turned her around after nearly a year of rebellion.

““Part of what I went through was trying to figure out who I was, and another part was testing Mom and Dad to see if they’d still love me and accept me.... The thing that won me over was seeing my parents not give up on me.””⁶³

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Loving Your Teen Through Life’s Seasons](#)” by Tiffany Stuart
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Part 7: Protecting Your Teen

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Teenage Drivers

Question

Our teenager just got his learner's permit. He's pushing hard to get behind the wheel of a car as soon as possible. I have to admit that I'm more than a little apprehensive about him becoming a driver at such a young age. Every time I think about it, I practically have a panic attack. How can I stop worrying?

Answer

Your concerns aren't unfounded. It's no coincidence that automobile insurance rates are greatly increased for adolescent drivers, especially males. Motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death among young people ages fifteen through twenty-four. More than three thousand young drivers die every year.

There are reasons for these statistics, of course. Inexperience is a major risk factor for teens involved in accidents. Many of them don't have the judgment and decision-making abilities required to avoid trouble on the highways. They also lack a healthy sense of their own mortality, and as a result they have a propensity to engage in risky behavior. Teenagers love to hang out and drive around with their friends, but for a sixteen-year-old driver the likelihood of having a fatal accident increases nearly 40 percent when one non-adult passenger is present, nearly 90 percent with two, and nearly 300 percent with three or more young riders.

After reading such discouraging information, you may feel ready to vow that your teen will never sit behind the wheel of a car until he's in his twenties and living on his own. But that's not realistic. Besides, that kind of mindset is counterproductive and insulting to teens who really want to learn how to drive safely. It's far more constructive to view the adolescent years as a time when

adults can teach safe driving habits and influence a young driver's behavior for life, imparting skills and knowledge that will perhaps save lives many years in the future.

There are a number of ways you can pass along a wealth of positive driving wisdom to your teen. In the first place, be patient. If you're doing the driver's education yourself, remember that the process of helping your son learn to drive may be nerve-wracking for you but it's much more so for him. So when you're acting as his instructor, keep your head about you and give all directions calmly and clearly. Be liberal with encouragement and praise. It will make a huge difference if you simply stay cool.

Second, remember that it's important to model safe driving habits for your adolescent. Know the traffic laws for your state and be prepared to enforce additional limits and expectations based on his attitude and skill. Observe the speed limit and be courteous of other drivers. For better or worse, children will imitate their parents.

Third, you may want to think about granting driving privileges on an incremental basis. Recognizing that driver-education courses by themselves are not a complete preparation for novice motorists, some states have instituted graduated driver's licensing for teens. A system of this kind is designed to phase teens into full driving privileges by allowing them to mature and develop their skills in a series of steps. For example, a stage-one driver might not be allowed to drive after dark, while in stage two he might be permitted to drive at night but only with adult supervision. Even if your state hasn't instituted a plan like this, you might consider adopting this approach in your own family. This will allow your teen to acquire the experience he needs while reducing some of the risks.

Fourth, make a point of underscoring the importance of basic safety rules. Always require everyone in the car, driver *and* passengers, to buckle up before the engine is started. This is another area where your example speaks louder than your words. In addition, your adolescent should never drive if he is drowsy. And while there are many good reasons for him to abstain from alcohol and drugs, don't fail to bring home the message that drinking and driving kills thousands of people every year. No matter how strongly you might feel about the use of alcohol, let your son know that he can always call you for a ride in order to avoid being in a car with an intoxicated driver—whether it's himself or someone else.

Finally, if you see unsafe driving patterns or habits that your adolescent refuses to correct, don't let him have the keys. The first thing would-be drivers need to learn is that driving is a privilege, not a right. Your first priority is not to win a popularity contest but to keep him (and others on the road) alive and

well while he learns to operate an automobile safely and skillfully.⁶⁴

In Other Words ...

“Recently [my sixteen-year-old son] was driving us along a busy street with lots of road work. The heavy traffic made me tense, so I urged Chris to slow down.

“‘Mom,’ he said with obvious irritation, ‘I’ve been driving myself for almost a year. I know when to stop.’

“Struggling to keep my comments to myself, I resorted to biting my tongue and pushing down on the invisible brake we all believe exists on the passenger side of cars with teenage drivers.

“Of course, Chris noticed the way I jerked my leg. ‘What are you doing?’

“‘Just stretching my leg,’ I replied, not exactly truthful, not exactly lying.

“‘It looked like you were hitting the brakes.’ His hurt, accusing tone showed how much he wanted my affirmation and trust in his driving skills....

“Hiding all that concern takes a lot out of a mom. But I can’t undermine his confidence by allowing him to believe I don’t trust him.

“Next time I plan to wear a really long skirt so he can’t see my right foot pushing a hole in the car floor.”⁶⁵

—Liz, quoted in *Losing Control and Liking It*

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD

(Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

- *Give Them Wings* by Carol Kuykendall (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1994)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)

Teen Dancing

Question

My teenagers have been asking to attend parties and school dances. But when my wife and I got a glimpse of some of the sexualized moves that go under the name of “dancing” nowadays we told them “no.” Our kids think we’re being unreasonable, and complain about this at least once a week. Is there a way out of this?

Answer

Your instincts are right on target. Many aspects of today’s youth culture are toxic to kids, and you’re wise to keep a vigilant eye on the types of parties and school-sponsored events your children attend. Dancing should be a matter of special concern to parents. There’s nothing unreasonable or old-fashioned about your misgivings.

Perhaps you’ve heard some of the disturbing news reports about “grinding,” the latest form of “dirty dancing” to make the scene at high school proms. “Graphic” is a mild way to describe it; in many cases it amounts to nothing less than a public simulation of the sex act on the dance floor. It’s to the credit of school officials that, in response to “grinding,” many of them have begun to set firm limits on the type of behavior that will be tolerated at school dances.

As these administrators clearly understand, supervision is essential. If you feel that your kids’ school isn’t providing teens with appropriate guidelines, you’d be smart to keep them away from dances. The same observation applies to parties held at private homes. Where proper oversight is lacking, your children should not be in attendance.

You won’t want to beat your kids over the head with all of this, of course. It’s critical to exercise your authority in the context of loving concern; as author Josh McDowell expresses it, “Rules without relationship lead to rebellion.” If you want to communicate your message in the most effective way possible, start by sitting down with your teens and reaffirming how much you

love and care about them. Let them know that, as parents, you have a responsibility to protect them from physical, emotional, and spiritual harm. Explain why the dances or parties in question could have damaging effects in the long run. Point out that there are good reasons to suppose that the type of dancing that goes on at many of these events encourages sexual activity and other hazardous behaviors. Then, as a way of softening the blow, offer an alternative outing on the night of the dance. Tell your kids you'd like to take them and a few friends out for a fun evening—perhaps dinner at their favorite restaurant or a family movie.

It's also important to keep your kids connected to strong Christian fellowship. In a sense, this is the larger and deeper issue behind your question. During the teen years, it's crucial that young people have a solid, supportive group of friends dedicated to following Christ and pursuing moral purity. Your teenagers need to be involved in an active, vibrant youth group that emphasizes discipleship, outreach, and Christian growth. If your church doesn't offer that, find one that does. It's vital to your children's spiritual well-being.

In Other Words ...

“Encourage your teen to attend parties sponsored by the church youth group or other Christian ministries.

“• Find out everything you can about the party your son or daughter will be attending.

“• Network with other parents.

“• Establish the hour at which your teen is expected home.

“• Talk through an exit plan with your son or daughter.

“• Discuss transportation.

“• Provide alternatives to parties. Be creative and ask for your teen's suggestions. For example, offer to drive your teen and a few friends to a water park, baseball game, or play. The goal is to satisfy your teen's desire for socializing in a fun, wholesome setting.”⁶⁶

—Adapted from *Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Combatting Cultural Influences](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Parent Concerned About Prom

Question

Proms sure have changed since I was in high school. Now they seem to revolve around spending too much on clothes and limos, getting drunk, and staying overnight in hotels. I'm nervous about letting my teenager go. Is there any way to get out of this without alienating my kid forever?

Answer

Your concerns are understandable. Parents have a number of good reasons to be worried about what goes on during and after a high school prom—everything from sexually suggestive dancing to reckless driving to potential drug and alcohol abuse. Most moms and dads had very different experiences during their high school years, and as a result have few points of reference from which to evaluate the current situation. It can be a real challenge to guide your teen wisely through the moral ambiguities surrounding social events like this. Still, we'd like to urge you to resist the knee-jerk temptation to just say “no” to the whole thing.

You can defuse some of the danger by confronting the issue head-on. Take an intentional approach. If your teenager is looking forward to attending the prom, see if you can get her to think out loud with you about the purpose of this “ultimate” night of fun and romance. Why does she want to go so badly? What does she expect to happen when she gets there? Help her to see that a great deal depends on her reasons for going.

There are, of course, any number of bad reasons for attending a prom—things like gaining acceptance from the peer group, acquiring or preserving a dating relationship, flirting with members of the opposite sex, or impressing others with clothes and limousines that come with a hefty price tag.

Are there any positive reasons for going to the prom? Yes. Your teenager can be allowed to take part in this event as a reward for hard work, integrity, or academic achievement. She can be encouraged to see it as a chance to

deepen strong friendships in a group setting. If she's a strong believer, it can even be an opportunity to stand out in the crowd as a winsome and attractive witness for Christ.

The important thing, then, is to get a handle on your teen's hopes and expectations. Once you understand what she's after, you can approve, caution, or redirect her desires based on what you know about her strengths and weaknesses. The limits you set should flow directly from the purpose of the evening. For instance, if "fun" is her one overriding goal, she may find it hard to say "no" to anything that sounds fun, even if it's dangerous or foolish. On the other hand, if she's genuinely interested in representing Jesus, certain standards of modesty—including those related to necklines and hemlines—will become obvious considerations. It's extremely important that these standards and limitations arise out of the desires of her own heart. When teenagers own their boundaries and feel responsible for them, they hold up much better under pressure. Conversely, an external limit imposed by Mom or Dad won't stand up as well in the face of the world's values.

Gaining a sense of your child's heart, intentions, and goals regarding prom night can confirm your anxieties or bolster your confidence. Either way, you'll have more solid information on which to base your ultimate decision. If you choose to let her attend the prom, you can enhance the experience by getting excited and looking forward to the event with her. If, on the other hand, this process of investigation leaves you feeling uncomfortable about prom night, you can explore alternative activities together—many of which are far less expensive.

If you're still unsure what to do and would like to discuss your hesitations with a member of our staff, please feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Your son wants to stay at a hotel on prom night; how should you respond? First, ask him why he wants to spend the night at a hotel. Who'll be there, and why does he think this would be a good idea? Then explain that the only 'benefit' to staying at a hotel would be to continue partying with friends after the prom or to keep from driving if he's been drinking....

"Concerning the first answer, tell him that all fun must end sometime, and two o'clock in the morning is a better time than eight o'clock. This isn't a trust issue; you want to help him stay away from situations where he'll be tempted

to do things he'll regret later....

“Second, if he says he wants to stay at a hotel to avoid driving drunk, don't ignore the fact that he wants to drink. In no way should you encourage him to drink alcohol even in a 'safe' place. Besides, he may be breaking the law.”⁶⁷

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Combatting Cultural Influences](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Teen “Sexting”

Question

We recently discovered that our teenage daughter has been involved in “sexting”—sending and receiving sexually explicit messages and photos over her cell phone. When confronted about this, she claimed this is harmless since it “doesn’t involve anything physical.” How can we respond to this?

Answer

Perhaps the first thing your daughter needs to know is that this “harmless” activity is potentially illegal. She could face arrest and prosecution for sharing or receiving explicit pictures over the phone. Photos of this nature are considered pornographic. If their subjects are minors, the pictures fall into the category of child pornography. As you probably know, most states have strict laws against the distribution of child porn in any form. This is not to mention that phone-transmitted photographs can be forwarded so many times that an individual’s privacy is completely compromised. We’ve heard reports of a young woman so devastated that she ended her own life after her photo was passed along to nearly every student in her high school.

It’s naïve to assume that no one is hurt by sexting simply because it doesn’t involve physical contact. That ignores the profound emotional, psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects of human sexuality. Scripture takes a holistic view of sex, describing it as nothing less than a whole-life, one-flesh union between a man and woman within the context of a committed marital relationship (Genesis 2:24). It’s impossible to indulge in the counterfeit intimacy of sexting without cheapening the meaning of real love—not to mention the fact that these photos defy biblical warnings about immodesty and lust. Such distortion can negatively influence a young person’s future relationship with a spouse, as well as erode self-esteem, self-respect, and a sense of personal identity.

The technological dimensions of the problem make it particularly difficult to resolve. Parents need to develop and maintain enough digital savvy to keep

pace with the ways in which cell phones and the Internet can be used. Moms and dads must warn their children about sexual predators who are all too eager to exploit young people. Before a teen ever starts using a cell phone, he or she must understand that it's never acceptable to exchange sexual photos or messages with anyone for any reason. In fact, if parents decide their teen is mature enough to have a cell phone, it would be wise to advise the teen that random spot checks can be expected in order to ensure that it's being used appropriately. Open communication between parents and children is more vital than ever; it's the only avenue for providing the protection and guidance kids need.

If you'd like to talk further about applying these suggestions to your teen's situation, feel free to call our counselors. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Sixteen-year-old Jenny barely saw her dad, thanks to his twelve-hour days and golfing habit. He did give her a new computer, though, and thought that would be enough to show her he loved her. She used it to post suggestive photos of herself... When her mom found out and tipped off Dad, he went ballistic and banned Jenny from using the computer for the rest of the year..."

"By acting out, teenagers can affirm they exist and that their existence has impact on the world around them. Their lives have made 'ripples in the water,' so to speak. They get *something* from their parents, even if it's punishment.

"To avoid that kind of acting out, remember: A teenager needs as much of your time and attention as a toddler does. In fact, a dad's validation is so critical to a child's emotional health that he or she will go to any length—and I do mean any—to get it, whether it's real or artificial."⁶⁸

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Preparing Your Child for the Online World](#)," a series of articles from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- "[Staying on Top of Your Teen's Technology](#)," a series of articles by Lindy

Keffer

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Protecting Your Child in an X-Rated World* by Frank York and Jan LaRue (Focus on the Family, 2002)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Teens and Internet Risks

Question

My fourteen-year-old wants to get involved with social networking and online chat rooms. I've read some of the conversations on the sites she wants to visit, and they seem pretty harmless. But I'm still afraid of not being able to monitor my child's interactions with strangers. Am I overreacting?

Answer

While the Internet can be a wonderful educational and communication tool, it can also be a dangerous place for unsuspecting young teens. According to a Congressional report, one out of five kids in the US has been solicited online for sex—usually by someone met in a chat room or through instant messaging. The Kaiser Family Foundation tells us that 70 percent of teenage Internet users have accidentally encountered pornography on the web, and that half of those kids said they were very upset by the experience. We've all heard horror stories about teens and pre-teens being abducted and raped by sexual predators they met online.

As parents, it's our responsibility to protect our children from the many risks they face in today's toxic culture. You can begin by setting up a "firewall" around your daughter, morally speaking. Start by talking to her about the responsible use of the web. It's possible that she's completely oblivious to the dangers lurking there. Make her aware of some of the more unsavory situations that can unfold on the Internet—for example, how the guy she talks to in a chat room who claims to be a cute 16-year-old boy might actually be a 55-year-old convicted sex offender. Once you've had this discussion, tell her that, in order to ensure her safety, you're going to be setting up some new guidelines for using the web.

We take the view that parents should never, ever allow a child to have a computer with Internet access in his or her private bedroom. In our opinion, this is a recipe for disaster. If this is the situation in your household, you'll

need to make some changes. Move the computer to a common area of the house, such as the kitchen or family room, where you can easily look over your daughter's shoulder to see what kinds of sites she's visiting.

It would also be an excellent idea to invest in Internet filtering software or sign up with a provider that blocks objectionable sites and allows parental monitoring. There are also software programs available that will permit you to keep track of every keystroke your child makes when sending an e-mail or instant message. In addition, you can restrict the chat rooms she visits to so-called "safe chats" that are overseen by adult hosts who work for the Internet provider. These hosts will report any suspicious communication to law enforcement and will block access to users who send inappropriate messages to others.

It's important to explain to your daughter that you're not implementing these changes out of a desire to "spy," but rather to make sure she's protected from harmful influences and dangerous people. If she complains that you're "violating her privacy," make it clear that you'll do your best to respect her online conversations with friends. But point out that, as a minor living under your roof, she has limited privacy.

Many parents find it helpful to write up an "Internet use contract" spelling out which sites their kids are allowed to visit, how long they're allowed to stay online, and what to do if someone with whom they communicate requests personal information or says something that makes them uncomfortable. Both parents and kids should sign this contract and agree on the consequences that will ensue if the rules are violated.

If you have further questions or concerns, feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. For more information, see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"I asked Detective [Chris] Shermer what advice he would give parents about dealing with predators. He outlined four points:

"1. Learn what your kids know. Get up-to-date with the electronics they're using. Sit down and ask, 'What are you doing here?'

"2. Have the computer out in the open when they're younger.

"3. When they're older and need a laptop for homework, have a contract in place. Explain to them, 'Here are the rules,' such as, 'You will always let me see what you post. If I come into your room and you slam shut your laptop, I will [be checking].'

“4. Know who your children are really talking to on their cell phones. Consider using a cell phone carrier who will block your child from receiving text messages during school hours (or any hours you set).”⁶⁹

—Bob Waliszewski

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Preparing Your Child for the Online World,”](#) a series of articles from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children
- [“Staying on Top of Your Teen’s Technology,”](#) a series of articles by Lindy Keffer
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Protecting Your Child in an X-Rated World* by Frank York and Jan LaRue (Focus on the Family, 2002)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)

Teen Loves Horror Stories

Question

Our seventeen-year-old son is fascinated with horror stories—films, TV shows, books, and graphic novels. We wish we could just keep him from seeing it, but we're realistic enough to know we can't. We're concerned that he's filling his mind with disturbing ideas and images, while he says it's all just harmless fun. How do we get him to make better entertainment choices on his own?

Answer

You have good reason to be concerned. Your teen may try to argue that a steady diet of horror won't affect him. He may even believe this with all his heart. That doesn't change the fact that our minds are shaped, for good or ill, by the stuff we pour into them. Again and again the Bible warns us against the dangers of imbibing negative and destructive words, ideas, and images—for “as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7, NKJV). That's why the apostle Paul makes a special point of instructing us to focus on things that are pure, noble, lovely, admirable, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8).

One of your primary responsibilities as a parent is to guide your son's moral development. It should be obvious that you can't do this simply with a list of dos and don'ts. Instead, you need to help him develop wisdom and discernment as he grows and matures. The best way to accomplish this is by providing reasonable guidelines while maintaining a close, warm, trusting relationship with him throughout the teen years.

We suggest you try the following approach. Sit down with your son and tell him how much you love him. Explain that one of the ways you express your love is by doing your best to protect him from harmful influences. Be sure to praise him for his love of reading, but don't hesitate to let him know that you're concerned about his obsession with horror stories. Tell him you have good reason to believe that this material will eventually have a negative

impact on his outlook and character.

Once you've explained your perspective in general terms, you can proceed to let him know—gently but firmly—that certain types of books, movies, TV shows, and graphic novels will no longer be allowed in your home. If you want him to respect your decisions in this regard, you'll have to convince him that you're acting on the basis of your own research. Rather than “banning” a book or DVD simply because it has a scary title or repulsive cover, do your homework so that you can intelligently determine which books, authors, and videos are acceptable and which aren't. If you don't have time to do this in-depth, you can always take a quick look at the reviews posted on Focus on the Family's PluggedIn.com website. They're designed to provide parents with all the information they need in order to make wise decisions about their children's media choices.

