

MARK OESTREICHER
& BROCK MORGAN

A

PARENT'S GUIDE

TO UNDERSTANDING

TEENAGE GUYS



REMEMBERING WHO HE WAS,
CELEBRATING WHO HE'S BECOMING



simply for parents



A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Guys

Remembering Who He Was, Celebrating Who He's Becoming

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INTRODUCTION

Let's start with this: Long before each of us was a youth worker (combined, we've been youth workers for more than 50 years!), both of us were teenage guys. And because we spend so much of our time with teenagers, we've worked hard to remember what it was like to actually *be* a teenage guy.

I (Brock) remember getting that dreaded phone call. It was about 6 o'clock on a Saturday evening, and I had spent the previous night at my friend's house with the understanding that I would call my dad first thing in the morning. All day had passed, and it was now beginning to get dark. Throughout the day I had occasionally thought about calling him, but then I'd quickly get distracted with adolescent adventure. It all came crashing down when my friend's mom came out to the front yard where we were horsing around and said, "Brock, your dad is on the phone." I felt instant panic. You know, the pit-in-the-stomach syndrome that comes when you know that you are about to die. I walked toward that 1980s avocado green phone with the long curly cord and tried to quickly think of excuses for why I disobeyed my dad. "Hello?" I said. "Brock, come home

right now; you are in big trouble.” “But, Dad!” “Big trouble, Brock.”

I (Marko) had so many of these moments, it's difficult to pick one. But I will absolutely never forget the moment in the mall parking lot. I'd just totaled one of the family cars on my first driving date, a week after getting my driver's license. The mall parking lot was empty except for the sad wreckage of our family VW Bug. I thought my older sister was coming to pick up my date and me. And I thought it would be funny to jump around like a clown on crack, clarifying the location of the obvious carnage. But when the ride home pulled up, it was my dad. Though only about 30 minutes, that was the longest drive home I ever had with my dad.

Our parents tell us that during our adolescence, they regularly felt worried and would lose sleep over us. At times they felt out of their depth as they tried to graciously guide us through dating relationships, school grades, teenage temptation of all sorts, knucklehead choices, teenage experimentation, and our spiritual lives.

We each remember the worried expressions on their faces, as neither of us seemed to think before we acted.

We remember feeling powerless in making good choices and wanting them to rescue us, while at the same time *not* wanting them to rescue us.

We remember being conflicted and double-minded.

We remember the feeling of overwhelming regret when we failed to listen to our parents.

We remember confessing stupidity or sharing deep pain, and we remember the hurt we saw in their eyes—and how they still lovingly responded to us.

These were not easy years.

We are writing this book as sons, as youth workers of multiple decades, and as parents of teenagers ourselves (Brock has a 15-year-old daughter and has been the legal guardian of a now 19-year-old, and Marko has an 18-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son). We know that the journey for teenage guys is one of failure and triumph, of defeat and victory, of joy and sorrow—and we hope that our personal experience brings texture to our stories and insights. Our prayer is that this little book will help you along the way.

We pray that all of you will see your sons with the eyes of Jesus and that, through you and others, they will begin to capture the dream of God for their own lives.

CHAPTER 1:

SHEPHERDING AT HOME IN A SHIFTING CULTURE

Because both of us are youth pastors, we've often approached parenting teenagers from that perspective. My wife (Marko here), when we're in a challenging conversation about how to respond to a tough parenting spot, often says, "Put your youth pastor hat on; what would you say to yourself as a parent?"

When I (Brock) was first parenting, I regularly felt out of my depth. I was learning how to be an effective pastor of students, though, and one day I experienced this moment of revelation: "I can just be a youth pastor at home!" As youth workers we're intentional about creating environments of growth—environments where students grow closer to each other, grow closer to caring adults, and grow closer to God. I thought, "Well, that sounds like a great way to parent. I'll just do that. As a family we'll do activities that help us grow closer to each other and closer to the Lord. I'll just pastor at home."

