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Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom for Parents

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Chapter 1

Can Anything Good Come of This Age?

Derek was, well, a challenging kid to have in our middle school group. He was a natural leader, charismatic, and good looking. And he was disruptive. Not disruptive in an "Oh, he just needs to take his medication" way, or even in a "He has all the squirrelly characteristics of a young teen boy, turned to 11 on the dial" way. Derek was intentionally disruptive. His timid mom couldn't control him, and she had no idea what to do with him.

Smart and scheming, Derek would regularly manipulate entire hordes of boys and girls in our group into behaviors that would create havoc and get everyone except Derek in trouble with their parents. If there were a group of kids hiding somewhere in a stairwell, Derek was usually the kid who got them there. If students were caught smoking or drinking, then Derek was likely the provider. If all the kids in a certain section of the room were sitting with their arms crossed and "I dare you to teach me something" expressions firmly fixed on their faces, then they were almost assuredly imitating Derek.

I met many times with both Derek and his mom. I chatted with each of them on the phone frequently. I took Derek out for sodas and meals and showed him grace and love. I tried to help his mom with her challenging role of setting boundaries for him.

While there were certainly many factors involved, the struggle, as it pertained to Derek's disruption in our group, came down to two particularly vivid facts: 1) He didn't want to be there; and 2) his mom used attendance at our group as a punishment. She revealed this to me once, with only the tiniest bit of embarrassment. When

she grounded him, he simply ignored it. When she took away other privileges, he either overrode her or manipulated her into reversing her decision. The only thing she'd ever found that "worked" was telling Derek he had to come to our church middle school group. And since he was almost always in trouble for something, we saw Derek fairly regularly.

I asked Derek's mom about this approach—more specifically, I asked if she thought it was healthy for Derek's spiritual development to experience church as a punishment. Her response was revealing: "I don't know what else to do. I can't handle him; when I send him to you, at least I don't have to worry about him for a few hours. I don't understand Derek at all, and I have no idea how to get through to him."

Natalie was another student in that same group. She was the youth group flirt. Her family was extremely active in our church, and she was present at everything we did. She wasn't overtly disruptive like Derek, but she was still exceedingly disinterested in anything other than constant chatting with friends, flirting with boys, and working on her next conquest.

In many ways, Natalie wasn't particularly unique—we had other girls (and guys) with the same values and behaviors. What made Natalie's situation stand out was her parents' perspective. One day they sat with me in my office, very frustrated, and asked, "Why can't you do something about Natalie? Why can't you change her? What's the point of our constantly bringing her to youth group if you can't fix her?" (To be fair, I'm not sure they actually used the word *fix*; but it was implied, even if they didn't use it.) But the most telling bit of the conversation was one sentence uttered by Natalie's mom: "She and her friends are nothing like I was at that age, and I don't understand her."

Yup, that's it in a nutshell. I've met with hundreds of parents during my years of middle school ministry, observed hundreds (or thousands) more, and often interact with parents of middle schoolers when I'm doing parenting seminars at churches. And this theme—this "I just don't understand my child" theme—is certainly common, if not nearly universal.

In fact, in my experience, just about the only parents of middle schoolers who think they *do* understand their child are those with an arrogant "What's there to understand?" attitude of indifference.

Common media portrayals of parents and young teens don't help. Parents are usually portrayed as bumbling and immature, while young teens (and teenagers in general) are often portrayed as savvier and smarter than their parents. I don't know about you, but I get really tired of the "doofus dad" stereotype I see on so much of the programming aimed at teenagers (as well as the "neurotic mom" stereotype).

But here's my observation: The gap between the perception many adults have of middle schoolers' potential and their actual potential is fairly wide. Most of this gap is rooted in complex cultural misunderstandings—even fear—of young teens.

I can't tell you how many times, over the years, I've been told by well-meaning church members and leaders: "God bless you for working with those kids; I sure couldn't do it." Or, "You must really be called to work with those kids because I can't understand how you do it."