In addition, be sure to offer your son some positive alternatives. Encourage him, for example, to read teen fiction that's exciting and fun but which also carries an edifying moral or spiritual message.

If you have additional questions or would like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, we'd like to invite you to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department at your convenience. See “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“So, how can you decide what's okay and what's not okay when it comes to movies?... Let's start with the obvious stuff. We may be going out on a limb here, but we think there are [some] kinds of movies we can rule out without a lot of argument, including ...

“• *Occult movies*. Sure, there's a difference between practicing the occult and watching movies about it. But what if a film's message is that these “detestable” things (see Deuteronomy 18:10-12) are okay or funny or exciting? Do you think God gets a chuckle out of movies like that? Neither do we.

“• *Sick movies*. These are films that cause people to shake their heads and ask, ‘What kind of twisted mind thinks up this stuff?’ They might include movies like the one in which a psycho killer dresses up as Santa Claus and butchers families during the holiday season—and films that use cannibalism or child molestation as a source of laughs (see Psalm 101:3).”⁷⁰

—Stan Campbell and Randy Southern

Need More Help?

Online

- [Plugged In](#) provides reviews of music, movies, books, and other media from a Christian perspective.
- “[The Family Media Guardian](#),” a series of articles by Rhonda Handlon
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Could My Teen Be Threatened by Human Trafficking?

Question

I've never been a big believer in overly tight controls for my teenagers. My feeling has always been that they should have an increasing amount of independence at this stage of their development, so I don't enforce strict curfews or ask a lot of questions when they come in late at night. But recently I read an article about sexual "slavery" and human trafficking in our state, and it just about made my hair stand on end. Does this pose a real threat to my kids?

Answer

Unfortunately, the article you read has a very real basis in fact. It's true that human trafficking, sexual slavery, and various types of bondage and coerced labor are going on all around us—even in middle-class neighborhoods. Wise moms and dads need to be aware of this dark, seamy underside of contemporary culture and keep their antennae out for signs of suspicious activity in the local community. Most of us go about our business blissfully ignorant of the suffering and tragedy that could be taking place under our very noses.

That's one side of the issue. The other is this: Alarmist fears help no one. You don't want to scare your kids—or yourself—unnecessarily, nor is it wise to communicate an attitude of suspicion or distrust to your teens without sufficient cause. You can't live life with your head in the sand, but neither should you succumb to the paralysis of paranoia. The fact is that most of the human trafficking that goes on in the US and other developed Western nations is happening on the fringes of "respectable" society. The vast majority of the victims are undocumented immigrants and poor, homeless, or displaced individuals who are tricked or forced into slave labor or sexual slavery through various forms of deception and intimidation.

That's not to say that this ugly problem can't raise its head elsewhere. For example, we're aware of a case in which a middle-class Christian girl was seduced by an attractive "boy at school," surreptitiously drugged, photographed in the sex act, and then forced to work as a prostitute under threat of exposure through publication of the photos. We don't mention this to terrify you with sensationalistic details, but to let you know that things like this can happen anywhere. Parents and children need to know that there are savvy individuals "out there" who know how to turn a profit by taking advantage of vulnerable, trusting teens and young adults.

As for your situation, you say that you don't ask a lot of questions when your kids sometimes come home late at night. Perhaps it wouldn't hurt to start keeping closer tabs on them. It's always possible that an otherwise sensible teenager might fall prey to something even darker than premarital sex or substance abuse if she lets her guard down and allows herself to be trapped. You know your own children better than anyone else, so you're in the best position to determine whether they could be vulnerable to the kind of deception and victimization described above. Are they troubled in any way—struggling in school, dealing with social rejection, facing bully problems? Are they new in the neighborhood, unpopular with their classmates, insecure, or low on self-esteem? If so, their innate desire for some kind of human connection could make them easy targets.

The best way to prevent this, of course, is to make sure you're building strong relationships with your kids at home. The family should be their primary point of connection, the place where they get the most encouragement, and the source of their positive self-image. You can protect them against all kinds of negative outside influences simply by forging a bond of mutual trust. In addition to letting them know that there are dangerous people abroad in society, make it clear that they can always come to you with their needs and concerns. Say things like, "There's nothing you can't tell us," and "You could never do anything that would cause us to love you less." Children who get that kind of affirmation at home generally aren't inclined to look for it somewhere else.

If at any point you come across substantial evidence that your children—or anyone else's—have actually become caught up in human trafficking, don't hesitate to call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. You can also give Focus on the Family's Counseling Department a call if you think it might be helpful to discuss your questions at greater length with a member of our staff. See "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“[In the US,] coercing or enticing a minor by using the mail or interstate or foreign commerce for the purpose of engaging in sexual conduct is punishable under federal law.... Transporting minors for prostitution or other sexual activity is also prohibited under federal law....

“Pedophiles have traveled cross-country and into the US from other countries in order to have sex with minor children they have encountered on the Internet. In addition, minor children have unwittingly traveled across the country to meet a new ‘friend’ (pedophile) who has provided a plane or bus ticket. Children should be warned that they should never give out personal information on the Internet and should never arrange to meet someone without parental knowledge and consent. If a minor child receives a request to meet with someone unknown to the parents, who knows or should know that the child is a minor, the incident should be reported to local law enforcement and the FBI.”⁷¹

—Frank York and Jan LaRue

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Rescuing Children from Prostitution,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Linda Smith of Shared Hope International (Focus on the Family)
- *This Immoral Trade: Slavery in the 21st Century* by Baroness Caroline Cox and Dr. John Marks (Monarch Books, 2007)
- *Guarding Your Child in an X-Rated World* by Frank York and Jan LaRue (Focus on the Family, 2002)

Part 8: Drugs and Alcohol

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Can't Control Teen's Use of Marijuana

Question

We recently discovered that our seventeen-year-old son has been using marijuana. When we confronted him about it, he said it's socially acceptable, that the authorities aren't concerned about it anymore, and that it's on the verge of being legalized everywhere. In short, he refused to stop. What can we do?

Answer

Sadly, there's a sense in which your teen is right: Media coverage of medical marijuana, campaigns to more broadly legalize recreational use, and lax attitudes toward pot in the culture at large have created a situation in which there are fewer and fewer consequences for using this particular drug. Even if your son were legally charged with possession and use of marijuana, there's a good chance that the courts wouldn't do anything about it. Increasingly, concerned parents like yourselves are left without a shred of support or backup in the outside world.

None of this changes the fact that cannabis is a mind-altering and addictive drug. Consequences such as legal fines, jail time, and social disapproval may have dropped off the radar, but your son's physical and mental health is still being compromised by his use of marijuana. The drug probably has already skewed his thought processes, and the harmful effects will only increase with time.

We'd encourage you to emphasize this side of the issue when discussing your concerns with your son. If you've noticed changes in his personality, you can strengthen your case by describing these behavioral shifts in specific terms. You can also direct him to a website like that of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) where he can see

images of “the brain on pot” and access basic facts about the short- and long-term effects of cannabis on the central nervous system.

If you’re a Christian family, there’s a spiritual and emotional aspect you’ll also want to bring to his attention. We’re not talking about beating him over the head with the Bible or laying down the law in a series of “Thou shalt not” statements—an approach which is almost certain to prove counterproductive. We’re suggesting that you explore your teen’s reasons for turning to a mind-numbing substance like marijuana. Ask questions about the deeper motivations behind this behavior. What else is going on in his personal life or in the life of your family that may be driving him to anesthetize his mind? Is he in emotional pain or under a great deal of stress? Do you have a troubled marriage? Has he been disappointed in love or discouraged in the classroom? Are there other sources of conflict at school or at home?

You may also find it helpful to remember the words of Ephesians 5:18: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” This instruction presents us with a choice. It’s not a question of legalistic rules and regulations, but rather of influences and control. Ask your son which is better: to open his mind to the potentially dehumanizing effects of a chemical substance, or to discover who he really is in the context of a relationship with a loving heavenly Father.

Once you’ve talked about this, don’t hesitate to state your principles and draw a line in the sand. Let your teen know that, as long as he remains under your roof, there can be no marijuana use. Tell him plainly that the attitudes of society at large have nothing to do with the standards governing life in your household. Set firm and consistent boundaries, and don’t be afraid to enforce them by imposing a series of consequences of your own devising—for example, the loss of cell phone or driving privileges.

If he refuses to cooperate, we suggest that you seek professional counseling, and we highly recommend that you do this together as a family. The most successful treatment programs take a family systems approach that involves intensive evaluation and a series of counseling sessions offered in an environment of community and accountability. If this doesn’t work, you might opt to break the negative pattern by sending your teen to live with a relative in another city or enrolling him in a residential drug treatment program. Our staff would be happy to provide you with referrals to programs of this nature or a list of qualified therapists in your area who specialize in treating drug addiction. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“If, after being confronted, your teen admits to drug use, develop agreements about what will be done. These should include at least two elements: stopping drug use, and attending counseling as a family in order to develop a strategy to move forward.

“If your teen proclaims his innocence and your search is inconclusive, your suspicion may persist. Tell your teen that suspicion is the immediate issue, and let him know what he is doing to create it. If he refuses to cooperate, explain that your mistrust will continue, affecting your responses to him, including your decisions about his freedoms. Let the pressure of your suspicion weigh on your teen over time; some kids just need to see that parents won’t give up.”⁷²

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Battling Drug and Alcohol Abuse,”](#) a series of articles from Focus on the Family
- [Teen Challenge](#) provides residential centers “for people of all ages demonstrating a need for intensive help with life-controlling problems.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Talking Smack: Who’s Talking to Your Kids About Drugs and Alcohol, If You’re Not?* by Glenn Williams (Biblica Publishing, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)

Teen Struggling with Alcohol or “Hard Drug” Addiction

Question

We’ve tried to deny reality for a long time, but the fact is that our teenage daughter is an alcoholic. It would be fair to say that the addiction has taken over her life—and ours. But admitting the problem doesn’t solve it; the whole thing continues to devastate our entire family. Where can we go for help?

Answer

Perhaps it will encourage you to know that you’re not alone. Even in families that are closely knit and hold strong values there are no guarantees that substance abuse won’t affect one or more of the children.

Our first advice to families dealing with alcoholism or “hard drug” addiction is to admit the problem; if you deny or ignore it, it’s likely to get worse. But it sounds like you’ve already taken this step.

Second, don’t allow yourself to succumb to false guilt. Most parents assume a great deal of self-blame when an addiction surfaces in their home.

Third, don’t look for or expect quick-fix solutions. Remember that there will be no complete healing until your daughter learns to assume responsibility for her own actions. This could be a long process requiring a great deal of faith and patience on your part.

The good news is that effective help is available to anyone who’s willing to do the legwork of investigating the options. We suggest that you seek professional counseling for your teenager, and we highly recommend that you do this together as a family. The most successful treatment programs take a family systems approach that involves intensive evaluation and a series of counseling sessions offered in an environment of community and accountability. Our staff would be happy to provide you with referrals to programs of this nature or a list of qualified therapists in your area who

specialize in treating alcohol and drug addiction. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

As the situation escalates, you may need to present your teen with a number of options. These might include entering an inpatient treatment center, a halfway house, or a boot-camp program or youth home, or staying with a relative or another family who’s willing to accept her for a defined period of time. More extreme possibilities may need to be discussed as well, such as making your child a ward of the court or even turning her over to the police if she’s been involved in criminal activity. If you continue to shield her from the consequences of her behavior or bail her out when her substance abuse gets her into trouble, she won’t be motivated to change—and you’ll be left with deep-seated anger and frustration.

Below are a number of other resources and referrals that should prove useful in your efforts to help your teenager find healing and release from the bondage of addiction. May God give you hope, strength, and perseverance.

In Other Words ...

“Get support for yourself. Join a sympathetic, small group of parents and bring your pains. Talk with your pastor or mentor. Journal. Do whatever’s healthy that will help you through this hard time. That’s not being selfish; it’s being responsible. Other children, your spouse, your employer—if you have them—need you to be as sane and healthy as you can be.

“Seek professional therapy if needed. If your teenager is in a program where family therapy is recommended or required, participate as fully as you can....

“As cold as this may sound, weigh the financial cost, too. Even the best program can’t guarantee a positive outcome. Don’t sink the entire family financially to ‘save’ one family member....

“It’s hard for a parent to think straight when his or her own flesh and blood is involved; that’s why godly counsel is so important and necessary.”⁷³

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Battling Drug and Alcohol Abuse](#),” a series of articles from Focus on the Family
- [Teen Challenge](#) provides residential centers “for people of all ages demonstrating a need for intensive help with life-controlling problems.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Talking Smack: Who’s Talking to Your Kids About Drugs and Alcohol, If You’re Not?* By Glenn Williams (Biblica Publishing, 2010)
- *Complete Guide to Family Health, Nutrition, and Fitness*, Paul C. Reisser, MD primary author (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Essentials of Parenting: Be Prepared* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)

Part 9: Teen Suicide

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Preventing Teen Suicide

Question

Every time I hear about a teenager committing suicide, I panic—especially if it’s in our town. Parents and friends usually seem shocked, which makes me think I’d never know it if my fifteen-year-old daughter wanted to end her life. How do I make sure she’d never do such a thing?

Answer

To begin with, we suggest that you pour some serious time and effort into the process of developing strong family bonds and building an open, communicative relationship with your daughter. Statistics indicate that a sense of parent-family connectedness is one of the most effective protections against suicidal behavior among young people; and while many parents don’t realize it, adolescents require every bit as much of Mom’s and Dad’s time and energy as toddlers. Your daughter needs you now as much as she ever did—only she needs you in different ways.

Among other things, this means you should be looking for opportunities to talk with your teen. To a certain degree, it doesn’t really matter what you talk about. The important thing is to establish channels of communication that will be up, running, and ready to go if and when the need arises. Your efforts in this area will yield the most fruit if you resist the temptation to dominate the conversation, and if you cultivate good listening skills. Take a strong interest in the details of your daughter’s life. Find out what gets her excited. Focus on her passions. Questions can be a big help, but they should be one-liners—for instance, “What really gets you excited?” or “How do you feel about your schedule at school this year?” You can smooth the pathway to meaningful interaction by scheduling specific times—perhaps on a weekly basis—to go

out for ice cream or take walks around the neighborhood together.

Your integrity as a person and as a parent is another important element of healthy family connectedness. Maintain consistency between what you say and what you do in every area of life. Begin by trusting in the Lord with all your heart; set an example of resilient faith and let your daughter see that God is your rock and foundation. When your behavior doesn't match your convictions, don't be afraid to admit it. There's nothing wrong with being honest and confessing your faults to your kids, especially when you're aware that your mistakes have hurt them in some way. Vulnerability is an important part of love. It's also essential to the process of building trust.

Meanwhile, it might also be a good idea to raise your daughter's awareness of the problem of teen suicide. It deserves open and honest discussion. Many parents assume that talking about suicide may have the unintended effect of encouraging it, but this is a misconception. Frank discussion and open airing of suicide-related fears, doubts, and tensions is one of the best ways of preventing self-destructive behavior among young people.

If examples of teen suicide come to light in your community, give your daughter a chance to express her feelings about them. Ask whether she has any idea why the young person in question felt compelled to end his or her life. Get your daughter to think seriously about what it means for some people to live without purpose, without meaning, and without God. Remind her that she's been made in her Creator's image and that her life is infinitely precious and valuable in His sight.

When you've done everything you can to put your daughter on the firmest possible emotional footing, pray for her and leave her in the Lord's hands. But bear in mind that the teenage years can be emotionally turbulent, thanks to physical changes, hormonal shifts, and the demands of peer pressure. Research indicates that a significant percentage of young people will experience clinical depression at some point during this phase of their development. This is not necessarily cause for alarm, but it's something you should be aware of since depression is one of the key components of a suicidal mindset.

If at any point you fear that your daughter may be exhibiting signs of serious depression—for example, painful introspection, negative self-concept, dramatic mood swings, episodes of moping and crying, withdrawal and isolation, fatigue and other unexplained physical ailments, poor school performance, and outbursts of anger and acting-out—and if these symptoms persist for more than two weeks, you should seek appropriate help immediately. You may want to contact your physician for advice or a referral. Even when a threat of suicide doesn't seem to be part of the picture, it's still important to deal with the depression.

If you think it might be helpful, we'd like to invite you to contact Focus on

the Family's Counseling Department and talk to one of our caring Christian therapists. They'd be happy to discuss your situation with you, learn more about your daughter, and recommend steps you can take. They are also in a position to provide you with a list of referrals to professional counselors in your local area. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"When prevention is your primary concern, consider the role of media. Bob Steele has; I interviewed him after his teenage son, Bobby, took his own life in 1994 following the suicide of Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain. I asked Bob, 'What would you tell parents today having gone through what you've gone through?'"

"He replied, 'The only thing I can say is to take [entertainment] seriously. Because I didn't. I had no idea that music could influence people to do something like suicide.... Kids are curious. They have curious minds and want to know everything. And if [there] ever comes a day in their life that is very dark and depressing, this music can tell them exactly what they don't need to hear.'

"If your kids have no interest in dark entertainment, count your blessings (and pray for their friends). [Otherwise], your first challenge will be to get to the root of their pain.... Teaching media discernment—as important as it is—is a distant second to making sure your teen has a real reason to live (John 10:10)."⁷⁴

—Bob Waliszewski

Need More Help?

Online

- The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) 1-800-273-TALK (8255) offers counseling.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Teens in Crisis: Why Parents Matter, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD (Focus on the Family)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Plugged-in Parenting* by Bob Waliszewski (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)

Is Substance-Abusing Teen at Risk for Suicide?

Question

Our sixteen-year-old daughter has a drinking problem. She also has a problem with depression. She's been in and out of counseling, but so far it hasn't helped much. We're worried that the two problems are making each other worse. Does her drinking make her more likely to commit suicide? If so, what can we do about it?

Answer

Research indicates a fairly close connection between teen suicide and substance abuse. The overwhelming majority of suicide victims of all ages have some kind of mental or substance-related disorder which interferes with healthy thinking processes and prevents them from coping normally with the stresses and disappointments of life. Where drinking or drug addiction are combined with the symptoms of clinical depression—a condition which is the result of a particular brain chemistry (usually low levels of serotonin) and which often has biological and genetic causes—the situation is ripe for the development of dangerous, self-destructive behavior.

In 30 to 50 percent of teen suicide cases, substance abuse is a part of the event itself. In other words, a large number of teens who take their own lives do so not only *while* intoxicated but *because* they are intoxicated. The irony is that many of them resort to drinking or drug abuse as a way of escaping their emotional pain. Unfortunately, the intoxicating substance frequently produces the opposite effect: It actually increases the intensity of their depression. At the same time, it removes inhibitions that may be keeping them from carrying out their desperate plans. It's not surprising that the result is often tragic.

If a child is abusing drugs or alcohol—or if he or she is even suspected to be moving in that direction—parents need to confront the situation positively

and decisively. If he or she shows signs of being clinically depressed, parents need to seek appropriate help immediately. That may include contacting a physician for advice or a referral. Even if a present threat of suicide doesn't seem to be part of the picture, steps should still be taken to deal with the depression.