Pastoring or shepherding at home means we have to be strategic, engaged, and prayerful. We have to be aware of what's going on in the home and in the lives of our family members. We have to strategically create environments where they can experience the warmth of God. In a world where culture could literally destroy, or at the very least distract and sidetrack our families (and ourselves), we have to be purposeful as parents. We want our children to know that they're never alone, that we're here for each other. And ultimately, we long for them to discover the God who has always been there with them, since before they were born.

One of the most important roles of a shepherd is to know the environment and the terrain. To shepherd, you've got to know the land the sheep are living in.

It's Not the Same World

As youth workers, we are constantly reminded that the teenage landscape is a very different world than it was when we were teenagers. We have even found that what was effective with students 10 years ago doesn't work nearly as well today. The mindset of today's teenager is different, and multiple factors contribute to this reality.

This first factor is that students are growing up in a *culture of immediacy*. Think about it: When you were a kid, you

went to the library to do research for your report. It could take you all day to gather the information. Today, students can get any information they want within seconds. They can text a friend, touch base with Mom, and turn in a paper all at the same time, with just the push of a button.

I (Brock) remember getting separated from my mom at the mall when I was a boy, and I thought I was lost for good. I had to wait for her to find me in the security area, hoping soon that she'd realize I wasn't with her. I sometimes think she viewed the security of the malls in our area as free child care. But today, you just use your cell phone and abracadabra, you're found. No waiting necessary.

But how, in this culture of immediacy, can your son's faith grow when Scripture tells us to be still, and to be quiet and wait on the Lord? No wonder teenage guys are leaving the faith for seemingly easy and immediate fixes.

Statistics on teenagers' use of technology

- One in three send over 100 text messages per day (March 2012, Pew Report)
pewtrusts.org/our_work_detail.aspx?id=56

- 93 percent of teenagers go online daily (Pew Report 2010)
pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx
- The average teenage boy watches 50 pornographic videos per week (TED Talks, the demise of guys)
blog.ted.com/2011/08/05/talk-and-survey-are-we-seeing-the-demise-of-guys-philip-zimbardo-on-ted-com/

Another difference of youth culture today: Teenagers are *way too busy and far too overscheduled*. Today's students have no time unfilled. Their day begins at 5 a.m. and often doesn't end until after midnight. They might play on multiple sports teams at once while taking college prep courses and working 20 hours a week at a part-time job. They are beyond busy and can't imagine being anything else. All the while, their parents applaud this pace of life and view it as a way to keep their son out of trouble or to build the college résumé.

T.S. Elliot once wrote that we are "distracted from distraction by distraction" (*Four Quarters*, Mariner Books, 1968). And Oswald Chambers writes in *My Utmost for His Highest* (Oswald Chambers Publications, 1992), "The

greatest enemy of a life of faith is not sin, but good choices which are not quite good enough. The good is always the enemy of the best.”

In places like Florida and Arizona, seasonal senior citizens are called snowbirds. Church youth groups around the country have “seasonal” teenagers. These are students who disappear from youth group depending on the season: band season, soccer season, SAT season. You get the picture. This has a huge impact on our sons, and we hear every week that their biggest struggle in following God is that they just don’t have the time. What are we doing?

Adults might think that teenagers’ lives are carefree and full of free time. However, a recent KidsHealth® KidsPoll shows that students have quite a different opinion. Of the 882 students ages 9 to 13 that were polled, 41 percent reported feeling stressed most of the time or *always*, because they have too much to do (February 2012 - kidshealth.org/kid/talk/kidssay/poll_stress.html#).

Another compounding reality for teenage guys is that they’ve grown up in a culture where *everything is disposable*. Their phones, cameras, water bottles, and even relationships are disposable. When we were in middle school and fell in love with a cute girl with big bangs, we

actually thought about what it would be like to marry her. Many of today's teenagers enter relationships knowing full well that they won't last.