I want to start this book by reframing a few things. And let's start with this one: The fact that you don't always understand your middle schooler is *not* cause for throwing in the towel, throwing your hands in the air, or any other defeatist metaphor involving throwing. The fact that you don't always understand your middle schooler is an *opportunity*. It's an opportunity to learn and grow; it's an opportunity to be dependant on God; it's an opportunity to get to know your son or daughter, all over again, during a time when your child really, really, really needs you to be present (even though he or she might be sending you signals to the contrary).

A Little History (Very Little, Actually)

Focused conversation and books (and ministry, for that matter) devoted to young teens is a fairly new phenomenon in our culture. And there's good reason for this. Until about the last 50 years or so, young teens weren't really considered "teens" at all.

Let's back way up. For thousands of years, in pretty much every culture around the world, children were children, and adults were adults. The line between these two worlds was clearly marked, and individuals were either on one side or on the other. Children participated in family and culture at large in culturally accepted, boundaried ways, and were encouraged to look toward, aspire to, and prepare for the day they'd cross the line into the adult community (which was usually around age 13 or 14 for girls, and 15 or 16 for boys).

Historically, every culture had some sort of rite of passage to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood.[1] Rites of passage are fairly nonexistent today. As a youth worker, when I ask teens how they'll know when they become adults, I get a wide range of responses, usually connected to some milestone: "When I get my driver's license" or "When I have sex for the first time" or "When I graduate from high school." When I ask parents, the responses are just as mixed and usually fall along the lines of "When they're responsible for themselves."

This response from parents makes sense, really. Since the stage of adolescence was first identified in the early twentieth century, "being responsible for oneself" has been the working definition of the end of adolescence (and the beginning of adulthood).[2] Adolescence was originally thought of as an 18-month window of time from age 14½ to 16—a bit of a culturally endorsed holding pattern in which "youth" were allowed an opportunity to wrestle with "adolescent issues." At the time, these issues were called "storm and stress" and were a simplified version of the independence issues we might characterize today. Over the years, while using various terminologies, they've sifted down to these three adolescent tasks: Identity ("Who am I?"), Autonomy ("How am I unique, and what power do I have?"), and Affinity ("Where and to whom do I belong?").[3] The shift that's taken place over the last hundred-plus years isn't really in the *definition* of adolescence, however. It's a shift in the *duration* of adolescence. And this has a direct impact, on many levels, on the existence and importance of middle school parenting.

By the time the 1970s rolled around, at least in the United States, adolescence was considered to be about five years long (or six school

years)—extending from the commonly understood starting age of 13 to the normal graduation-from-high-school age of 18. Let's stop to think where these numbers came from, because they've been burned into our cultural consciousness for so many years.

Between the early twentieth century (when adolescence was first identified as an 18-month window) and the 1970s, the period of adolescence had expanded on both the opening and closing ends. The delaying of the end of adolescence was cultural, to be sure, and was directly tied to the normalization of high school education. In the earliest parts of the twentieth century, only a small percentage of older teenagers were in school. In fact, if older teens were in school at that point, most were already off to college; and this opportunity was primarily reserved for wealthier families.

High schools became more commonplace in the United States toward the end of the first half of the twentieth century, to the point that it was compulsory through 16 years old and culturally normative through 18 years old. By the time youth culture came into its own, in the 1950s, high schools were the norm. High schools, of course, became the boiler room of the new youth culture and quickly aided in raising the age at which adolescents were expected to be fully functioning contributors to society (the upper end of adolescence).

But the beginning age of adolescence also changed during this time period. At the turn of the twentieth century, when adolescence was first talked about, the average age for the onset of puberty was 14.5 years old.[4] This physical change became the de facto starting point for adolescence. But between 1900 and 1970, the average age for the onset of puberty dropped by about a year and a half, to 13 years old.

To say this change in age for the beginning of adolescence was purely physiological would be incomplete. As youth culture found anchoring and validation, younger kids (who were 12 and 13 at the time, sometimes even 14) aspired to be a part of what was ahead of them. Soon enough, these preteens were considered young teens, both physiologically and culturally.