When a child is already abusing drugs or alcohol, there are a number of places to turn for professional assistance. We suggest parents begin by seeking professional counseling for the child, which we understand you've already done. We highly recommend, though, that you do this *together* as a family. The most successful treatment programs take a family systems approach that involves intensive evaluation and a series of counseling sessions offered in an environment of community and accountability. Our staff would be happy to provide you with referrals to programs of this nature or a list of qualified therapists in your area who specialize in treating substance abuse. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"One frightening aspect of substance abuse is that it can trigger erratic, self-destructive behavior for which little or no warning was given. A mild depression can suddenly plummet to suicidal intensity with the help of drugs or alcohol. Because of the unpredictable actions of chemicals on the system, a number of deaths occur among youngsters who did not intend to hurt themselves....

"If you feel that there is any possibility of a self-destructive act by your child, it is important that you not only express your concern but also seek help immediately."⁷⁵

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) 1-800-273-TALK (8255) offers counseling.
- "[Battling Drug and Alcohol Abuse](#)," a series of articles from Focus on the Family

- [Teen Challenge](#) provides residential centers “for people of all ages demonstrating a need for intensive help with life-controlling problems.”
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Teens in Crisis: Why Parents Matter, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD (Focus on the Family)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)

Teen Suicide Warning Signs

Question

I'm afraid my teenage son may be developing suicidal tendencies. How can I know for sure? Does depression always include a risk of suicide? Are there any signs I should be watching for?

Answer

Though depression doesn't always lead to suicide, it's one of the major contributing causes of a suicidal state of mind and should be taken seriously. Your son might be clinically depressed if his condition includes such elements as the following:

- painful introspection
- negative self-concept
- dramatic mood swings
- episodes of moping and crying
- withdrawal and isolation
- fatigue and other unexplained physical ailments
- poor school performance
- outbursts of anger and overt acting-out

If these symptoms persist for more than two weeks, seek appropriate help immediately. You may want to contact your physician for advice or a referral. Even if your son isn't threatening to commit suicide, you should take steps to deal with the depression.

You didn't tell us exactly why you believe your son may be suicidal, but even without more information about your situation we can tell you this much: It's always better to err on the side of caution. In particular, any talk about suicide on the part of your teen—statements such as, "I'd be better off dead," or "Maybe life would be easier for you if I wasn't around"—should be taken seriously.

Risk factors for suicide among young people include mood disorders,

substance abuse, certain personality disorders, low socioeconomic status, childhood abuse, parental separation or divorce, inappropriate access to firearms or prescription drugs, and interpersonal conflicts or losses. You should be especially vigilant if any of the following predictors of suicide are present:

- a previous suicide attempt
- a family history of suicide
- chronic pain, degenerative disease, or a serious psychiatric condition such as bipolar disorder
- expressions of intense guilt or hopelessness
- threatening, talking, or joking about suicide
- a sudden change from struggling with depression, stress, anxiety, or deep disappointment to seeming happier and calmer—a possible sign that the person has decided to end his or her life
- “cleaning house”—a sudden impulse to give away personal possessions
- suicide among other adolescents in your community
- a sudden, major loss or humiliation—perhaps due to physical or social bullying, or a dramatic boyfriend-girlfriend breakup—which may seem trivial to the parent but feel like an unsolvable problem to the teen

You can evaluate the level of risk and imminence of the danger by remembering the acrostic *SLAP*:

Specific plan. Is your teen considering a specific course of action for taking his own life, either communicated to you directly or brought to light in some other fashion? If the answer is yes, go on to the next question.

Lethality of the plan. Is this specific plan really deadly? If so, he’s now running a 50 percent risk. Continue to “A.”

Availability of plan. Can the plan be enacted? Does he have access to the means needed to carry out his intentions? For example, are there any guns in the house? Would it be easy for him to lay his hands on large amounts of prescription medications? If so, he is in considerable danger, and you should take immediate action.

Proximity of help. Are there people close enough to keep him from following through with this specific, lethal, and available plan? He probably won’t try anything while friends, family, or others he respects are around. Most suicides happen when the depressed individual is alone or in the company of another suicidal person. If there is no help close by, get your son to a place where he can be kept safe. If you can’t put him under family supervision, call 911 or take him directly to a local emergency room.

If you’re not sure about the answers to these questions, it would be a good idea to sit down and have a heart-to-heart talk with your teen. Don’t be afraid to get pushy. Press him with some direct questions. You might begin with

something like, “Where are these negative feelings coming from?” or “What is it that’s causing you to talk so much about ending your life?” It could be especially helpful and revealing to ask, “Exactly what would have to change for you to feel better?” You may also want to get an official psychiatric diagnosis in order to ascertain more clearly what’s behind the depression and the hints about suicide. Your child could be struggling with an anxiety disorder, a bipolar condition, or some kind of substance abuse.

You can take an important first step in this direction by contacting Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department and talking to one of our caring Christian therapists. They’d be happy to discuss your situation with you. They are also in a position to provide you with a list of referrals to professional counselors in your local area. If this option appeals to you, please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.⁷⁶

In Other Words ...

“There is growing evidence to support a connection between early sexual activity in teenagers, depression, and suicide.

“A Heritage Foundation report found that sexually active teenage girls were three times as likely and sexually active teenage boys twice as likely to experience depression as their counterparts who weren’t sexually active. Furthermore, the study reported that sexually active teenage girls are almost three times as likely and sexually active teenage boys almost eight times as likely to attempt suicide as teens who remained abstinent.

“It’s difficult to determine whether depressed teenagers are more likely to become sexually active, or whether sexually active teenagers become depressed because of their behavior. The study seems to suggest that both may be true.”⁷⁷

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) provides an informational helpline (1-800-950-6264) and other resources.

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression* by Gary E. Nelson (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007)
- *My Friend Is Struggling with Thoughts of Suicide* by Josh McDowell and Ed Stewart (Christian Focus Publications, 2008)
- “Teens in Crisis: Why Parents Matter, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD (Focus on the Family)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Teen Suicide Intervention

Question

Based on the information I've gotten from your website and some other sources, I feel pretty certain that my child is seriously depressed—and in danger of harming himself or taking his own life. What should I do?

Answer

If you believe the danger is imminent, get professional help right away. While you're making the necessary contacts, take steps to ensure that your teenager is not left alone—not even for a few moments. Make sure that every possible means of harming himself—firearms, ropes, prescription drugs, etc.—is removed from the house. If there's no help close by, take him to a place where he can be kept safe. If a responsible family member can't supervise him, call 911 or take him to a local emergency room.

If the situation seems serious but not urgent, try to get your teen to open up and talk. Any hint of suicidal thoughts or tendencies on the part of a young person should receive immediate attention. Don't be afraid to press him with some direct questions. You might include something like, "Have you ever felt so bad that you've actually thought about taking your own life?" Get an official psychiatric diagnosis to determine more clearly what's behind the depression and the references to suicide.

Whatever you do, don't make the mistake of trying to face this challenge alone. Reach out to friends, family, neighbors, and other trusted members of the community. Build a support network. Pull in anybody you can think of who might be able to help—a pastor, youth leader, teacher, coach, or professional counselor. Ask your teen, "Who do you think you could talk to about these negative feelings?" If he suggests a name, follow through by offering to set up an appointment with that person on his behalf. Become a good listener and take his feelings seriously. Pray with him and for him. Get a physician's evaluation of his condition and be willing to consider appropriate medication.

You should also feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. One of our caring Christian therapists would be happy to discuss your situation with you. Our counselors are also in a position to provide you with a list of referrals to mental health professionals practicing in your local area. If this option appeals to you, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁷⁸

In Other Words ...

"The main goal of an acute, inpatient [hospital] stay is to stabilize the patient, get her started on medications that may be needed, and develop a discharge plan to get her connected with services that can address the underlying issues. Don't expect those issues to be taken care of in this sort of environment; there's not enough time.

"This is where you'll go if your teenager is suicidal or has just attempted suicide. The hospital also can evaluate whether a person is depressed enough or 'out of touch with reality' enough that further hospitalization is warranted."⁷⁹

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) provides an informational helpline (1-800-950-6264) and other resources.
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- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Parent Afraid to Express Concern About Suicide

Question

I have reasons to believe that my adolescent daughter may be struggling with suicidal thoughts. I understand the importance of confronting this situation directly, but I also have fears about bringing up the subject with her. What if I bring up my concerns and she's *not* suicidal? Could this have the effect of pushing her in that direction?

Answer

It's reasonable to be apprehensive about such a crucial discussion. But don't forget that, generally speaking, your initiative and concern are what your teen needs most. If you feel there's reason for concern, you shouldn't hesitate to say so. Many people suppose that talking about suicide with a depressed person will only aggravate the problem, but in actuality the opposite is true. Open and honest discussion is one of the best ways of preventing suicide.

Look at it this way. Your daughter's symptoms—even if she's not technically suicidal—indicate that she isn't handling life very well. If that's the case, there's a problem somewhere that warrants loving intervention; as her parent, you're in the best position to provide it. There's no reason to fear that you may make things worse if you take the bull by the horns, as long as you make it clear that your words and actions are motivated by genuine love and concern. Statistics indicate that a strong sense of parent-family connectedness is one of the most effective protections against suicidal behavior among young people.

When you express concern about your teen hurting herself, be specific about the signals you're getting. Whether your fears are justified or not, she may be grateful that someone is paying attention and making an effort to reach into her life with practical help. We suggest you sit down with your daughter and ask where her negative feelings are coming from, whether she's actually thought

about taking her own life, and exactly what would have to change for her to feel better. You may also want to get an official psychiatric diagnosis of what's behind the depression and the veiled or unveiled allusions to suicide.

You can be a lifeline to your child at a time when the pressures of adolescence are overwhelming her and distorting her perceptions of the future. Try to set aside your own private reaction to her crisis and concentrate on helping her weather the storm. Don't criticize, express anger, assign blame, or share personal anxieties at this point. Instead, be a source of unconditional love, compassion, and support. When teens start to see life as a dark and daily source of frustration and pain, they don't need a judge; they need a friend. As a wise and loving parent, you can direct your daughter's attention to the eternal hope available in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:2-4). But first you'll have to gain her confidence and trust.

If you have reason to suspect that your adolescent might be clinically depressed or suicidal, seek appropriate help immediately. Ask your physician for advice or a referral.

You should also feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. One of our caring Christian therapists would be happy to discuss your situation with you. Our counselors are also in a position to provide you with a list of referrals to mental health professionals practicing in your local area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁸⁰

In Other Words ...

"First and foremost, listen carefully to your ... adolescent, and take his feelings and problems seriously. One study of suicidal adolescents indicated that 90 percent felt that they were not understood by their families. Expressions of worry or a sad mood should never be met with indifference or (worse) a shallow rebuff ('You'll get over it' or 'Snap out of it!'). Sit down, shut off the TV, look your son or daughter in the eye, and hear what he or she has to say—without judging, rebuking, or trivializing it. It might help enormously if you can say honestly that you (or others you know and respect) have struggled with some of the same feelings."⁸¹

—*Complete Guide to Baby and Child Care*

Need More Help?

Online

- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) provides an informational helpline (1-800-950-6264) and other resources.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression* by Gary E. Nelson (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007)
- *My Friend Is Struggling with Thoughts of Suicide* by Josh McDowell and Ed Stewart (Christian Focus Publications, 2008)
- “Teens in Crisis: Why Parents Matter, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD (Focus on the Family)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Teen Has Committed Suicide

Question

Our teenage son recently committed suicide. We're devastated. We're wrestling with guilt, shame, confusion, and fear—wondering where we went wrong and how in the world something like this could have happened to one of our own children. We're also faced with trying to manage the aftermath of the event and deal with the toxic effect it's having on our whole family. Can you help us?

Answer

The first thing you need to know is that this is not your fault. Parents in your position tend to blame themselves. If they don't blame themselves, they may blame one another and end up destroying their marriage. You need to be aware of these dangers and make a determined effort to avoid them. Even the best parents in the world can't expect to have absolute power over the attitudes and actions of their children. So don't add to the severity of your grief by assuming responsibility for things beyond your control.

Our hearts go out to you and your family in the midst of this profoundly painful situation. We can imagine that you're experiencing a wide range of conflicting emotions. In particular, it must be overwhelming for you as parents to be grappling with the knowledge that, for reasons you don't fully understand, the precious child you brought into the world somehow felt compelled to end his life.

If it hasn't happened yet, you can shortly expect to be overwhelmed by a host of "Why, God?" questions. You'll ask yourselves where you went wrong and how you could possibly have missed the signs that this tragedy was approaching. Please know that your friends at Focus on the Family care deeply about you and are here to come alongside you in any way we can.

Above all, we want to encourage you to fight any tendency you may have to withdraw into yourselves and "clam up" about the terrible thing that's

happened to your family. It's vital to talk about your feelings and allow yourselves to grieve openly. This has to take place whenever we lose a loved one, but it's especially important—and difficult to achieve—in the case of a suicide. At a very deep level, most of us don't know exactly how we should respond when someone close to us takes his or her own life. The intentionality of the act lends it an aura of meanness. At moments our grief and sadness get tangled up with feelings of anger and resentment toward the victim, who seems to have abandoned us for purely selfish reasons. At other times we feel guilty about getting angry and beat ourselves up for being so hardhearted and callous. It's awkward and complicated, and it can become a deadly downward spiral of self-perpetuating despair if you don't grab the hand of someone who's equipped to pull you out.

With that in mind, we urge you to seek the help of others who've walked this path. It would be worth your while to contact one of the groups on the following resource list for further information. They offer support groups for parents and family members of suicide victims.

You should also engage the services of a professional counselor as you work your way through the aftermath of this experience, and we highly recommend that you include the entire family in the counseling process. Focus on the Family's Counseling Department can provide you with a list of qualified Christian therapists in your area who specialize in dealing with problems of this nature. Our counselors will also be happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"... I journaled last year, 'On October 18, I kissed my son goodbye. He was gone [after committing suicide] a month later.'

"While there is nothing untrue about this, it leaves me in deep pain over things that I cannot change. Acting on [my wife] Connie's advice and her prayers for me, I have added to this a layer of truth that is redemptive: 'I kissed Todd goodbye for the last time in this world. I will kiss him again in the next.'",⁸²

—Rex Kennemer, quoted in *When Your Family's Lost a Loved One*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Coping with Death and Grief](#),” a series of articles by Patricia Johnson
- [GriefShare](#) offers seminars and support groups for those who’ve lost loved ones.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.
- [SAVE](#) (Suicide Voices of Education) offers grief information and a database of suicide bereavement support groups throughout the US.

Other Resources

- *When Your Family’s Lost a Loved One* by David and Nancy Guthrie (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- *Aftershock: Help, Hope, and Healing in the Wake of Suicide* by David Cox and Candy Arrington (B&H Publishing Group, 2003)
- *Standing in the Shadow: Help and Healing for Suicide Survivors* by June Cerza Kolf (Baker Publishing House, 2002)

Talking with Teen About Suicide of Friend

Question

A young man in our community—a student at our local high school and an acquaintance of my teenage son—recently took his own life. My son hasn't said much about it, but I can tell he's upset and maybe struggling with some really big questions. I know it's important to talk with him, but I don't know how to do it. What can I say?

Answer

Your concerns are right on target. It's vital that you make an effort to discuss this subject honestly and openly with your son. When a young person commits suicide, everyone in the community is affected. Family members, friends, teammates, neighbors, and sometimes even those who hardly knew the teen may experience feelings of grief, confusion, and guilt. They might also struggle with a sense that the suicide could have been prevented if only they'd done something differently. Under such circumstances, people need desperately to grieve and bring their feelings into the open. It's never healthy to squelch deep emotional reactions of this nature.

It's often assumed that talking about suicide may have the unintended effect of encouraging it. But the opposite is true: Frank discussion of suicide-related fears, doubts, and tensions is one of the best ways of preventing self-destructive behavior among young people. So open the lines of communication and keep the talk flowing freely and naturally.

Contemporary teens are often more comfortable raising this subject than their parents are. If you give him a chance, you'll probably find that your son doesn't require a great deal of prompting. Our guess is that he'll prove more than willing to express his feelings and share his perspective on the suicide if you invite him to do so. Once the door is open, you may discover that *you're* the one having a hard time facing this issue squarely and honestly. If so, don't hesitate to seek help from a pastor, a church elder, an experienced teacher, or a

trained counselor. Teen suicide is a formidable problem, and it's important to educate yourself before starting a dialogue on this topic with your adolescent.

This could be an excellent opportunity for you and your son to discuss some of the possible reasons for the rise in teen suicide over the past several decades; in the US, for example, suicide is now the third leading cause of death among young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Talk about the pervasive hopelessness and desensitization to the value of life that seem to characterize many young people. Challenge your son to think seriously about what happens when people live without purpose, without meaning, and without God.

Ask your teen if he has any idea why the young man in question felt compelled to end his life. Was he depressed? Had he experienced a significant loss or disappointment? Were there conflicts at home? Bully troubles at school? Did he have trouble connecting with his peers? Find out if your son has ever wrestled with similar issues, and ask what you can do to help.

Talk about the sadness the two of you felt when you first heard the news of this teen's suicide. Tell your son that you couldn't bear it if something like that ever happened to him. Assure him that he can always feel free to talk to you about anything that's going on in his life, no matter how sad, scary, or embarrassing it may be. Make it clear that you will always love him and be there for him no matter what he might be going through. Remind him that his Creator, in whose image he's been made, has a plan for his life (Jeremiah 29:11). Affirm your conviction that, thanks to God, there's always hope no matter how dark our circumstances may appear. Try to set an example of resilient faith and hope in your own life.

If you need help, please don't hesitate to contact our Counseling Department. See the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book for more information. Our counselors will be happy to assist you in any way they can.

In Other Words ...

"Unfortunately, your children may have friends who commit suicide. Your role as a parent in this case is to help your children work through their feelings of guilt for not seeing the signs in time and doing something to prevent the suicide. You must give them hope that if their friend knew Christ, he or she is in heaven. Open and honest discussions about the issues your child's friend felt so desperate about can help your child work through grief and prevent him or her from falling into despair as well (John 10:27–29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14)."⁸³

Need More Help?

Online

- “[How to Help Your Child Grieve](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- “[Coping with Death and Grief](#),” a series of articles by Patricia Johnson
- [GriefShare](#) offers seminars and support groups for those who’ve lost loved ones.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *It’s Okay to Cry: A Parent’s Guide to Helping Children Through the Losses of Life* by H. Norman Wright (Random House, 2004)
- *When Your Family’s Lost a Loved One* by David and Nancy Guthrie (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- *Aftershock: Help, Hope, and Healing in the Wake of Suicide* by David Cox and Candy Arrington (B&H Publishing Group, 2003)
- *Standing in the Shadow: Help and Healing for Suicide Survivors* by June Cerza Kolf (Baker Publishing House, 2002)

Faith and Suicide

Question

It was hard to take when our son walked away from his faith soon after starting college. But lately he's gotten increasingly moody and withdrawn, making us even more worried. Could the loss of his faith make him more likely to commit suicide? It seems a non-believer might have less hope than a Christian. How can we help our son when he doesn't believe in a God who cares whether he lives or dies?

Answer

Suicide is extremely complicated. It's almost always the result of a "perfect storm" of interrelated contributing factors, many of which have nothing to do with an individual's professed beliefs and are not under his or her conscious control.

The overwhelming majority of those who commit suicide have a mental or substance-abuse-related disorder that interferes with healthy thinking and coping. In many cases clinical depression—often the result of a particular brain chemistry and which frequently has biological and genetic causes—is an important piece of the puzzle. Personal and family history, various personality disorders, medical illnesses, and past abuse or trauma can affect the bigger picture. That's not to mention the hormonal instability, dramatic impulsiveness, immaturity, and lack of experience typical of many adolescents and young adults.