Temporary and disposable are the norm. This mindset of disposability even creeps into faith. If everything in the world is disposable, why not a faith that's "disposable" if it's not working for me this week?

An obvious aspect of our culture that is also having a major impact is *the sexualization of all things*. It's not like kids weren't horny when we were growing up, of course. But the cultural landscape of sexuality continues to expand and change. This is having profound impact on our guys *and* our girls. Watch the ads during the Super Bowl, and you see what our culture is telling teenagers they should value. Every commercial seemingly falls into one of a few categories: Sex, Beer and Sex, or Cars and Sex.

When we were kids growing up, pornography wasn't very accessible. The first time either of us ever saw a Playboy® magazine (which, if we're honest, is tame compared to online porn), we were in middle school. We both still remember that first sighting. I (Brock) was playing war with my friends in the woods and just happened to stumble upon a magazine. I (Marko) was in the backyard shed of a wild

kid in my neighborhood, who'd stolen a magazine from his dad. Today, many sixth- and seventh-grade guys are already addicted to Internet porn.

It's just a different world, and the accessibility to porn is almost omnipresent and creeps into the lives of nearly every teenage guy. And this reality absolutely has an impact on their everyday lives. I (Brock) took a break from writing this section to hang out with a 15-year-old guy in my youth group. He confessed to hooking up (having casual sex) with random girls, girls he didn't even know. I just spoke to a youth worker in Texas who told me that the *student leaders* in her youth group were caught playing a game in a back room at the church where every student put money in a jar, and the two girls who were willing to make out with each other in front of the group got to split the cash.

Mainstream media, heavily influenced by pornography, normalize this kind of behavior. The more we see something, the more ordinary it becomes. It's no longer shocking. This is having a profound impact, one we'll dive into a little deeper later in this book.

One more shaping cultural factor we'll mention in this chapter is that today's teenage guys have grown up in a culture with a "*Starbucks® spirituality*." Teenagers

personalize and customize their faith like ordering a drink at Starbucks: “I’ll have a kabbalah latte, with a shot of Buddhism, some Jesus on top, and a Krishna cookie on the side.” The guys in our small groups have no problem with contradiction. One “truth” doesn’t have to exactly fit with another “truth.” This is a complex issue for sure, but as parents, are we graciously guiding them through this culture?

Last year I (Brock) was away with our high school group for a weekend retreat. On Saturday night I spoke, we all worshipped, and God moved. Students all over the room were repenting of their rebellion, giving their lives to Jesus, and praying for each other. It was one of those nights that keeps me in youth ministry and makes me think that all the investment is finally paying off. Afterward I was sitting with a group of 10th-grade guys, and they were all sharing what Jesus had done in their hearts. Then John spoke up: “Tonight God told me that reincarnation is true.” I, along with everyone present, looked at him, wondering if he was joking. But then we realized, “He’s serious!” Thank goodness, his buddy cut through the awkwardness and came to the rescue with, “Dude, wrong religion.”

Many students have no problem taking portions of other religions and applying the parts that resonate. As youth

workers and parents in this culture, we're often reminded of the early church. And we have to graciously be our sons' guides. We can't be afraid that they'll choose poorly or get off the path of Jesus. We must trust the Lord and not parent out of fear. We have to remind ourselves that Scripture will not return void or be taught to them in vain.

And we must also allow them to teach us. In many situations we need to be both a listener and a learner. We have to help guide them toward the ultimate big-T Truth. This openhanded approach actually helps young men become critical thinkers and opens their eyes to see how significant a life of faith is in the midst of a very complex world.

I (Brock) have to finish the story of the "reincarnation guy." He came to another camp a few months later. He never once felt condemned by our group or by me. And on a summer night, on top of a houseboat, he gave his life to Jesus. I could have squashed him prior to that night, but I decided to trust that God was at work in his life, that God would reveal himself in due time.