Now, this may not be a surprise to you, but things have changed dramatically since 1970. I could write separate books about how the world has changed, how adolescence has changed, how education has

changed, and how physiology has changed over the last four decades. I'll keep it short, but let's start with the older end of adolescence.

Since the 1970s, the expected age of integration into adult life has continued to grow older. There are economic reasons for this,[5] cultural reasons for this,[6] and physiological and psychological reasons for this[7] (and probably other contributing factors). It's hard to nail down an exact age, as high school graduation provided us. Yet those who study adolescence commonly understand it as extending well into the late twenties now, on average.

But this book isn't about older teenagers. So let's focus on the beginning of adolescence.

The average age of puberty has continued to drop. These days, girls begin developing breast buds and pubic hair as early as 9.5 or 10 years old, and they often experience menarche (their first period) around age 11 or 12. For our purposes, it's fair to say that puberty now begins around age 11.[8]

I'll talk more about why this has happened in chapter 3. But for now, let's deal with this reality: Adolescence begins around 11 years old. And that's just physiologically. Culturally, young teens have become fully ensconced in youth culture at younger ages also, creating a calcifying edge to this new, younger definition of a teenager.

In fact, the lengthening of adolescence to a 15-years-plus journey has caused many to start talking about the adolescent experience in three phases: Young teen, mid-teen, and older teen (or emerging adulthood).[9] Add to this the "youthification" of preteens (often called "tweens" by the media these days), and it would be fair to say the adolescent journey is closer to 20 years long—a full fourth of life. Now that should reshape our thinking about parenting teenagers in general, and parenting young teens specifically.

A Rare Opportunity

When I talk to middle school youth workers, I frame the rare opportunity of middle school ministry in terms of the overlap of these two variables:

1. Research shows that most believers (the *vast* majority) begin their journey of faith *prior to* the age of 13 or 14.[10] This is certainly reflective of the reality that most decisions of faith are made during childhood. But there seems to be enough "childhood" left in young teens that they are still very spiritually open, and the likelihood of conversion drops off dramatically after the young teen years.
2. The two years following the onset of puberty (remember: Average age = 11) are a tumultuous period of change. One of the most dramatic of these changes is the onset of abstract thinking, which is essential to owning one's faith.

In other words—I tell youth workers—the young teen years are an unprecedented opportunity by the very nature of the overlap of childhood and young adulthood. Childlike openness, combined with (semi-)adult-like thinking ability; willingness combined with exploration.

But I'd like to shift that language a bit for you, as a parent. I think there's an even more significant overlap occurring during the young teen years, when it comes to parenting:

1. You are still the number one influence in the life of your son or daughter. Did you catch that? Read it again.
2. The two years following the onset of puberty (remember: Average age = 11) are a tumultuous period of change. One of the most dramatic of these changes is the onset of abstract thinking, which is essential to owning one's identity.

Let's unpack that a bit. First, that statement about your being the number one influence in the life of your son or daughter. It sure might not feel like that's true. All the real-life evidence in your home might cause you to think you've lost that influence. But don't be misled by the behavior of your teen. For years, I taught both youth workers and parents that, during the young teen years, the peer group begins to eclipse parents' influence. But that's just not the case—and research has born this out time and time again.[11]

There is no question that the peer group begins to play a more significant role in the life of your young teen; but you're still in the top spot, influence-wise. It's not until the later years of high school that peer influence starts to eclipse parent influence, with peer influence clearly taking the lead during emerging adulthood.

My two-word implication: *Have hope.* Okay, four more words: *Don't squander your influence.*

Now you likely noticed that the second of those two overlapping factors is the same in the parent mix as in the youth worker mix. But it's not quite the same. I changed out the last word, from "owning one's faith" to "owning one's identity." Here's why: The primary role of church youth workers is the faith formation of teens. But your parenting role, and your opportunity, is to influence the much broader and all-encompassing reality of identity (which includes faith, but is more than that).