There's also this point to consider: Scripture tells us we're all fallen people—teens and adults, parents and children, believers and unbelievers. From a biblical perspective, then, as well as from a medical, psychological, and purely human point of view, this fallen condition suggests that Christians will not be immune to suicidal thoughts and tendencies.

This doesn't deny the power of God. Nor are we suggesting that faith and worldview don't matter. On the contrary, the Bible asserts that a man is what

he thinks in his heart (Proverbs 23:7, NKJV). It's reasonable to suppose that strongly held convictions will have practical, measurable effects on a person's outlook and behavior.

For some, Christian faith and hope serve as a shield against hopelessness and despair. For others, simple fear of God's judgment may function as a deterrent to suicide. If a believer has access to a strong support system in the church—a safety net not available to non-believers in quite the same way—he or she can rely on brothers and sisters in Christ to come alongside when dark times come. For all these reasons, it might be fair to assert that Christians have an edge over non-Christians in the battle against depression and suicidal thoughts. But it's equally true that nothing is certain when we're dealing with unpredictable, fallible human beings.

What does this mean in your situation? If you have reason to suspect that your son is struggling with self-destructive tendencies, don't waste time preaching or arguing theology with him. Instead, remember that, mixed in with the spiritual, there's probably a strong physiological or chemical component to the problems he's facing. This should be your point of departure for an effective intervention strategy.

Your first concern should be to pray for your son and enlist others to do the same. Meanwhile, take steps to determine whether he's clinically depressed. If symptoms like painful introspection, negative self-concept, dramatic mood swings, episodes of moping and crying, withdrawal and isolation, fatigue and other unexplained physical ailments, poor academic performance, outbursts of anger, and overt acting-out last more than two weeks, seek appropriate help immediately. You may want to contact your physician for advice or a referral. Once this aspect of his problem has been addressed, you can return to the challenge of encouraging him to come back to Christ.

Feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department as well. One of our caring Christian therapists can discuss your situation with you. Our counselors are also able to provide you with a list of referrals to mental health professionals practicing in your local area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Only God has the authority to choose the time of our death. Many faiths teach that suicide is an unforgivable sin, since the one who commits suicide cannot ask forgiveness for the act after he or she dies. This isn't what the Bible teaches....

“If a Christian commits suicide, he or she is still assured of eternal life (John 10:27–29; Romans 8:38–39; Ephesians 1:13–14), but God will surely not be pleased that a child of His made this choice. If He is grieved when we don’t trust Him in life, how much more grieved would He be if we choose not to entrust to Him the day and manner of our death? Although not specifically discussing suicide, 1 Corinthians 3:15 certainly could apply to someone who is saved but commits suicide: ‘He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.’”⁸⁴

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) provides an informational helpline (1-800-950-6264) and other resources.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression* by Gary E. Nelson (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007)
- *My Friend Is Struggling with Thoughts of Suicide* by Josh McDowell and Ed Stewart (Christian Focus Publications, 2008)
- “Teens in Crisis: Why Parents Matter, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD (Focus on the Family)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Busy Mom’s Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

Part 10: School and the Future

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Teen Struggling in School

Question

Our son has always been a good student, but since he entered high school his grades have taken a nosedive. When we ask him what's going on, he just shrugs his shoulders and says, "My teachers don't like me." How can we get to the bottom of this?

Answer

Many parents dread the prospect of discovering that their kids are falling behind or utterly failing in one or more subjects in school. It's important to find out what's going wrong and seek to make improvements as soon as possible.

Because learning is such a complex process, simple answers and quick fixes are rarely available. Any number of conditions may interfere with school performance, and in some kids more than one factor may be involved. This is particularly true during the adolescent years, which can be chaotic and emotionally unsettling for a variety of reasons.

Since your son has been a good student in the past, we'd suggest that you begin troubleshooting by finding out if there are any physical or medical reasons for the academic difficulties that have suddenly overtaken him. It could be something as simple as a problem with vision or hearing, or the turmoil caused by hormonal changes that accompany puberty. It's possible that your teen is experiencing symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or a learning disorder. His medical history might provide clues to the origin of his present struggles. Make an appointment with your doctor and ask him or her to help you sort out the possibilities. Talk to a counselor. Find out if your child is dealing with unusual stress.

If there are no medical or psychological issues requiring a physician's or

counselor's attention, ask yourself whether your son's problem might have a non-academic basis. Maybe it's a question of personality, ideology, or a conflict with the school and its curriculum. Find out what "My teachers don't like me" really means. What exactly was said? Is there a discernible pattern? Is it possible that your teen is primarily at fault because of disrespectful or inattentive behavior? Could this involve a clash of viewpoints? It may help to talk to someone else in the same class to get confirmation that a problem really exists.

The next step is to schedule an interview with the teacher or teachers involved in order to get their perspective. Ask an open-ended question, such as, "My son seems to be having a hard time in your class. What can we do to help?" Perhaps you haven't heard the whole story. If this is the case, it would be better to find ways of building bridges than to light fires.

In the event that you discover your son's beliefs and viewpoints aren't welcome in the class, you may have to take steps to defend your son's right to a hassle-free education. A meeting between other like-minded parents and the teacher(s) in question, a conference with the principal, or if necessary, a transfer to another class may be appropriate. Throughout this process, remember to keep your conduct as calm and rational as possible. Your bottom line should be the simple notion that school ought to be a neutral ground for mastering basic material, not a platform for pushing a social or political agenda.

If you need help putting these ideas into action, or would simply like to discuss them at greater length with a member of our staff, we hope you'll call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our counselors would be pleased to assist you in any way they can. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)"⁸⁵ for more information.

In Other Words ...

"[If your] teenager doesn't take responsibility for things like getting his homework done, let him bear the natural consequences of his actions....

“• If he's having a problem, offer to help or to get help. If he declines, let it go.

“• If the report card comes back with low grades, limit weekday activities until the schoolwork gets done.

“• If homework is not coming home, call the school to see why.

“• If he continues to abdicate responsibility, let natural consequences

take their toll. He may not feel the pinch until he applies to colleges for scholarships. This can be scary and disappointing for a parent and may even seem insensitive, but it's really just a reflection of who's responsible for the work.”⁸⁶

—*Parents' Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Help Your Child Succeed in Public School](#)” by Cheri Fuller
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Standing Up for Your Child Without Stepping on Toes* by Vicki Caruana (Focus on the Family, 2007)
- *Middle School: The Inside Story* by Cynthia Tobias and Sue Acuña (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2014)
- *Every Child Can Succeed* by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1996)
- *Have a New Kid by Friday* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Revell, 2008)
- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Daughter Wasn't Asked to Prom

Question

I realize this isn't as serious a crisis as some. But my teenage daughter wasn't asked to the prom, and she's crushed. As a parent, what can I do to encourage her and build her up?

Answer

To begin with, avoid making a big issue of her disappointment. Prom night is one of the most over-hyped experiences of adolescence. Your daughter doesn't know this, of course; her friends, the media, and the prevailing culture have all told her she's missing out on the biggest evening of her life. It probably won't do much good to try to convince her otherwise. But it's just as unhelpful to say or do anything that might prolong her melancholy mood.

That's not to say that you should ignore or make light of her feelings. The emotions she's going through are very real, and they have nothing to do with the intrinsic value of the prom. They're primarily related to her sense of self-worth. So be sensitive. Don't try to apply a quick-fix solution. Give her time to be sad and withdrawn. Back off if you get the impression that she's unwilling to discuss the matter. When she *does* come to the point of opening up, take time to listen. Reaffirm her as a person, reinforce the importance of character as opposed to mere popularity and social standing, and remind her of what she has to offer some fortunate young man when the time is right. Direct her attention to what the Bible has to say about God's unfathomable love for her. And as opportunities arise, help her gain a more realistic view of events like the prom.

On a more practical level, you might consider recommending an alternate activity for the evening. If some of her friends are free, host a slumber party or a movie night. If everybody else is at the prom, propose a "dad date" at a location of your daughter's choosing. If she decides to stay home, encourage her to call a friend far away (and don't worry about the minutes).

Whatever you do, take pains to reassure her of your love. If you need suggestions for effective and meaningful ways to communicate your affection, don't hesitate to give our Counseling Department a call. Our caring staff counselors are all fully licensed and qualified; please see the "[How to Reach Us](#)" page in the front of this book for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Reflect her emotions; don't mock them. Teens love to see their feelings reflected in your face. It tells them you understand how they felt when the coach yelled at them today. If their emotions seem over-the-top or the reasons for them seem trivial, remember that their world is smaller than yours—which makes each event look bigger....

"Be alert for moments of honesty and vulnerability. Teens will, on occasion, break down and spill what's on their hearts. When they do, give them all the time they need to share. Then ask, 'Do you want me to give suggestions or help? Or do you just want me to listen?'"⁸⁷

—Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson

Need More Help?

Online

- "[Your Teen Needs You](#)," a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Bloom: A Girl's Guide to Growing Up* by Susie Shellenberger (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2003)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD

(Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

- *Raising a Modern-Day Princess* by Pam Farrel and Doreen Hanna (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Taking a Year Off Before College

Question

Our son is about to graduate from high school, and he's asked us how we feel about him taking a year off school before starting college. He's very responsible in a number of ways, but we're concerned about him losing momentum—not to mention that college gets more expensive every year. What should we do?

Answer

Your son's suggestion could be an indicator that you've done a great job of raising him. He sounds thoughtful, intelligent, and goal-oriented. Given what you've told us about his level of maturity and keen sense of personal responsibility, we see no reason to be concerned about his desire to take a year off from school.

There are a number of constructive ways he can use the time. He can work in order to earn a portion of his college tuition. He can expand and build upon his formal education by traveling or getting involved with community service. He can think about life and ponder his goals and figure out what he wants to study in college. All of this can be an important part of growing up and becoming the person God is calling him to be. As for "losing momentum," chances are that he'll be even more motivated to dive into his studies after a yearlong break—especially when he realizes that many career choices won't be open to him without a college degree.

You're absolutely right, of course, about costs. You'll need to discuss the implications of that aspect of the situation with him—his ability to earn money, the need for a budget, and what you will and won't cover.

In light of what you've said about your son's track record, we wouldn't be too concerned about his plan to take a year off. There are many successful people in the world who didn't go to college right out of high school. The most important thing at this point is to uphold your son with love, support, and gentle

guidance in whatever he decides to do. If you need help in this area, Focus on the Family's Counseling staff would be more than happy to speak with you over the phone. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"At first almost everything went according to plan—until [our son] Russell turned 19.... He asked if he could put off college for a while.

"‘I'd really like to take a break from school,’ he reasoned.

"‘Wait a minute,’ I protested. ‘That’s not in the plans!’

"‘Whose plans?’ he asked.

"‘Well, uh ... you know ... my plans ... I mean, your mother’s and my plans for your life.’ Then, with my best pious language, I asked, ‘Are you sure the Lord wants this?’

"‘Nope,’ Russell replied. ‘I have no idea what He wants. I thought maybe a year of work would help me sort things through.’

"I gathered up all my dreams and plans for this kid, plus my study Bible and an exhaustive concordance, and closeted myself in my study to discover what the Lord’s will in this matter might be.

"As I expected, I couldn’t find one word in Scripture stating that children must go to college. In fact, I couldn’t even find a verse that said parents automatically know better than 19-year-olds what is best for their lives....

"So I changed my plans for Russell’s life."⁸⁸

— Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- [Boundless](#) addresses issues important to young adults, including life choices.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Mom Afraid to Let Teen Go to College

Question

My son just graduated from high school and will soon be leaving for college. Like any good mother, I'm worried about what he'll face on his own—challenges to his faith and his moral values, not to mention the practical challenges of living on his own for the first time. We've always been a close-knit family, and sometimes the thought of seeing him go is almost too much for me. In fact, I've been lying awake nights thinking about this. Can you help me?

Answer

We understand your feelings, and find your love for your son touching and inspiring. At the same time—and please understand that no disrespect is intended—we think it's time you opened your eyes and realized that he's growing up. Leaving the nest, going off to college, establishing a measure of independence, learning to deal with the logistics of daily life—these are all normal rites of passage for a young adult. Instead of feeling anxious, you can be excited and proud that he's launching out into a larger world.

Not that we can't relate to your concerns. It's true that there are many moral snares and spiritual pitfalls awaiting young people on today's college campuses. But if you've raised your boy with an emphasis on knowing God and following His Son, Jesus, there's every reason to think he'll acquit himself admirably when temptations arise.

Your son has reached a place in his development where he must assume increasing responsibility for his own actions. It's up to him to decide how he's going to respond to the challenges he'll face. This is the moment for which you've been preparing him ever since you brought him home from the hospital. At some point he has to pass beyond your control and discover what it means to be accountable to God alone. Your role is to support him in prayer, asking the Lord to bring to his mind the spiritual truths and moral principles you've taught over the years.

You may find it comforting to know that you're not the only parent who's ever struggled with this transition. Many moms and dads have difficulty "letting go" or allowing a child to separate from the parent-child relationship and move into full adulthood. Be that as it may, you'll have to make the break at some point. You can take an important step in the right direction by examining your motives honestly. What's compelling you to hang on to your son's childhood so tenaciously?

We can't answer that question for you. But we can tell you this is often a huge issue in families with a history of marital conflict. The empty-nest years can seem especially threatening to a woman who feels distanced from her husband and who, as a result, has been pouring all her emotional energy into her children. This is just one of several scenarios that can account for a parent's unwillingness to release his or her child. You probably know whether this applies to your own case.

We're concerned about your reference to "lying awake nights thinking about this." Have you considered the possibility that your worrying may be getting out of hand? Healthy anxiety is one thing; it's designed to help us cope with the challenges of life and to perform at a higher level. Anxiety disorder, however, is an entirely different matter. It raises its head when normal anxiety grows and mutates to the point where it does the opposite of what it's intended to do; instead of helping you cope, it keeps you from functioning and dramatically disrupts your daily life. If you think you might be suffering from a disorder of this kind, we'd highly recommend that you seek the assistance of a professional counselor.

If this course of action is something you'd like to pursue, feel free to contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department for a list of qualified Christian therapists practicing in your area. Our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your fears with you over the phone. Don't hesitate to get in touch with them if you think this might be beneficial; please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Find some young adults who've experienced negative consequences from the party scene, and have them talk with your teen. If you've made mistakes, it may be beneficial to share a bit about your experiences.

"Instead of controlling your child during the last two years of high school, slowly begin to pass decision-making responsibilities to him so that he can have experience making choices in the face of peer pressure before getting

to college. Better for him to make a few minor mistakes while you're there to help him navigate the consequences than to make life-altering errors when he's away from home.

“Finally, let your child see you seeking and serving God and living a life that honors Him. If he shares your faith this will encourage him in his convictions; if he doesn't have the same faith commitment you have, you'll serve as great example.”⁸⁹

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Letting Go of Your Teen,”](#) a series of articles by Tim Sanford
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Give Them Wings* by Carol Kuykendall (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 1994)
- *TrueU #1: Does God Exist?* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Will My Child Lose His Faith at College?

Question

My son is a college junior. I'm very concerned about the state of his relationship—or lack thereof—with the Lord. His faith doesn't seem to mean as much to him as it did during his high school years, and now he's thinking of taking a philosophy course in metaphysics. I don't even know what metaphysics is! Should I be worried? Is there anything I can do to help him get through college with his faith intact?

Answer

There are several things you can do:

- You can pray for and with him as circumstances allow.
- You can keep the lines of communication open by reaching out to him, talking with him, walking with him through his personal struggles, and making sure that his physical, mental, and emotional needs are met.
- You can encourage him to find a strong campus fellowship group and to stay involved with a solid, Bible-based local church; after all, none of us should expect to live the Christian life successfully on our own.
- You can put out an effort to educate yourself about some of the challenges he's facing, whether academic, social, or spiritual.

Let's use your question about metaphysics as an example. You'd be surprised what a difference it might make if you were prepared to discuss this subject with your son knowledgeably and from a distinctly Christian viewpoint. Metaphysics, according to the dictionary, is simply "the branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of first principles and problems of ultimate reality." Religious philosopher William James called it "nothing but an attempt to think things out clearly to their ultimate significance, to find their substantial essence in the scheme of reality." In Focus on the Family's *The Truth Project*®, Dr. Del Tackett describes it as "that branch of philosophy that examines the nature of reality, existence, and the relationship between mind

and matter, time and space, fact and value.”

If physics is the study of the material universe, then metaphysics can be understood as the pursuit of the reality that stands behind and explains or gives meaning to the material world. Physics, then, is a branch of empirical science, whereas metaphysics concerns itself with questions that most of us tend to think of as religious or spiritual.

If your son is studying philosophy at a secular university, it’s safe to assume he’ll be presented with a metaphysical perspective that’s something less than compatible with a biblical worldview. If he wants or needs help responding to that perspective, he may be interested in obtaining a copy of Focus on the Family’s *TrueU*[®] video series. You’ll find more information in the following resource list.

If you’d like to explore this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, Focus on the Family has a team of pastoral counselors available who would love to discuss your questions and concerns with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Make the church hunt as easy as possible. Don’t try to pick your teen’s college-town church for her, but make the search simpler. Look together at the Yellow Pages and newspaper church listings for the area. If possible, visit one or more congregations near the campus. Ask friends for recommendations. Encourage your teen to make a list of possibilities; call them and get campus-to-church directions. If she wants to try different denominations from the one(s) she grew up in, don’t stand in the way. The important thing is that she finds a place to grow and be supported.”⁹⁰

—*Parents’ Guide to the Spiritual Mentoring of Teens*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[What to Expect at College](#),” an article by J. Budziszewski
- [Boundless](#) addresses issues important to college students and other young adults.

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *TrueU #1: Does God Exist?* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)

Teen Questions Christian Worldview

Question

Suddenly our son, a high school senior, is openly grappling with deep questions about social justice, the meaning of life, the existence of God, and his own purpose as an individual. I guess we should be glad he's taking these things seriously, but we're also nervous about some of the conclusions he might reach. How can we make it more likely that he won't lose his faith as he sorts through these issues?

Answer

The adolescent years are a crucial period in any individual's spiritual and intellectual development. This is the time when the foundations of a person's worldview are laid down—the basic (and often unspoken) assumptions that govern attitudes, decisions, and actions. Young people often make decisions during their teens that will set a course for the rest of their lives. Many make permanent spiritual commitments at church, camp, or other events and continue to mature in their faith. But these are also years during which big questions about God and the universe are asked, and parents may find their own beliefs (or lack thereof) held up for inspection.

Many teens feel the need to chart a different spiritual course from their parents during these years. This development can make parents feel very uneasy, but it's more or less inevitable and absolutely essential. If he's to grow up and find his own way in the world, your son must eventually make his own decision as to whether or not he will believe in God and follow His path. You can't do it for him. That's why, to a certain degree, an examination of what he's heard as a child is a healthy process. He has to figure out how his childhood faith applies to adult situations and problems.

During this time, your primary job will be to keep your own relationship with God thriving. Spiritual vitality that shows itself through genuine joy, peace, and other positive expressions of belief will ultimately communicate

more to your teen than a lot of clever or convoluted answers to his questions. Integrity matters, too; young people are particularly responsive to honesty and turned off by hypocrisy.

If your child's need to assert his independence from you spills into the spiritual realm, you may need to entrust his growth in this area to other adults (or even peers) who can positively influence his view of God, faith, and the world in general. Youth leaders, teachers, young couples, single adults, or other friends of your family can often “stand in the gap” for you in this area. Do what you can to encourage these contacts and interactions (without being pushy about it) and then leave the results in God's hands. Don't forget to pray for all your children.

You may also find it useful to watch—and to encourage your son to watch—Focus on the Family's *The Truth Project*® and *TrueU*®. These DVD-based courses are designed to equip Christians to better understand a biblical worldview and communicate its principles to those around them. For more information, see the following resource list.

If you need further help in this area, Focus on the Family has a staff of pastoral counselors available who would love to discuss your questions and concerns with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call us and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.⁹¹

In Other Words ...

“We shouldn't be surprised or caught off guard when our children ask us tough questions about Christianity and the Bible. After all, they are immersed in a culture that aggressively questions and attacks the Christian worldview.... By the time our children reach college, they will have been bombarded with so many conflicting intellectual messages that it may be difficult for them to distinguish God's truth from what the world is telling them. If the answers we give to their questions about faith aren't satisfactory or are laced with contempt toward atheists or other non-Christian groups, our children will begin to search elsewhere. And we may not like where they find their answers.”⁹²

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Absolute Truth](#)” by Lindy Keffer
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *The Case for a Creator, Student Edition* by Lee Strobel and Jane Vogel (Zondervan, 2004)
- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *TrueU #1: Does God Exist?* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Tough Questions About God, Faith, and Life: Answers to the Difficult Questions Teens Ask* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)

Teen Lacks Career Direction

Question

My daughter doesn't seem to have a clue about what she wants to do after high school. It's hard enough to find any kind of job these days, let alone one that reflects what God might want her to do with her life. How can I get her to pick a direction and go in it?

Answer

Your first step should be to expose her to as many different occupations as possible. Give her a taste of the career choices available. Be sensitive to her personal interests and inclinations and do what you can to develop them. Help her discover her natural, God-given talents and strengths. If she's fascinated by medicine, set up a time for her to talk with your physician about the demands and rewards of this profession. If she's mechanically inclined, arrange to have her spend a day hanging around the local garage. The same approach can be taken with almost any type of career.

As you move through this process, avoid projecting your personal expectations on your daughter. Children don't always follow in their parents' footsteps. If you're an accountant but your child has difficulty with math, don't push her into a career that would make her miserable. If you're an attorney but your daughter wants to be an artist, don't try to force her "square peg" temperament into the "round hole" of a legal career.

It's also important to help your adolescent think of vocation and career in spiritual terms. For a Christian, work can be about more than making money. It's an expression of human creativity, which in turn reflects the creativity of God. Viewed from this angle, a believer's vocation can be a vehicle for fulfilling service to the Lord and other people. The Bible makes it clear that God has created each of us according to a unique design (Psalm 139:13-14); that He has gifted us with special talents (Romans 12:6-8); and that excellence in the workplace is valuable (Proverbs 22:29).

Once a sense of direction begins to emerge in your daughter's thinking, find ways to help her get the advice and training she needs. Her school's guidance counselor may be able to assist. Encourage your daughter to pray about her future; consider career-testing services that can help her determine what job options best fit her personality, temperament, and interests. These tests often help young adults narrow down the possibilities and can confirm whether a particular career choice is logical. Adolescents who are somewhat aimless may find direction in the test results; others who have a number of interests might use tests to focus on their areas of greatest strength, thereby avoiding the time and expense of having to change majors later in college.

If you'd like to discuss these matters further with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our counselors would be more than happy to help you sort out your questions and concerns over the phone. They can also provide you with referrals to qualified guidance professionals who may be able to provide your daughter with more specific assistance. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁹³

In Other Words ...

"Try asking your teen questions like the following. You might want to ask them every six months or so, as interests and passions may change over time.

"1. If you could do anything you wanted and knew you wouldn't fail, what would you choose to do, and why?

"2. If you knew you had only two years to live, what would you want to do with that time?

"The first question encourages your teen to think and dream boldly....

"The second question isn't meant to be morbid or frightening. Rather, it challenges a teen's assumption that he'll live forever, helping him to consider what's really most important to him—and to God."⁹⁴

—Joe White with Larry Weeden

Need More Help?

Online

- "[How Your Teen Is Wired](#)," a series of articles by various authors

- “[Help Your Teens Achieve Their Dreams](#),” a series of articles by Joe White with Larry Weeden
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *Up 2 U: It's Your Life, Choose Wisely* by Andy Stanley with Heath Bennett (Multnomah, 2005)
- *You Are Here: A Straight-Shooting Guide to Mapping Your Future* by Danny Holland (Random House, 2007)
- *The Busy Mom's Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul C. Reisser, MD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *It's Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

Do We Have to Pay for College?

Question

This is our son's senior year in high school. We have yet to discuss specifics, but he obviously assumes we'll be footing the entire bill for his "college experience." Though he's only an average student, he seems to be making some pretty big plans and entertaining some extremely high hopes for the next four years. I'm not sure our financial resources are sufficient to cover his expectations. Even if they are, his current academic performance isn't overly reassuring. It seems like we have two choices: Send all our money down the drain, or close our wallets and watch our son's future wither up and die. Is there any way out of this?

Answer

Your son's attitude isn't unusual. There was a time when most college-bound students seemed willing to do whatever it took to get their degrees, whether that meant going part-time or full-time, earning scholarships, taking out loans, or working their way through. Nowadays the prevailing philosophy seems to be that there's "no way" to get to college unless Mom and Dad pay for it. What's more, many kids seem to assume they'll be going *away* to college. This usually means higher costs, thanks to out-of-state tuition or private college fees.

Don't fall prey to this kind of pressure. If your son is headed for college, you are not obligated to pay. You may choose to pay, or to help pay, but that's a decision you must prayerfully make. Keep in mind that there are ways to get a college education without any assistance from parents. It may not be the "experience" your teenager is hoping for, and it may take longer, but it's still possible.

If you do decide to contribute to your son's educational expenses, give the following considerations some thought before plunging ahead:

1. Make sure that this is about promoting your son's best interests, not your

own. Don't try to make up for the education you didn't get or turn your teen into a family trophy.

2. Realize that the academic world isn't necessarily the best place for everyone. Encourage your son to pursue interests that fit his skills and capabilities and that will benefit him most in the long run.

3. Don't use your money to control your collegian's life. Don't say, "I'm paying your tuition, so be sure to call Mom every week," or "Not another penny for school until you break up with your non-Christian girlfriend!" In other words, examine your motives very carefully. Are you trying to buy your son's affection or manipulate his behavior? These are important questions to ask yourself.

Once you know what you want to do and why you want to do it, we suggest you move forward by implementing the simple plan outlined below:

1. First, determine ahead of time how much money, if any, you can afford to put toward a college education. "We'll pay for college" is too vague. What if your son decides he wants to attend Oxford University? Instead of leaving things open-ended, set a specific dollar amount for each year. That way everyone will be on the same page.

2. Next, create a "Mom and Pop Scholarship Fund" that will cover a defined amount per semester for a certain number of semesters. If your son picks a college that costs less per semester than the plan provides, you can figure where to allot the balance of the money (laptop, grad school, summer mission trip, etc.). If the chosen college costs more than the scholarship amount, it's up to him to come up with the difference through other means.

3. Finally, operate your "Mom and Pop Scholarship Fund" like a real one. While such funds might not have "strings" attached, they often require that students maintain certain standards such as working toward a degree and maintaining a sufficient grade point average.

4. At the end of the predetermined number of semesters, your "Mom and Pop Scholarship Fund" expires. If you choose to offer additional assistance, that's up to you. But it's not a requirement for admission to the "Good Parent Club."

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. You can contact our Counseling Department for a free consultation; they'll be happy to assist you in any way they can. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.⁹⁵

In Other Words ...

"Mitch's dad told me he wouldn't keep paying his son's tuition unless the

young man broke up with his girlfriend....

“I challenged that dad by asking, ‘What are you buying with your money? Are you buying an education for your son so he can get a good start in life? Or are you buying—or attempting to buy—your future daughter-in-law?’

“Be careful to understand the motives behind your use of money. Make [your] ‘Mom and Pop Scholarship Fund’ contingent on things like these:

“• a 3.0 cumulative GPA (or whatever you deem appropriate)

“• courses that move toward a degree

“• enrollment for eight (or whatever number) semesters

“These requirements are tied to purchasing a good education for your student—nothing more.”⁹⁶

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- [Crown Financial Ministries](#) provides financial advice.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Cost-Effective College* (e-book) by Gordon Wadsworth (Moody Publishers, 2000)
- “Helping Kids Learn Responsibility” by Lee Paris in *The 21-Day Dad’s Challenge*, Carey Casey, general editor (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)
- *Complete Guide to Faith-Based Family Finances* by Ron Blue with Jeremy L. White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)

Teen Doesn't Want to Go to College

Question

Our seventeen-year-old son says he isn't interested in college. But he's a smart kid, and my wife and I are glad we got our degrees. Our son says that as far as he can see, college is nothing but a big business designed to benefit the people who run it. Why bury yourself in debt, he asks, just because everyone else expects you to pursue "higher education"? Why waste several years of your life earning a worthless piece of paper, only to end up working in retail alongside your high-school graduate friends when you can't find a job in "your field"? We've argued about this more than once, and think he'll regret it if he doesn't go. How can we resolve this?

Answer

Your son is an honest and perceptive thinker, and we commend him on having the courage to raise this question in the first place. There's at least one point on which he's absolutely right: The fact that "everyone else" is doing it is not a good reason to spend tens of thousands of dollars and four or five years of your life on a college education.

God does not call us to that kind of mindless social conformity. Instead, He wants us to seek and obey His will. He wants us to follow His leading wherever He takes us. There is no single "one-size-fits-all" plan that He expects every individual to adopt.

To put it another way, college is not necessarily for everyone. It has its advantages and disadvantages, depending on your personal inclinations, your outlook on life, and what you intend to do. For some—doctors, lawyers, teachers, lab technicians, or theologians—it's an indispensable element of professional training. For others—mechanics, commercial fishermen, carpenters, comic book artists, farmers, or law-enforcement officers—it's a far less important piece of the puzzle. Still others may view a university course primarily as a source of intellectual nourishment and an opportunity to gain

rich cultural experience. Your son needs to figure out where he falls along this continuum before deciding whether or not to embark on a college career. Only he can make that choice, and if He's a follower of Christ he should do it with earnest prayer and a heartfelt desire to serve the Lord.

You can let him know that a college education can be worth pursuing regardless of occupational goals. A degree can open doors that can't be opened in any other way, but a university isn't simply a glorified trade school. There's a sense in which higher education ought to be treasured for its own sake, quite apart from considerations of career or job market viability.

Why do we say this? For two distinctly Christian reasons. First, since we believe that God created all things, we also affirm that knowledge of any and every kind contributes to and informs our knowledge of Him (see Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:19, 20). Second, we're convinced that a broader understanding of the arts and sciences—in other words, of everything that has to do with people, human culture, and man as a creature made in the image of God—can only enhance our ability to carry out the second of Jesus' two Great Commandments: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

You may also need to caution your son when you make your case for college. Christians pursuing a higher education today must exercise great discernment not only in choosing a college or university but also in the way they approach their studies and interact with their professors. Many secular institutions are intrinsically hostile to the biblical worldview and present material in a way that denies absolute truth and stands in direct opposition to Christian standards. It's only fair to mention this in conversations with your son.

If you feel it would be helpful to pursue this question at greater length, don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. You can contact our Counseling Department for a free consultation; please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Should [you] go to college? ... Because you belong to God, your primary concern should not be what your friends—or for that matter, anyone else—wants you to do. Your primary concern should be trying to discover what God has in store for you.

"That's not to say that others, especially your parents, won't have helpful and wise things to say to you, but let me propose a few alternative questions to

get you moving in the right direction.

- “• What decision will give me the greatest opportunities in life?
- “• What decision will give me the greatest job satisfaction?
- “• Where will I have the greatest influence for Christ?
- “• What will allow me the greatest opportunities for stewardship for God’s kingdom?
- “• Where will I be able to most fully develop my gifts and talents?”⁹⁷

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- [Boundless](#) addresses issues important to young adults, including life choices.
- “[What to Expect at College](#),” an article by J. Budziszewski
- “[Conflict with Your Teen](#)” by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, a series of articles on parent-teen communication
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *Up 2 U: It’s Your Life, Choose Wisely* by Andy Stanley with Heath Bennett (Multnomah, 2005)
- *You Are Here: A Straight-Shooting Guide to Mapping Your Future* by Danny Holland (Random House, 2007)

First Year of College: Academic Problems

Question

Our daughter is attending her first year of college away from home. While she's never been an exceptional student, she's very intelligent and has always gotten good grades. That's why we're so concerned about her first semester performance: She failed one course and barely got by in the rest. We haven't seen evidence of any other worrisome behaviors, so we're not quite sure what to make of the situation. How should we approach this with her? Should we threaten to withdraw funding for school?

Answer

No, we wouldn't encourage you to go that route—at least not without further investigation. Alarmist “worst-case-scenario” thinking is never helpful, particularly in a situation as complex and sensitive as this. Instead of jumping to unwarranted conclusions, we recommend that you talk to your daughter. Ask her some simple, straightforward questions. Find out what's been going on in her life over the past several months. It might be an eye-opening conversation.

It's not uncommon for even the best of students to experience a drop-off in grades during their first year in college. At this stage of his or her educational career a kid's plate is full to overflowing. As you may remember, the world of the university is very different from that of the average high school. A freshman has to negotiate an appreciable amount of culture shock upon being thrown into this environment for the first time. She has to learn her way around a sprawling, confusing campus. She has to get used to a strange and potentially erratic schedule. She has to figure out that, in college, one spends a great deal more time working outside of class than one does sitting in a lecture hall. In your daughter's case, she has to adjust to a new living situation, take responsibility for her own eating, sleeping, and study habits, and process a whole host of new friends and acquaintances. She may also suffer from homesickness.

The ease with which she manages all this depends on her personality type, temperament, and level of maturity. Once she's worked her way through these preliminary details, she has to find time and energy to devote to physics, English, geography, French, and chemistry. It doesn't sound simple, and it's even more complicated than it sounds.

Should you cut off your daughter's funding? Generally speaking, this represents a counterproductive attempt to motivate and support a person who's already struggling on many fronts. Unless her problem with grades has been accompanied by other negative behaviors—or unless you have good reason to believe she's deliberately chosen to adopt a cavalier attitude toward the scholastic side of her college experience—we'd prefer to see you explore other avenues before taking such a drastic step.

Instead of wondering whether it's "time to clamp down," maybe you and your spouse should be asking yourselves, "What does she need from us? What will ease the adjustment process and help her through this difficult transition?" Perhaps some solid friendships, possibly within the context of a local church or an on-campus Christian fellowship group, would provide your daughter with the sense of security, stability, and serenity she needs in order to concentrate on her studies. Maybe she's longing for some reassurance that you, her parents, have confidence in her and that you're willing to stand by and support her until she gets her academic legs under her. Maybe she just needs a sympathetic ear. We have a feeling that specific answers will emerge out of your relationship with her as you take the time to talk things through.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss your questions at greater length with a member of our team, Focus on the Family has a staff of professional counselors available who'd love to talk with you over the phone. If this option appeals to you, feel free to call our Counseling Department at your convenience. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"If you are not already consistently writing things on a calendar, begin to develop that habit from the first day you enter college. I recommend a calendar that has plenty of space for each day, space that will allow you to plan your day hour by hour.... When you get your calendar, mark all the commitments and appointments you know about. Use a pencil, because things are sure to change!

"There are as many different study habits as there are people, but the most successful students develop a rigorous study routine. That's why I strongly recommend that you schedule two hours of study time each week for

every one hour you spend in class—and write those times in your calendar, too! ... The worst that can happen if you follow this formula in your first few months of college is that it will be impossible for you to get too far behind.”⁹⁸

—Alex McFarland

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Let Your Kids Fail,”](#) an article by Chip Ingram
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Teaching to the Test,” Chapter 8 by Ken Blanchard in *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *The DNA of Parent-Teen Relationships* by Gary Smalley and Greg Smalley, PsyD (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2005)
- *It’s Your Kid, Not a Gerbil* by Dr. Kevin Leman (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2011)

“How Can I Know God’s Will for My Life?”

Question

My teenage daughter faces a lot of decisions about her future—school, job, dating—but doesn’t seem able to make any of them. She’s afraid she’ll make the wrong choices. I can see why; she’s always heard at church about “knowing God’s will for her life” and “choosing God’s best” and seeking His guidance before making any major decisions. But she has no idea how to go about it. Frankly, neither do I. I can’t think of a time when God told me exactly what to do in any situation, especially not in a voice I could hear. How can I help my daughter when I haven’t figured this out myself?

Answer

There is no simple answer to this question. The short response is that we can’t solve this problem for you or for your daughter; you have to do it yourselves, and you can only do it through prayer and faith and by walking closely with the Lord. You’ll discover God’s will for your life as you become the person God wants you to be. It’s all about your relationship with Him; and that relationship, like any other, is something that evolves and emerges over time.

Paul provides us with valuable insight into this subject in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

According to this verse, there are three steps to discerning the will of God:

1. non-conformity
2. transformation
3. renewal

Paul says that your path will become clear as you step out of the currents and trends of this present world, allow the Lord to remake you in His image,

and develop a new way of thinking. In other words, God's will is not so much a matter of *knowing* as *becoming*. In the final analysis, it isn't something we *find* but something we "morph" into as we submit to the truth and let Christ remold us by the power of His Spirit.

But is this all the Bible has to say about God's will? Doesn't it offer any more specific information? As a matter of fact, it does. There are many places where it tells exactly what God's will looks like:

- "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable ..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4).

- "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

- "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:15).

In these verses it's easy to detect a pattern. God's specific will is that you should become a certain kind of person: chaste, obedient, thankful, kind, loving. Everything else flows from that.

Does this mean He has no particular plan for the details of your life—no preference as to the person you marry, the career path you follow, the places you go, the things you do? Some would argue that He doesn't—that His will for us is, in a sense, fluid and open-ended. We can agree to a certain extent, but not entirely. After all, God is the master planner, the Lord of the universe. As He said to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

There is every reason to suppose that God is intimately involved with the ins and outs of your daily experience. He does have a plan for your life, and He is guiding you according to His pre-determined purposes. This does not mean, however, that He's obligated to tell you what He's up to. That is a mystery to which He alone is privy. If you need to know the details, He will reveal them to you at the proper time.

Meanwhile, your job—and your daughter's—is to stay on track with the process of transformation. Where you can't see or know, you must learn to trust and obey.

If you need further help understanding these concepts, Focus on the Family has a staff of pastoral counselors available who would love to discuss your questions and concerns with you over the phone. Feel free to call and ask to speak with a pastoral counselor. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Will God tell [Julie] which college to attend? Will the ‘right’ college brochure fall from the sky? Will she discover a verse that names her future alma mater?

“Probably not. Those things may not be impossible, but they don’t happen very often.

“Here’s what *does* seem to be happening in Julie’s case. As she puts into practice the Bible’s guideline to treat others the way she’d like to be treated, the barriers between her and her mom begin to come down. She goes to Mom for advice about college—and Mom may actually have some good ideas.

“The process doesn’t stop there, though. As she thinks about college, Julie may be able to set priorities based on more of God’s [biblical] guidelines....