How Should You Respond?

You might feel I overuse this term in this book, but I'll sum up my parenting advice to you with one word: *Engagement.* Counter to the many external indicators you might be experiencing, these are *not* the years for you to disengage or pull back. Just the opposite: These are years for you to lean in. In many ways, these years are your last shot. By the time your son or daughter is 16 or so, much of who he or she is—and will be in the future—is set in wet cement.

Think of parenting a young teen as your final, big, uphill push in the road-race of your God-given role. Not that it's all a downhill coast after the young teen years. But your influence will decline, your child will have more independence (and "own" more of his or her choices), and the bulk of your work will be finished.

But the final, big, uphill push on a road-race is the most difficult. You'll be weary at times. You'll be confused. You'll have your buttons pushed and your own weaknesses exposed. Add to this "encouraging" portrait the reality that there are no guarantees. I've seen disengaged parents whose children have stellar character and a passion for God; and I've seen wonderful engaged parents whose

children choose horrible paths in life, leading to pain and misery. But, on average, the older teenagers I see who are comfortable with who they are, confident in their beliefs, and ready to step into adulthood, are those whose parents, with humility and dependence on God, attempted to stay engaged and walk alongside their children.

My middle school son and I take Kung Fu lessons together. Our instructor is always harping on the need to have "martial spirit." When we feel like giving up, or slowing down, he reminds us of this, usually unpacking it while emphasizing the results we'll get if we push through, step it up, and work through the pain. I think you can see the connection here.

Okay. Let's move forward. Parenting a middle schooler is a beautiful gauntlet of complexity, and an amazing opportunity. Let's do this thing.

A FEW WORDS TO PARENTS

YOU'RE NOT ALONE!

Do you remember how alone you felt as a middle school student, when all those changes were going on in your body, mind, and soul? I remember wondering if I was the only one experiencing these weird sensations in my body, and these weird situations in life. I remember wondering if I was normal, if I was going to survive, and if I was ever going to come out of the mess I was living through.

Interestingly enough, I'm having those same feelings 30 years later as a parent of middle schoolers. Sometimes my kids drive me crazy. Sometimes I lose my patience (okay, more than sometimes on that one). Sometimes I wonder whether my kids are just going through a phase, or are they developing lifelong character flaws? Sometimes I question if I am doing a good job as a parent, or if I'll survive the teenage years of my kids.

Some of these troubling feelings and thoughts are way too similar to the struggles I had when I was 13. But what I have come to find, as I've talked to other parents of middle school students, is the same truth I discovered as an awkward 13-year-old: I am not alone! And neither are you!

You are not alone! Every parent of middle schoolers is feeling the same way you are. All (decent) parents of young teens question their ability to parent, their approach, their reactions, their discipline system, and their kids' responses. Everyone! You are not alone! None of us have this parenting thing figured out (and those who say they do are either lying or delusional). The journey of parenting is difficult, and it doesn't even get much easier with experience, because even if you think you've got it figured out with kid number one, you find kid number two is different. You have to start all over again.

What do you do? Be open and honest with someone. I've found in recent years that when you get parents of middle schoolers together in a room, if one parent is willing to say, "Hey, my kid seems to lie all the time—does anyone else deal with this?" the rest of the parents in the room quickly chime in with, "Oh, yeah, I thought we

were the only ones who struggled with that! What are you doing to help your child with this?" When you get parents talking with one another about parenting middle schoolers, great encouragement flows freely, and most people leave the conversation recharged to continue the joys (and frustrations) of raising a teenager to be a godly young man or woman.

As a fellow parent, I want to strongly encourage you to seek places where you can be honest about the challenges you face in parenting, and find others who are willing to do the same. Ask your youth pastor if he or she will facilitate some forums on parenting where parents can talk and share with one another. And be encouraged–you are NOT alone; you may just be the only one willing to admit you're not perfect.

–Alan Mercer is the pastor of middle school ministries at Christ Community Church in Leawood, Kansas.