“Julie doesn’t have to throw a bunch of college catalogs down the front steps and pray that the ‘right’ one lands on top. Instead, she needs to let God transform her priorities and help her make decisions based on what’s important to her—and to Him. That transformation happens as she gets to know God better, as she discovers more truth in His Book, and as she practices what she learns.”⁹⁹

—Randy Petersen

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Discovering Your God-Given Purpose](#),” a series of articles by Shana Schutte
- “[How Your Teen Is Wired](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- “[Help Your Teens Achieve Their Dreams](#),” a series of articles by Joe White with Larry Weeden
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren (Zondervan, 2007)
- *Wired by God* by Joe White with Larry Weeden (Focus on the Family, 2004)
- *Up 2 U: It's Your Life, Choose Wisely* by Andy Stanley with Heath Bennett (Multnomah, 2005)
- *You Are Here: A Straight-Shooting Guide to Mapping Your Future* by Danny Holland (Random House, 2007)

Part 11: When They Reach Adulthood

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Parents Disapprove of Son's Romantic Relationships

Question

Our son, who's in his early twenties, is still living with us. We're anxious to see him "grow up," move out on his own, and get married. He's brought several girls home to meet us over the past few years, but thus far he's shown very poor judgment and we haven't approved of any of them. What can we do to get things moving in the right direction?

Answer

If you really want your son to grow up, move out, and get married, you'll have to start treating him as a mature, responsible, self-reliant adult—even when he doesn't behave like one. He's reached a place in his personal development where he simply must learn to assume responsibility for his own actions. You aren't helping him to do this by maintaining control over his personal choices and passing judgment on his girlfriends. It's up to *him* to select a marriage partner and decide what he's going to do with the rest of his life.

You're entitled to your opinions, of course, and there's nothing wrong with offering a few words of advice here and there—provided you do it tactfully. But at some point your son has to pass beyond your control and discover what it means to be accountable to God alone. Your approval cannot and should not be the determining factor in his love life. Your role is to support him in prayer, asking the Lord to bring to his mind the spiritual truths and moral principles you've instilled into him over the years.

You may find it comforting to know that you're not the only parent who's ever struggled with this transition. Many moms and dads have difficulty

“letting go” or allowing a child to separate from the parent-child relationship and move ahead into full adulthood. Be that as it may, you’ll have to make the break.

We know that isn’t easy, especially these days. Many cultural analysts have noted that modern educational and economic realities have had the effect of prolonging adolescence. For a number of reasons, it’s increasingly common for young adults in their twenties to be living at home with their parents. There are pros and cons to this arrangement, of course, but there’s no denying that it places a young man or woman under a unique set of pressures—pressures that would have been unheard of in earlier generations. It’s possible that the conflicts you’re experiencing with your son may have less to do with the quality of his romantic interests than with the awkwardness of your living situation.

We strongly encourage you to do everything in your power to help your son get out from under your roof. We’re *not* recommending that you “kick him out,” merely that you devote some energy to enabling him to launch out on his own. Once this happens, you just may find it easier to sort out the family dynamics that have been influencing your feelings about his relationships with members of the opposite sex.

If you’d like to discuss this subject at greater length with a member of our staff, you’re welcome to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Here are a few questions that will get a discussion rolling about mate selection with your adult child.

- “1. Does this person bring out your best behavior?
- “2. Do you enjoy being around his/her relatives?
- “3. Do you have compatible views on sex, money, and religion?
- “4. Can you love this person for a lifetime, even if he or she never changes?
- “5. Do you and your mate view each other as equals?
- “6. Is your prospective mate serious enough to make a long-term commitment?
- “7. Do you and your mate understand each other’s goals?”¹⁰⁰

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- [Boundless](#) addresses issues important to young adults, including romantic relationships.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* by Robert Lewis (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Grown Child Skeptical About Marriage

Question

I was divorced from my ex-spouse a number of years ago, when my children were still small. Until recently I assumed this was all water under the bridge. Now I find that my grown son blames me and his dad for his own negative view of marriage. He has no intention of marrying his live-in girlfriend; in his words, marriage is old-fashioned and “divorce is inevitable anyway.” Needless to say, this grieves me. What should I tell him?

Answer

Perhaps you should begin by being honest about your own mistakes. Family brokenness has been the cause of untold pain and disillusionment among the members of today’s up-and-coming generation. In a way, it’s hard to blame them for their negative attitudes toward marriage and the traditional family; their parents really do owe them an apology and an explanation. If you can muster the courage to be open with your son about the background, circumstances, and causes of your divorce, you may open new avenues of understanding and communication between the two of you. You may also help him avoid similar errors and brokenness in his own love life.

Once you’ve done that, you can tell your son that in spite of your own disappointing experience, you still regard marriage as one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind and place the highest possible value on the permanence of the marital bond. You might explain that, next to a person’s relationship with God, there’s nothing in this world more important than the relationship between husband and wife. It’s central to God’s plan for human procreation and the meaning of human sexuality (see Mark 10:6-9).

Will that convince your son that marriage isn’t a doomed and useless institution? Maybe not. But there’s more to be said. Reliable research consistently demonstrates that married people are healthier, happier, live longer, enjoy better mental health, have a greater sense of fulfillment, and are

less likely to suffer physical abuse than their unmarried counterparts. What's more, a study published in *Psychological Reports* reveals that married persons are less likely to feel lonely.

It's been shown that couples who live together outside of legal marriage experience more conflict and aggression in their relationships than those who don't. And in a review of more than 130 published studies measuring how marital status affects personal well-being, Dr. Robert H. Coombs of UCLA's Biobehavioral Sciences Department found that alcoholism, suicide, mortality, and a variety of psychiatric problems are all far more prevalent among the unmarried than among the married.

Maybe your son has bought into the popular idea that cohabitation can serve as an effective testing ground for marriage. As a matter of fact, living together increases a couple's chances of divorce in later marriages.

There are more statistics that support this perspective, but they won't help your son much if his cynicism about marriage is based mainly on "sour" personal experience. In that case, there's no substitute for a good heart-to-heart talk with a caring professional who not only knows the facts, but who also listens with compassion and understanding. If either you or your son would like to discuss your feelings or your family history with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"My mom was, in a word, a *great* mom. She loved me and my two brothers unconditionally....

"Though her own two marriages failed, my mom never stopped believing in the institution of marriage as God designed it. Especially after she became a Christian (which happened after her divorces), she developed the deep conviction that God wants marriage to last a lifetime and that with His help, it's not only possible but normal....

"We were seeing the kind of commitment that says, 'You will always be mine, and I will always be yours, no matter what.' And so we had confidence that we could also enjoy such commitment to and with our wives one day."¹⁰¹

—John Trent, PhD

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Marriage: God’s Idea](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Breaking the Cycle of Divorce* by John Trent, PhD with Larry K. Weeden (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart, PhD, and Wilford Wooten, LMFT, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Should Parents Pay for Adult Daughter's Wedding?

Question

My husband and I have limited financial resources after putting our children through college. Our daughter and her fiancé have good, professional jobs and earn more than we do, yet they expect us to pay for their wedding. Is this our responsibility? We feel like we're done paying for our adult children's expenses!

Answer

There's no right or wrong answer to this question. But we can tell you this much: It's easier for everyone concerned when issues like this have been discussed and decided ahead of time.

Many poor financial decisions are made in connection with weddings. That's because most tend to "happen" without any real plan. Parents and children often leap into the process by throwing out a lot of exciting ideas without stopping to think through what they want to accomplish, what it's likely to cost, and whether or not they can afford it.

The best-case scenario happens when parents decide years ahead of time what they intend to do for their children financially as they pass through various stages of life. They agree on what type of college they'll pay for (if any) and what expenses they'll cover during and after college—including wedding costs and first-home expenses. If parents haven't thought through those questions, they're apt to face emotional battles later, either between themselves or with their adult children.

The principle here is to avoid creating a "coping gap." A coping gap exists when there's a difference between expectations and reality. If parents can establish realistic expectations for their children early in life, they're in a much better position to reduce conflict during periods of high emotion—for example,

after an engagement ring has already been given and the church has already been reserved.

In cases like yours, where this kind of planning apparently hasn't taken place, we'd suggest that it's still possible for parents to establish some realistic financial parameters. Come up with a budget outlining what you're willing to spend on the wedding; communicate that to your daughter and her fiancé. Tell them they can spend the budget any way they want—on a reception, a wedding gown, invitations, flowers, etc. If any money is left over, it can be used as a nest egg or applied to the cost of beginning their married life together. If, on the other hand, your budget falls short of their needs and expectations, let them know that you have financial limitations and that they're free to make up the difference out of their own resources. This may require some sensitivity and a generous amount of diplomatic language on your part, but we believe you can pull it off if you know your own minds and are firm about establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

If you're unsure about your ability to manage the relational aspects of this situation, we'd encourage you to give our counseling staff a call. They would be happy to listen to your concerns and assist you with some practical suggestions. They can also provide you with referrals to professional Christian family therapists practicing in your local area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.¹⁰²

In Other Words ...

"When you just don't have money to spare, or when you think assisting with money is the wrong thing to do, help your children find another solution. Avery and Carmen couldn't help the kids buy a second car. There just wasn't any money. But Avery lent his son the old pickup to use until they could save up for a down payment....

"Chelsea wanted to borrow money for a big trip to Hawaii. But instead of lending the money, her folks helped her find a summer job on the islands that paid her way over as well."¹⁰³

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Faith-Based Family Finances* by Ron Blue with Jeremy L. White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Adult Child Marrying a Non-Christian: Attend the Wedding?

Question

Through more than twenty years of marriage we've tried to raise our children to know and obey God. Now, to our great disappointment, our son has decided to marry a non-Christian. We love our child, but we also consider this a question of conscience and being faithful to biblical principles. In light of what the Bible says about being "unequally yoked," should we lend our support by attending the wedding?

Answer

This is a question that doesn't have just one correct answer. As you say, it's a matter of conscience. Conscience is something the biblical writers take very seriously, while allowing a great deal of latitude (see, for example, Acts 23:1; Romans 2:15; 9:1; 14:5; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13).

In the final analysis, only you and your spouse can decide how to handle this sensitive situation. We can encourage you to pray, seek wise counsel, and talk things through carefully with one another and with your child before making up your minds. We can also mention a few points you may want to take into consideration as you move through that process.

First, as a full-fledged adult, your child is your peer. This means that the task of raising him is now complete and your role has changed from guide and director to advisor or mentor. You'll always be Mom and Dad, of course, and it's understandable that you want him to honor the faith in which you've raised him. In spite of this, you're no longer in a position to tell him what to do. You can express concerns about his choice of a marriage partner. You can talk about relevant biblical principles. You can point out the increased potential for conflict in any marriage where the partners can't agree about their deepest spiritual convictions. You can urge the young couple to confront that potential

head-on with the help of a premarital counselor. You can discuss all these issues openly and intelligently, just as you would with any other adult Christian friend. But in the end you have to treat your adult child as an equal and respect his decisions.

Second, it's crucial to maintain healthy boundaries. This means identifying what's yours and what isn't, and learning to tell the difference between the things you can and can't control. Though you can't dictate the behavior of another adult, you can stay faithful to your own values and convictions. You can also ask the other adult to respect your beliefs. If you're thoroughly convinced it would be wrong to support this marriage by attending the wedding, and if you're certain you'd feel the same way if one of the individuals involved were not your own child, then stick to your guns. Don't give in to pressure or compromise your beliefs simply to appease your child. But be sure to explain your actions and choices with compassion, sensitivity, and great care.

Finally, take time to ponder all your options. Don't rush into anything on the basis of emotional reactions. If you think about it carefully, you may conclude that this issue isn't as black-and-white as it seems. It's one thing to give your "stamp of approval" to a marriage by actively participating in the wedding. It's another simply to attend and sit in the congregation as an expression of love and respect. It might be worth asking yourself whether there are other ways of communicating concern about this union—ways that wouldn't cause offense or that might avoid long-term estrangement from your child, his spouse, and your future grandchildren. You need to weigh and balance these considerations before coming down on one side or the other.

If you feel it would be helpful to talk this over at greater length, don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Our counselors would be more than happy to discuss your situation with you over the phone. They can also provide you with referrals to qualified family therapists in your area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Let us encourage you to never end a family relationship—even if you feel deep hurts from past offenses by family members. Realize that over time things change. If you cut off the relationship and refuse reconciliation, the seeds of bitterness will remain, and your heart will harden. Your anger and frustration will not go away just because you refuse to forgive or seek forgiveness."¹⁰⁴

—David and Claudia Arp and John and Margaret Bell

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Lead Your Family Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Tricia Goyer (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Adult Child in Difficult Marriage

Question

My grown-up son is married to a woman he lived with for several years prior to the wedding. It's an unhappy situation, and lately he's been talking about getting a divorce. Is there anything I can do to help them?

Answer

Your son's story is sad but not surprising. The best research indicates that couples who cohabit before marriage have a 50 to 65 percent higher divorce rate than those who don't. To a certain extent, your son entered this marriage with the deck stacked against him.

Does that mean his situation is hopeless? Absolutely not. Precisely because they sprang from relatively casual relationships, most of the marriages referenced above break up for relatively casual reasons. They fall into a growing category that psychologists refer to as "low-conflict" divorces. There are no huge fights, no affairs, no episodes of violent domestic abuse leading to the dissolution of these marriages. Instead, these couples usually claim that they've simply "fallen out of love." In such cases it's typical for a husband or wife to say that his or her spouse is "no longer meeting my needs."

People who take this view and get divorced for such reasons fail to understand that marriage is much more than a vehicle for meeting one's personal needs. If your son and his wife fit this description, you might look for an opportunity to ask whether they have this perspective on marriage. You could explain that God created marriage to be a lifelong commitment involving patience, self-sacrifice, long-suffering love, and a willingness to put a spouse's needs above one's own.

If your son and his wife are Christians, you may be able to reason with them on the basis of this biblical perspective. If not, there's some interesting research you may want to share with them. Certain studies indicate that if a couple struggling in a troubled marriage will simply stick it out, there's a high

probability that they'll be able to describe their relationship as "very happy" five years down the road. On the other hand, those who dissolve their marriages usually find themselves just as unhappy as singles as they were in the married state.

Besides praying and speaking the truth in love, there's one other thing you can do for your son and his wife. Tell them you love them and that you consider their relationship worth saving. Then encourage them to seek professional counseling. We have a staff of licensed Christian therapists here at Focus on the Family who can offer them a free, confidential session over the phone and then refer them to a qualified marriage counselor in their area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Here are five phrases you are advised never to use with your adult children about their marriage:

"I told you so!"

"If only you had listened to me, but oh, no—"

"Didn't I tell you to marry Brian? He's a doctor, you know."

"You're better off without the likes of him/her!"

"You got yourself in that fix, and you'll just have to figure a way out.""¹⁰⁵

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help

Online

- "[When Your Kids Divorce](#)" by Robert Busha
- "[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#)," a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart,

PhD, and Wilford Wooten, LMFT, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The Blessing* DVD series featuring John Trent, PhD (Focus on the Family/Thomas Nelson, 2012)

Prodigal Adult Child

Question

Our adult child has completely rejected his Christian upbringing. After graduating from high school he moved in with his girlfriend and got involved with drug and alcohol abuse. Our hearts ache to reach out to him, but he doesn't want our advice. What can we do?

Answer

Your longing for a warm, close, emotionally safe relationship with your son is completely understandable. God designed moms and dads to feel this way about their children, and when the relationship doesn't turn out as they'd hoped and expected it's only natural that they should be grieved. At the same time, you're wise to set boundaries, enforce limits, and communicate clear messages to your son about Christian values and biblical standards of behavior. You need to find creative ways of holding that position while assuring him of your love.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) provides a helpful model. The father in Jesus' story didn't assume responsibility for changing his son's heart and mind. He understood there were only two things he could do in response to the young man's ill-advised choices: pray and wait. He did those patiently until the son finally "came to his senses" (verse 17). When at last the boy came home, freely confessing the error of his ways, the father ran to meet him while he was "still a long way off" (verse 20). You can be ready to respond with the same degree of love and compassion at the first sign of repentance on your son's part.

Is there anything you can do to help him start moving in that direction—to open a crack, however small, in the wall of his resistance to God and his Christian upbringing? Not directly. But perhaps you could enlist the assistance of an objective third party. Is there anyone you know to whom your son might be inclined to listen? A family friend, perhaps, or a relative, or a pastor or

member of your church? An older male in the role of mentor—a man your son trusts and whom he doesn't perceive as a threat—could be of great help to you in this situation.

The girlfriend's parents might be another potential avenue of approach. Anyone who can speak one-on-one with your son, carefully offering food for thought and listening compassionately to his responses, could play an important role in opening the lines of communication.

Still, the Prodigal Son wasn't able to come to his senses until he'd come to the end of himself. It's possible that your son hasn't yet experienced enough personal loss to be willing to listen to anyone. If and when he reaches a point where he's open to re-evaluating his life choices, you can let him know that Christian counselor referrals are available to him through Focus on the Family. If you'd like further consultation with a Focus counselor yourself, feel free to contact us as well. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In the meantime, remember that the battle you're engaged in is spiritual as well as emotional. You may find strength and encouragement in resources like those on the following list.

In Other Words ...

"Do you continue to show love toward your prodigal even when he or she is so very difficult to love? Unconditional love can be overwhelmingly frustrating at times. It may be heart-wrenching as was my parents' love toward me.

"But *your love is a gift to be given* to your rebellious loved one. Your love for the child for whom you weep, mirrors Christ's love to him or her. Your child cannot earn your love. Give it freely in spite of constant antagonism toward you.

"This kind of love creates a longing in even the coldest of hearts.

"Many, if not all, hurting souls cry out for nothing more than to be truly accepted and loved. My parents' consistent love (20 years worth of love to a closed heart) finally broke through my hardened heart, and helped me see the Savior's love for me."¹⁰⁶

—Wendi Hayden English

Need More Help?

Online

- “[If You Love an Alcoholic](#),” an article by Lisa Brock
- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them: Words of Encouragement for Those Who Wait* by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Books, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Didn't God Promise Our Child Would Turn Out Right?

Question

We're in the middle of our own personal nightmare right now. Our college-age son walked away from his faith a year ago and started engaging in some extremely destructive behavior. Now his younger sister seems to be following in his footsteps. We're a Christian family, and we've always tried to raise our kids accordingly. Doesn't the Book of Proverbs say that parents who do this can expect their children to stick to the straight and narrow? Where did we go wrong?

Answer

First, you need to know that you're not alone. Many parents wrestle with issues like those that have been causing you so much anguish and grief. Some find themselves in an ongoing struggle with rebellious teenagers. Others have watched adult children completely reject the Christian faith in spite of everything the parents have done. Like you, most of these moms and dads are carrying a heavy burden of guilt and shame. With or without cause, they blame themselves and assume full responsibility for the unfortunate choices their offspring have made. We're keenly aware of this, which is why we feel that what you need from us isn't additional criticism but love and understanding.

This attitude shapes our way of looking at the question you've raised: What does the Bible really mean when it says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" (Proverbs 22:6)?

Many parents in your position feel condemned by this verse. They tell themselves that if only they'd done a better job of training their child, he or she would never have "turned" from the right path. These feelings may be justified in some situations, but not in every case. We're convinced that it isn't fair to draw any such conclusion on the basis of Proverbs 22:6 alone.

Why not? Because a careful study of Scripture leads us to believe that this verse was never meant to be understood as an absolute promise—but rather as a statement of probability. That’s the view of many reputable Bible scholars, including John Walvoord and Roy Zuck of Dallas Theological Seminary. In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (David C. Cook, 1989) they point out that many of the proverbs state general truths rather than guarantees (see Proverbs 22:3-4, 9, 11, 16, and 29, for example). Though it’s generally true that children who are well-instructed in the faith continue to follow it, some choose not to.

If your conscience is clear before the Lord, we’d encourage you to take heart and stop blaming yourself for the mistakes of your children. You can’t make their decisions for them or control their relationship with God. If they’ve rebelled against you and rejected your faith in spite of your best efforts, try to take some comfort in the thought that you’ve been faithful to your responsibilities and obligations as a parent.

Bear in mind, too, that the final chapter of their story has yet to be written. God is able to use youthful errors to teach people valuable lessons and bring them at last to a place of humility and repentance. This is evident from the experiences of many biblical characters such as Jacob, Joseph’s brothers, and Jonah. Remember the timing mentioned in the Proverbs 22:6 statement of probability: “When he is old he will not turn from it.”

If you’d like to discuss your concerns at greater length with a member of our staff, please feel free to give our Counseling Department a call. Our trained and licensed family counselors are available to speak with you over the phone; they’d consider it a privilege to be of service to you and your family in any way they can. See “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“*Write and then throw out* a goodbye letter to your idealized grown child—the dreamed-of person you once imagined your son or daughter would be at this point in his or her life; *write and keep* a second letter for your private reference, describing your adult child as he or she actually is today and affirming as many details as you can about the God-given gifts and attributes you see in your grown child. Finally, *write and send* a third letter containing meaningful words of loving encouragement to your son or daughter.”¹⁰⁷

— Debra Evans

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Ministering to the Prodigal Son \(or Daughter\)](#),” an article by Erin Prater
- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them: Words of Encouragement for Those Who Wait* by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Books, 2008)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)
- *Stand Strong in College* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2007)
- *TrueU #1: Does God Exist?* DVD series (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Adult Daughter Moves in with Boyfriend

Question

We recently discovered that our daughter, who's away at college and nearing graduation, has moved in with her boyfriend. We believe that's totally wrong. When we confronted her about it, she said she didn't want to hurt us but that "this is the way we do things now." She claimed living together is the best way to test a couple's compatibility. Are we overreacting? Has the world changed that much?

Answer

Of course not. Your concerns are valid and your commitment to traditional biblical standards of sexual morality is commendable. We want to encourage you to maintain your perspective and stand firm in defense of your values. But do it gently and with a generous measure of parental love and understanding. You want to keep the lines of communication open between you and your daughter; otherwise, you won't be able to help her at all.

If your daughter and her boyfriend are serious about wanting to gauge the long-term viability of their relationship, we'd suggest an alternative far superior to the one they're proposing. It's called premarital counseling. The best way for a couple to test compatibility for marriage is to date for at least one year before engagement while participating in a structured counseling program that includes psychological testing.

There are a number of such programs available. One of the best is called "Prepare and Enrich." It has an 80 percent success rate at predicting which couples will be able to forge a lasting relationship and which will be divorced within three years. To find out more and take an introductory quiz, your daughter can visit the website at <http://www.prepare-enrich.com>.

If your daughter is interested in looking up qualified Christian marriage and family counselors in her locality, she can contact Focus on the Family's Counseling Department for a free over-the-phone consultation. Our counselors,

all of whom are licensed therapists, will be happy to discuss her questions with her and direct her to a local practitioner who can help her and her boyfriend get started on the road to a fulfilling marriage. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In addition to counseling, it’s vital to allow sufficient time for a relationship to grow without the pressures of long-term commitments and the emotional entanglements of physical intimacy. A year isn’t too long to wait when two people are planning to spend the rest of their lives together. Many couples who are in love rush into things, sometimes with disastrous consequences. In most cases, we also recommend that young men and women wait until they’re in their early twenties before talking seriously about marriage. Research shows that couples who marry after age twenty-three have a much lower divorce rate than those who take this decisive step at an earlier stage.

We have a couple of practical reasons for believing that cohabitation prior to marriage isn’t a good idea. In the first place, the statistics are against it. Your daughter and her boyfriend may believe that living together is a good way to find out whether they have what it takes to build a strong marriage, and from a certain perspective this appears to be a reasonable assumption. Won’t a “test drive” provide the information necessary to predict marital success or failure? Unfortunately, the exact opposite is true. The best research indicates that couples who cohabit before marriage have a 50 percent higher divorce rate than those who don’t. These couples also have higher rates of domestic violence and are more likely to become involved in sexual affairs. If a cohabiting woman gets pregnant, there’s a high probability that the man will abandon the relationship within two years, leaving a single mom to raise a fatherless child.

Our second reason for advising against premarital cohabitation grows directly out of our Christian faith. A living arrangement that includes sexual relations outside the context of marriage undermines the biblical meaning of marriage itself. It disregards God’s design for human sexuality. Marriage, according to the Bible, is a one-flesh union between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24). The sexual act is the glue that seals this bond. There are many passages that address this issue in clear and unmistakable terms. The implication is plain: Sexual intercourse is inappropriate in any other setting. This is not simply an old-fashioned idea; it’s the scriptural point of view.

In Other Words ...

“With cohabitation, either party can leave anytime for any or no reason. This lack of commitment undermines the relationship. Rather than cohabiting, it

would be more beneficial to get counseling and uncover potential differences, which allows you to decide whether to proceed with marriage or not.

“Every couple living together, married or not, will have differences and conflict. The big question is whether or not there’s the will to work out differences and work through conflicts. Commitment means you’ll take the time and effort to make a marriage work no matter what. Commitment is needed for any relationship to endure. Marriage provides commitment; cohabitation rarely does.”¹⁰⁸

—*The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Test-Driving Marriage](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- “Why You Shouldn’t Live Together, Parts I and II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Dr. David Gudgel
- “Cohabitation vs. Marriage: Why the Ring Matters,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Glenn Stanton (Focus on the Family, 2011)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

Married Child Struggles Financially: Should Parents Help?

Question

Our daughter and her husband are struggling financially. We'd like to help them out, but we're afraid of setting a bad precedent or interfering in their marriage. Should we just stay out of it and hope for the best?

Answer

Our answer may come as a surprise. If you have the financial ability and the desire, we actually think it's more beneficial to give to your children while you're alive than to leave them a large inheritance—provided, of course, that you do it wisely and follow some basic guidelines. If you feel inclined to come alongside your daughter and her husband during this difficult and formative stage in their marriage, we suggest you keep the following principles in mind.

1. *Give with no manipulative strings attached.* Gifts should be gifts, not behavioral modification tools. If you're trying to change adult children's behavior through what you do for them financially, you're being manipulative. For some parents and grandparents this poses a challenge. Instead of giving money freely, they may be tempted to want something in return: phone calls, visits during the holidays, license to "meddle" in their children's marriages, etc. But such expectations run contrary to the spirit of true generosity.

2. *Transfer wealth gradually without changing their lifestyle dramatically.* For example, consider helping them out with the cost of necessary items, such as a washer and dryer or a refrigerator. It goes without saying that there's no reason to help them procure luxuries. If they're buying a home, you might also think about giving them a monthly gift to help pay down the principal on their mortgage. By adopting this approach, you avoid making them dependent upon you for their basic monthly payments while simultaneously providing them with financial help; if you keep this practice up

faithfully, they'll probably pay their mortgage debt in ten to fifteen years instead of thirty.

3. *Respect the sanctity of your daughter's marriage and her husband's need to provide.* Be sensitive to your son-in-law's feelings and bear in mind the importance of his role as provider in the marital relationship. Don't give the young couple so much money that he feels he isn't needed or has his motivation to work dampened. Your giving shouldn't cause conflict in the marriage or give the impression that you're taking sides in a disagreement between husband and wife.

4. *Respect your children's parental wishes.* If your children have kids of their own, avoid coming between the parents and the grandchildren. Let's say your children respectfully ask you to reduce your Christmas giving. Perhaps they think too many gifts are making their children selfish. Respect their wishes. Don't get into a situation where your desire to give causes problems.

5. *Stay out of the way of God dealing with your children.* It's hard for more affluent parents to watch their kids struggle with problems that could be solved with a check. But it may not always be God's will for you to intervene in your children's problems. The Lord may have a lesson for them to learn or may want them to seek another solution that He has in mind. The more you have, the more difficult it is to allow your children to be fiscally disciplined and suffer the consequences of their own mistakes. It's much easier for you to take away the financial pain.

Follow these guidelines, and we predict that giving to your daughter and her husband will be a joy and a blessing for all concerned. If you need help applying these concepts to your situation, don't hesitate to give our staff a call. Focus on the Family's counselors would be happy to listen to your concerns and assist you with some practical suggestions. They can also provide you with referrals to advisors and counselors who specialize in helping families with financial issues. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.¹⁰⁹

In Other Words ...

"There's a lot more to money than just getting more of it. And there's more to family life than trying to take care of every monetary need your adult children might have. Parents are not the cavalry ready to rescue adult children from every financial pinch. Our kids are out on their own. They need to learn to pay their way, budget their funds, live within their means.

"But at the same time, why in the world have we worked so hard for so long if we can't enjoy using part of our resources to help out our own kids?

Long days, overtime, and tedious hours can be forgotten in an instant when we see the delight, relief, and joy in the faces of our children—even if the children are adults.”¹¹⁰

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- [Crown Financial Ministries](#) provides financial advice.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Faith-Based Family Finances* by Ron Blue with Jeremy L. White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- Part 4, “Money,” in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart, PhD, and Wilford Wooten, LMFT, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)

Sexually Active Adult Child Bringing Partner Home

Question

My unmarried adult daughter, who lives out of town, will be coming home for Christmas and bringing her boyfriend with her. To our disappointment, they've been sexually active for some time and will be expecting to share the same room while they're here. As Christians who take the Bible seriously, we can't say yes. But how can we say no and not shut down our relationship with our daughter?

Answer

This is a delicate situation, but it's not irresolvable. You need to find a way to hold two things in balance: respect for your daughter as an independent adult, and faithfulness to the dictates of your own conscience. In other words, you need to approach it as you would approach any conflict of values with a friend or peer.

There comes a time in every child's life when he or she crosses the threshold into adulthood. Once this line is passed, the parent-child relationship changes in some basic ways. As an adult, your daughter is your equal. She's graduated into a position of self-responsibility, in which she's accountable to a higher authority—the authority of God Himself. If she wants to engage in sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage, she'll have to answer to Him for that decision. She's no longer bound by the rules of Mommy and Daddy.

Does this mean it's okay for her to adopt a dismissive attitude toward you or to disparage your values and opinions? Absolutely not. As your peer and a guest in your home, she's still obliged to respect your beliefs and standards of behavior. Furthermore, there's no time or age limit attached to the biblical command to honor one's parents; as Paul writes (quoting Exodus 20:12), "'Honor your father and mother'—which is the first commandment with a

promise—“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth”” (Ephesians 6:2-3).

We suggest having a frank conversation with your daughter before she comes home for the holidays. Explain that as Bible-believing Christians you have strong feelings about God’s plan for human sexuality. Make it clear that, from your perspective, sexual relations are meant to be reserved for marriage. For this reason she and her boyfriend will have to occupy separate rooms while staying under your roof.

You don’t have to fuss or argue or preach. Just let her know that while you love her dearly, your convictions won’t permit you to condone what you regard as sexual immorality. If she’s willing to cooperate, you’ve achieved your objective. If not, invite her to arrange other accommodations. Help her understand that the choice is hers to make. And remember that you can have a huge influence in her life through the power of prayer.

If your daughter is open to learning more about the biblical basis for your beliefs, you may want to direct her attention to a resource like Les and Leslie Parrott’s book *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*.

If you’d like to discuss this situation at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to give our Counseling Department a call. Our trained and licensed family counselors are available to speak with you over the phone; they’d consider it a privilege to be of service to you and your family in any way they can. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“The following sample letter assumes that your grown child knows your objections to cohabitation. However you word your message, love must prevail.

“My dearest daughter,

“Thank you for wanting to come home for the holidays and for being sensitive to our beliefs and values. Your father and I look forward to your visit and meeting your new boyfriend. As parents of a grown adult, we of course have long ago released you to follow your own path.

“We would make one condition of your visit, and that is that you and your boyfriend sleep in separate bedrooms while you’re staying in our home. For our part, we resolve to resist the temptation to offer you parental advice or express our concern in regard to your current lifestyle. While your father and I are concerned for your future, we love you very much, and we look

forward to having you home for the holidays.

“Love, Mom”¹¹¹

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids,”](#) a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- [“Test-Driving Marriage,”](#) a series of articles by various authors
- [“Parenting Adult Children,”](#) a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them: Words of Encouragement for Those Who Wait* by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Books, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- “Why You Shouldn’t Live Together, Parts I and II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Dr. David Gudgel
- “Cohabitation vs. Marriage: Why the Ring Matters,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Glenn Stanton (Focus on the Family, 2011)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Son Says He's a "Gay Christian"

Question

Our son, who's finishing his first year at college, recently announced that he's a "gay Christian." He believes God has told him there's nothing wrong with homosexuality and that other interpretations of the Bible are mistaken. Worst of all, he's been sharing these ideas with his brother (who's disgusted with him), and wants to explain them to his younger siblings, too. Sometimes I'm so angry I could scream; sometimes I just sit and cry. We love our son, but don't want him preaching this message to our other kids. What should we do?

Answer

Our hearts go out to you and our prayers are with you in the midst of this painful and exasperating situation. The firestorm of conflicting emotions you're experiencing—crying one moment, angry the next—is typical of concerned and loving parents in your position. Your feelings are normal, understandable, and completely justified. So don't blame yourself for reacting in this way, and don't assume responsibility for decisions your son has made as an independent young adult. He's old enough to be his own person now, and a burden of false guilt will only hinder you from showing him God's love in the most effective way.

How do you relate to your son now? Generally speaking, treat him as you would any other adult who can choose his own path in life. If he wishes to remain in your home, it should be on the same basis as any other boarder, renter, or tenant: He should know the house rules (we'd recommend you give them to him in written form, as a contract), respect your beliefs and values, and agree to abide by the standards you've established in order to ensure the safety, security, and well-being of every member of the family.

You can start by insisting that he refrain from discussing homosexuality with his younger siblings. To this you should probably add some rules regarding his behavior with any "friends" he may elect to bring into your home. For

example, clarify that there will be no overt displays of homosexual affection nor any sharing of the same room while under your roof. Ask him if he'd be willing to sit down with you and an objective third party—preferably a trained Christian counselor—who could encourage healthy communication between you. Don't be afraid to tell him that his announcement has sent you and the rest of the family into a tailspin, which is why you feel the need for professional assistance.

Meanwhile, arrange a meeting with other members of the family. Using age-appropriate language, explain to them what's going on with your son. Acknowledge and empathize with their emotional reactions to the situation, remembering that each of your children may need help sorting out his or her feelings. Make it clear that while you remain committed to biblical standards of morality, you can't possibly stop loving your son; as a result, he's welcome to stay in your house as long as his behavior conforms to the rules. Ask the other children to join you in your efforts to treat him with love and respect.

If your son decides he can't abide by your guidelines, invite him to begin the process of moving out of the house and pursuing his newfound lifestyle in an independent setting. Don't fuss or argue. Just let him know that while you love him dearly, your Christian convictions won't allow you to condone what you regard as sexual immorality. Help him understand that the choice is his to make.

If he persists in claiming that the Bible has nothing to say against homosexuality, remind him gently that the evidence all points in the opposite direction. But remember that there's probably very little to be gained by arguing; on the whole, a case like this calls for generous amounts of patience and prayer. If you need help in this area, you might want to consult some of the resources on the following list.

We can't overemphasize the importance of enlisting the help of a professional counselor in a situation like this. We have a staff of trained family therapists whose job is to dispense sound advice and practical assistance over the phone. If you'd like to speak with one of them, please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information. They can also provide you with references to reputable Christian therapists practicing in your area.

In Other Words ...

"The following is from a mother and father who love their son very much but disagree with his embracing a gay identity and engaging in gay relationships.

"Dear Son:

“First things first: We love you, and we always will. There’s nothing you can ever do that would cause us to stop loving you. You’re our son and we love you....

“You want us to accept and embrace you as gay. That’s one of the things we disagree about and where we hope you’ll allow us to be in relationship even though we disagree.... You see ‘being gay’ as an identity, as who you are. We see you as our boy, our son, a man—and same-sex attractions as just one aspect of your life.

“We believe strongly in God’s design for sexuality: Sexual expression is reserved exclusively for a husband and wife. Anything outside of that is sin. That’s what we believe from God’s Word; it’s a big part of our faith. Being sexually attracted to men isn’t the real issue; it’s what people do with those attractions. Homosexual lust and sexual activity are sins, and sin damages people—body, soul, and spirit....

“God is powerful and transforms people. That doesn’t mean we expect Him to ‘turn you straight,’ but there are people with same-sex attractions who choose not to identify as gay and not to engage in same-sex relationships. With professional help and with loving support, some people leave homosexuality....

“In closing, let us say again that we love you so very much. You’re always welcome home, but we would need to talk about how to handle the situation if you wanted to bring a male friend with you. We hope you understand.

“We love you.

“Mom and Dad”¹¹²

—The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex

Need More Help?

Online

- [“Responding in Love to an Adult Gay Child,”](#) an article by Roberta Rand Caponey
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *101 Frequently Asked Questions About Homosexuality* by Mike Haley (Harvest House, 2004)
- *The Focus on the Family Guide to Talking with Your Kids about Sex*, J. Thomas Fitch, MD, and David Davis, editors (Focus on the Family/Revell, 2013)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Adult Child Has Made Poor Decisions

Question

We've done our best to raise our children to be committed Christians. In spite of this, our grown son has made some very poor choices in terms of lifestyle, vocation, living arrangements, and friends. We're deeply disappointed—and can't help feeling guilty and wondering where we went wrong. Is it too late to do anything about this?

Answer

Your first assignment is to get rid of those feelings of guilt. Nobody is perfect. Every parent makes mistakes. You may have committed all kinds of errors and blunders, but that's not what makes your son who he is. He's defined by his own choices, not by your shortcomings. So don't blame yourself and don't assume responsibility for decisions he's made as an independent young adult. If love has been your guide throughout the parenting process—and the tone of your inquiry leads us to think it has—then cut yourself some slack and leave him in the Lord's hands. He's old enough to be his own person now. If you go around carrying a burden of false guilt, that will only make it harder to show him God's love.

You didn't specify whether your son's problems are the result of a deliberate rejection of his Christian upbringing. If he's engaged in blatant sin, you can confront him following the guidelines laid down in Matthew 18:15-20. If he's simply irresponsible or immature, your response will be somewhat different.

Either way, you're dealing with a prodigal. We'd suggest that Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) can provide you with some insight.

The father in this story didn't assume responsibility for changing his son's heart and mind. He understood that all he could do about the young man's ill-advised choices was to wait. He did so until the son finally "came to his senses" (verse 17). When at last the boy came home, confessing the error of his

ways, the father ran to meet him “while he was still a long way off” (verse 20). You can be ready to do the same at the first signs of a change of heart.

In the meantime, it’s possible to communicate clear messages to your son about biblical standards of behavior while respecting his privacy and independence. This requires prayer, sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leading, and keeping an eye out for teachable moments; it’s a matter of speaking the right word at the right time. Look for creative, appropriate ways to explain your convictions while assuring him of the constancy of your love. Don’t hesitate to be forthright if he solicits your opinion or asks for advice.

You might also consider enlisting the assistance of a third party—a family friend, relative, pastor, or member of your church who’s trusted by your son. If and when he reaches a point where he’s open to re-evaluating his life choices, you can let him know that Christian counselor referrals are available to him through Focus on the Family. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information. If you’d like further consultation with a Focus counselor yourself, feel free to contact us as well.

In Other Words ...

“Struggling children do not always move back home, but they all need to find a new direction for life. So with you and your spouse advising, help them set realistic goals.

“A realistic goal is one that all of you believe is within reach. A 45-year-old son who is determined to sharpen his game with constant practice and join the Professional Golf Association tour is dreaming. A 45-year-old son who needs two more years of college to get an advanced teaching degree is setting a more realistic goal.

“With Richard and Betty’s exhortation, [their son] Andy set three goals for himself: He would quit drinking, he would take a nine-month vo-tech course in sheet metal work and welding, and he would be in his own home, with the boys staying at a day-care center after school, in 18 months.

“It was a plan that could be measured.”¹¹³

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
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Other Resources

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- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Spouses Disagree over Helping Adult Child

Question

Our adult child has moved out of the house and is trying to support himself. Unfortunately, he isn't making it. He's struggling in several ways, including financially, and I'm really worried about him. When I suggest that we help him, my husband calls me a "softie" and says the boy needs to learn a few lessons in the school of hard knocks. This is becoming a major sore spot in our marriage. What should we do?

Answer

Before doing anything else, you need to work through your marital issues. It's pointless to talk about the difficulties your adult child faces until you've addressed the foundational problem in your marriage. Your son's welfare is important, but it's even more crucial that the two of you achieve a meeting of the minds.

We suggest you begin by sitting down and talking about this situation openly, honestly, and methodically. Don't do it when you're hot under the collar. Arrange a time to talk over your differences rationally—perhaps over coffee, or after dinner at a nice restaurant. Approach the situation as equal partners and work out a plan that's acceptable to both of you.

Some of the difficulty you're experiencing may be due to gender differences. Men tend to use language to transmit information, report facts, fix problems, clarify status, and establish control. Women are more inclined to view language as a means to greater intimacy, stronger or richer relationships, and fostering cooperation rather than competition. So when it comes to communication between the sexes, it's often a matter of "debate vs. relate." Keep these differences in mind as you tackle this issue together.

We're aware that many Bible-believing Christians would solve a problem

like yours by leaving the decision entirely up to the husband. We respect their point of view, but beg to differ. Ephesians 5:22-30 doesn't give a man free rein to dominate his wife in an authoritarian way. Instead, he's supposed to act as a wise team captain, recognizing his wife's strengths and using them for the benefit of the entire family. That's why it's so important that you try to forge a partnership in dealing with this situation.

As part of this process, pray together. Most disagreements turn on a missing piece of information, a timing issue, or both. There's probably no right or wrong answer to the question before you, so take as much time as you need to seek God's mind on the matter. Discuss and wait on the Lord with humility and expectancy. God values order, not confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), and has promised guidance to those who seek Him with all their heart (Jeremiah 29:13).

Meanwhile, you might want to enlist an older male to act as a mentor to your son—if your son will accept that help. It's important to respect appropriate boundaries in relationships with adult children, and this could be a good way of maintaining a healthy distance and perspective.

If you'd like to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of our staff, please feel free to give our Counseling Department a call. Our trained and licensed family counselors are available to speak with you over the phone; they'd consider it a privilege to be of service to you and your family. For details, see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"Make sure you and your mate completely agree. Agreement in parenting is an extremely important factor whether your kids are five or 50....

"Here are a few guidelines:

- "• Don't do it until you and your spouse completely agree.
- "• Don't do it if it has the potential for causing sibling contempt.
- "• Don't call it a loan if you both know your children can't possibly repay the money.
- "• Conduct all your discussions about the financial loan or gift in private with your mate.
- "• Pray together about the situation, and wait until you both feel spiritually at ease about the decision.
- "• Carry out the transaction with joy, releasing the results to the Lord."¹¹⁴

—Stephen A. Bly

Need More Help?

Online

- [Crown Financial Ministries](#) provides financial advice.
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Complete Guide to Faith-Based Family Finances* by Ron Blue with Jeremy L. White (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2008)
- “How Can We Work Out Disagreements?” by Mitch Temple in *Complete Guide to the First Five Years of Marriage*, Phillip J. Swihart, PhD, and Wilford Wooten, LMFT, general editors (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)

Adult Child Moves Back Home

Question

We have three children—a boy and a girl who are still in high school, and an older son in his mid-20s. The oldest has had some tough luck recently and needs to move back home for a while. We realize he's an adult and we'll have to treat him differently in terms of rules and expectations, but fear his brother and sister will call this “unfair” and demand to be treated the same way. How do we avoid a civil war?

Answer

You're on target in assuming that your relationship with your oldest son has to be revamped. You and your spouse are still his mom and dad and care about him as intensely as ever, but he's an adult who needs to be respected and treated as such. You're no longer in the business of “raising” him; that task is complete. The lines of relationship have shifted from vertical to horizontal. Though in a certain sense he'll always be your “child,” he's nevertheless your peer. Your role has changed from guide and director to advisor or mentor.

Does this mean he's no longer subject to rules of any kind? Certainly not—at least not while he's living in your home. But from this point forward you should expect nothing of him that you wouldn't expect from any other adult boarder renting a room in your house. Rules are essential wherever people share living space, but in this instance they don't exist to control or shape your son's behavior. Among peers, rules have a primary function: to ensure safety and preserve order. In other words, the guidelines you adopt shouldn't be directed primarily at your son's attitudes and actions, but rather at safeguarding the best interests of the entire household.

If you and your son are to coexist peacefully under the same roof, you're going to have to identify what's yours and what isn't—and learn to tell the difference between the things you can control and the things you can't. You need to realize that you can't dictate the behavior of another adult. It's not up to

you to say, “Son, I will not allow you to smoke or drink.” On the other hand, you can choose to make your home a tobacco- and alcohol-free zone. It’s your house, your mortgage payment, and your decision. This isn’t a question of telling your adult son what to do or how to run his life. It’s a matter of exercising ownership rights, eliminating chaos, and protecting the other members of the family.

It’s entirely reasonable to insist that every member of the house pick up after himself or herself and keep family areas (living room, kitchen, bathroom) clear of personal clutter. Appropriate respect for other people’s privacy and property—tools, clothing, vehicles, money—must also be maintained, and family standards of decency and propriety upheld. If it’s agreed that the older son will help shoulder some of the financial burden of running the household, don’t be afraid to hold him to his promise.

The trick here is to avoid being blindsided by your emotions. It will be all too easy to slip back into old parent-child patterns and let things slide that would never be tolerated in a normal adult-to-adult relationship. Handle all of this as you would manage any business agreement with any boarder or renter. Draw up a written contract if you think it might be helpful. If the boarder (your son) refuses to respect the rules or to follow through on his end of the bargain, let him know that he’s free to look for a new living situation. If he’s over eighteen years of age you’re not obligated to pay his way or protect him from the world’s hard knocks.

Will this arrangement have a negative impact on your two teenagers? We don’t see why it should, provided you clarify the difference between minors and adults and explain the reasons for having two sets of rules. You can assure them that the time is rapidly approaching when they, too, will have to carry the entire burden of responsibility for their behavior. As teens, they should already be moving in that direction; no doubt you’ve discovered that an adolescent isn’t much easier to control than a young adult.

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these suggestions at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. Please see “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Alex was twenty-three, a recent college graduate who’d returned to live with his parents until he got ‘established.’ But Alex couldn’t seem to find a suitable position in his field. He seemed depressed much of the time, lacking

motivation for job hunting....

“After I collected the pertinent history and met with Alex, it became clear that he—like many firstborns—was very perfectionistic and anxiety-prone. The world of ‘after college’—the real world—was so overwhelming and scary to him that he shut down. Or froze up.

“Kicking Alex out in the name of tough love wouldn’t have been the best way to address the situation. Instead, I helped set him up with a job-search coordinator and a career counselor. I also gave him homework assignments like creating a budget and role-playing job interviews. We worked on his perfectionistic patterns and used thought-stopping techniques to slow his anxious thinking.... Slowly, with assistance, Alex landed a good job and was able to move into his own place.”¹¹⁵

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- “[When Adult Children Move Back Home](#),” an article by Roberta Rand Caponey
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Adult Child Living at Home Won't Go to Church

Question

We have an eighteen-year-old son, soon to be nineteen, who's been a Christian for many years. He still lives at home, and we support him financially. Unfortunately, he recently decided to stop going to church. Our question: Should we force him to go? We believe he should follow the rules we establish, and one of them is that our family goes to church. At the same time, we don't want to drive him away from the Lord by dragging him to mandatory "worship" every Sunday.

Answer

At some point in every child's life, he or she crosses the threshold into adulthood. In the Jewish tradition, a boy is considered a man at age 13. In contemporary U.S. culture, a young person comes of age and is empowered to vote at 18. The precise time of transition differs from society to society, and an individual's level of maturity plays an important role. But the idea remains the same, and the principle involved is basically biblical (see 1 Corinthians 13:11).

Once this line is crossed, the parent-child relationship is supposed to change. Your young person is on the road to becoming your equal rather than a dependent minor. He'll graduate to being directly accountable to God Himself. Whether or not he takes immediate advantage of the opportunity, he has the right to leave home and make his own way in the world.

His personal decisions become something more than a matter of simple "submission" to Mom's and Dad's injunctions. He will choose to act—or not—on the basis of the wisdom you've attempted to instill in him over the years and out of an awareness of his personal responsibility toward his Creator.

Does this give him the option of disparaging your values and opinions? No.

As Christians, we know there's never any justification for treating another person with disrespect. Your son remains obliged to "submit" to you—not as his parents, but as fellow human beings and as his brother and sister in Christ (Ephesians 5:21). Furthermore, there are no expiration dates attached to the biblical command to honor one's parents (Ephesians 6:2).

It should be fairly obvious how these principles apply to the question you've raised. If your son attends church, it should be because he has a heartfelt desire to serve Christ and connect with His people—not because you "force him to go." At this stage in the parenting process you simply have to be realistic about what you can and can't control. Even if you make church attendance mandatory, do you really have what it takes to enforce the rule? How far are you willing to go to ensure that he complies with your wishes? These are questions you'll have to face honestly if you want to maintain peace at home.

Where spiritual matters are concerned, your wariness about the danger of coercion and manipulation is well-placed. "Remember," wrote author C. S. Lewis to a friend who was concerned about a similar problem, "how much religious education has exactly the opposite effect to that which was intended, how many hard atheists come from pious homes." That's an outcome you want to avoid at all costs.

As we consider your question, we can't help wondering whether this is primarily a battle for control. When struggles of this kind arise between parents and adult children, there are usually deeper issues lurking beneath the surface—issues having to do with respect and personal boundaries. If you think this observation might be relevant to your situation, and if you'd like to discuss that possibility at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family's Counseling Department. Our counselors would be happy to come alongside you in any way they can. They can also provide referrals to Christian family counselors practicing in your local area. Please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

"When they question our beliefs, ideals, values, or approach to life, we may find ourselves, quite naturally, wanting our adult sons and daughters to agree with us and continue following our example—to believe the way we believe—even though we know this is an unrealistic and even unhealthy expectation for our maturing children. Consequently, opportunities for loving and blessing our grown children may be lost.

“Keeping our perspective helps. Knowing that God isn’t finished with our sons and daughters, or with us, is a powerful reminder of the extent of His grace.”¹¹⁶

—Debra Evans

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them: Words of Encouragement for Those Who Wait* by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Books, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)
- *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask About Christianity* by Alex McFarland (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2013)

Time to Ask Adult Child to Leave?

Question

After high school, our oldest son decided not to attend college. In the beginning he had a part-time job, but it ended over a year ago. That's when the trouble started. Since then he's been sleeping until noon every day, lying around the house, and eating all our food. He's a legal adult—twenty years old on his last birthday—but he refuses to look for another job, won't help with chores, defies our wishes by bringing tobacco and alcohol into our home, and constantly stirs up trouble with his younger siblings. We don't want to push him onto the street, but we can't let this go on much longer. How do we know when it's time to ask him to leave?

Answer

Sometimes tensions rise beyond the bearable level, even when you've done all the right things as a parent of a young adult. There may even come a time when the tension begins to cause damage. It sounds as if your situation has arrived at that point.

If your son's behavior had disrupted the household and threatened the well-being of the rest of the family while he was still a minor, you may have had little choice except to stand your ground and do "damage control." Since he's officially an adult, you need to ask yourself whether there's any good reason to keep the damage-causer under your roof.

Before doing anything drastic, examine your heart and check your motives. If you're champing at the bit to lower the boom and kick your son out of the house, pause and ask yourself why. If, on the other hand, you're unwilling to take any kind of decisive action, see if you can identify the root causes of your hesitancy. If you find all this too confusing or overwhelming, seek the counsel of a pastor or therapist. A trained professional can also help you do a thorough "damage assessment" of the entire family. It's crucial to determine whether your son's presence in the house is harmful to himself or others, and if the

damage is serious or potentially permanent.

The point of all this analysis and counsel is to make sure you're not doing anything on the basis of pure emotion. Before drawing a line in the sand, you need to be fully convinced that your actions aren't based on anger or fear. If they are, you'll almost always make a poor choice. Instead of solving the problem, you'll simply be avoiding what you're afraid of or lashing out at what makes you mad.

You can keep emotions under control and work toward a wise decision by following this three-step process:

1. First, you and your spouse (if you're married) should sit down separately and write out a list of personal statements you want to communicate to your son. Explain your concerns in the clearest possible language.

2. Review each other's lists. After an honest discussion, develop a list of statements you can feel good about presenting to your son together. This part of the procedure is extremely important. If both parents aren't on the same page, nothing decisive can be accomplished.

3. After a joint list is agreed upon, sit down together with your son and read it to him. Make sure he knows exactly what you expect of him. If, for example, you consider the presence of beer and cigarettes in your home a non-negotiable issue (and we'd suggest this is a question of maintaining safety and order for everyone in the family), then let him know that he has a choice—either the tobacco and alcohol have to go, or he does. If seeking employment is a requirement for remaining under your roof, say so plainly. Don't leave anything up to personal interpretation on his part.

Once this process is complete, remember that follow-through is vital. This isn't about "scaring your son straight" with empty threats; that's manipulation, and it won't work in the long run. If he won't meet the criteria for staying in your home, proceed to the next step: Ask him politely but firmly to pack his things and leave. If you need backup, don't hesitate to invite a few friends from the neighborhood or your church to be present on "eviction day." You should also be ready to call the police, but only as a last resort. If you're not willing or able to go that far, don't issue an "eviction notice" in the first place.

Whatever you do, it's crucial that you remain consistent and stay true to your word.¹¹⁷

If you think it might be helpful to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of the Focus team, our staff counselors would consider it a privilege to speak with you over the phone. They can also provide you with a list of referrals to trained therapists practicing in your area. You can contact our Counseling Department for a free consultation; please see "[How to Reach Us](#)" for more information.

In Other Words ...

“Imagine I was renting a room from you, and that you’d given me a ‘no pets’ rule. Yesterday you found six hamsters I’m keeping in my room as pets. What will you do now as my ‘landlord’?”

“You’d probably restate the ‘no pets’ rule clearly. You’d tell me I’m in violation of this rule that I agreed to. You’d give me one, two, or seven days to come into ‘compliance’ with this rule. Or else ... or else what?”

“Say it. I’d have to leave....”

“And if I refuse to leave willingly, what will you do? Call the police and have me evicted.”

“That’s the way it needs to be with your adult son or daughter, too. That’s enforcing healthy boundaries. It’s taking control over what’s yours without trying to control what’s mine.”¹¹⁸

—Tim Sanford

Need More Help?

Online

- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them: Words of Encouragement for Those Who Wait* by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Books, 2008)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Sticking with Your Teen* by Joe White with Lissa Halls Johnson (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2006)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the

Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)

- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

Relatives Keep “Rescuing” Adult Child

Question

Our adult son has made some really poor choices, and as a result he’s struggling to make it on his own. He’s become extremely manipulative, and we’ve had to establish firm boundaries with him. Unfortunately, members of our extended family haven’t done the same. In fact, some of our relatives keep sabotaging our efforts by rushing to his rescue. What should we do?

Answer

There isn’t much you *can* do. If you’ve established appropriate boundaries with your son, and if you aren’t doing anything to enable his self-centered, irresponsible way of life, your main concern is to stay the course. You can’t control your relatives’ actions. But you can set a good example for them by standing firm.

Perhaps you’re familiar with Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer”: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.” In a situation like yours it’s vital to have this attitude. One of the most important keys to peace of mind and sound mental health is the ability to distinguish between the things you can control and those you can’t. Fail to keep that distinction straight and you’ll drive yourself to distraction. You’ll also end up filled with frustration, anger, resentment, bitterness, and despair—the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit Paul describes in Galatians 5:22-23.

What if the relatives try to drag you into their “rescue efforts”? Let’s say they come to you shaking their heads and wagging their fingers and saying, “That kid of yours is about to break us with his demands for money and other kinds of help! Why aren’t you carrying your fair share of the load?” There are three things you’ll probably want to tell them.

First, own up to any responsibility you may bear for creating this situation. If you’ve been at fault, don’t be afraid to admit it. You can say something like,

“Yes, we know our son has developed a real knack for leeching off other people, and we realize he can be pretty persuasive and insistent about getting his own way. We also know there have been times when we’ve been a soft touch and given in to his demands when we shouldn’t have. To the extent that we’re to blame for making him what he is today, we’re genuinely sorry.”

Second, explain what you’ve done to rectify the situation and change your own behavior. Describe the boundaries you’ve established and the steps you’ve taken to keep them in place. If your relatives seem open to it, encourage them to adopt a similar plan. Remember, it’s all about relationships: The better you and your extended family understand your connections with your son, the better you’ll be able to handle challenges when they arise.

Third, empathize with your relatives. Offer to pray with them. Let them know that you understand what it’s like to be on the receiving end of your adult child’s solicitations, accusations, and manipulations. Make it clear that you’re available to join them in taking a stand. Explain that nothing would please you more than to see the entire family presenting a united front against your son’s unacceptable behavior.

If you’d like to discuss these ideas at greater length with a member of our staff, feel free to call Focus on the Family’s Counseling Department. Our counselors would be happy to assist you in any way they can. See “[How to Reach Us](#)” for more information.

In Other Words ...

“We suggest that you do what you can to stay connected and in relationship with those who are mired in difficulty or with those making life difficult for everyone. All too often when people are angry or disappointed with others, they shut off communication as a means of self-preservation, but ceasing communication only makes things worse in the long run. Far better (and more effective) is to continue to remain in contact until an opportunity for reconciliation occurs. Yes, it may test your patience and your faith. You may need to ‘turn the other cheek’ and ‘go the extra mile,’ as Jesus encouraged His disciples to do. But who knows when the light of God might shine down upon all parties and a new day might dawn? Nothing is impossible with God.”¹¹⁹

—David and Claudia Arp and John and Margaret Bell

Need More Help?

- “[Establishing Boundaries with Adult Kids](#),” a series of articles by Allison Bottke
- “[Parenting Adult Children](#),” a series of articles by various authors
- [Focus on the Family](#) offers resources, articles, and answers to many parenting questions.

Other Resources

- “Resolving Family Conflict, Parts I-II,” a *Focus on the Family* broadcast CD featuring Ken Sande (Focus on the Family)
- *Losing Control and Liking It* by Tim Sanford (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2009)
- *Once a Parent, Always a Parent* by Stephen A. Bly (Focus on the Family, 1993)
- *Blessing Your Grown Children* by Debra Evans (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2012)
- *Peacemaking for Families* by Ken Sande with Tom Raabe (Focus on the Family/Tyndale House Publishers, 2002)

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