

When Your Teen Rejects Your Values - A Christian Response

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Rick Rood looks at a typical teenage rebellion and offers a plan based on a biblical worldview and Christian values to help lead them through rebellion to a strong Christian walk. By reacting from a truly Christian perspective and following a biblical plan of action, our chances of successfully making it through to adulthood are greatly increased.

The Fact of Teenage Rebellion

Mark Twain once advised parents that when their child turns 13 they should put them in a barrel, close the lid, and feed them through a hole in the side. When they turn 16, Twain suggested parents close the hole! Twain was a humorist, and we laugh about his counsel. But beneath the laughter is the recognition that the teenage years are seldom easy...for the teen or their parents! And it's particularly challenging when we find that our teen is rejecting our values.

Admittedly, in tackling this issue we are taking on a real lion! If there is anything more humbling than being the parent of a rebelling teenager, it's attempting to pass on advice to others who are struggling with this same situation. But our prayer is that this pamphlet will offer some help and encouragement to parents of a challenging teen.

"Adolescence" is the label we attach to the time of life from the onset of puberty to maturity. It denotes the stage of life during which a young person moves from childhood to adulthood, from dependence upon parents to independence. It's a time of great change not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, spiritually and socially. It's a time when teens are asking questions like "Who am I?," "What do I believe?," "How do I fit into life in this world?"...when they're searching for their

identity as individuals.

Adolescence is also a time when some degree of strain develops between teens and their parents. No longer do parents appear to be infallible and beyond contradiction. Our flaws are much more visible...and probably exaggerated by our teen. It's a time when the values of their peers generally appear much more attractive than their parents', and when acceptance by their friends will likely become much more important than that of their parents.

It is not uncommon in their quest for identity and independence for teens to reject some of the values of their parents, their church, and society. And to a degree this is not unhealthy. Young people need to develop their own convictions about life. And part of the process may involve challenging the values and convictions they have been taught. Some may challenge them more overtly, and others more covertly. Some may challenge them in relatively minor areas such as dress, appearance, music, or the way they keep their room. Others may show total disregard for the moral and spiritual values of their family, their church, and even society. Parents who allow for no individuality in some of the more "minor" areas (such as dress and appearance), may be challenging their teen to test them in the areas that are of much greater consequence.

Several years back, a group that included Dr. James Dobson conducted a survey of some 35,000 parents. The survey concluded that while 25% of teens are of "average" temperament, 40% were considered to be more on the "compliant" side, and 35% on the "strong-willed" side. (More boys than girls fell in this latter category.) Among the strong-willed teens, 74% were found to be in some degree of rebellion during their teenage years, 26% of them to a severe degree. Furthermore, it was surprisingly found that the strong-willed were most susceptible to the influence of their peers! It was no surprise to find that 72% of parents of strong-willed teens characterized their relationship as "difficult" or "very stressful"! (*Parenting Isn't for Cowards*, by Dr. James Dobson, chaps. 3 & 4).

If you identify with this group of parents, you are definitely not alone! And perhaps this realization is an important first step in responding to a teen who rejects our values!

The Sources of Teenage Rebellion

Many a parent has wondered if the teen living in their home is really the same child that they played with and enjoyed just a few years before! And it is only natural for them to ask “Why?” “Why is this happening? And why is this happening to us?” Most parents are probably also asking themselves, “Where did we go wrong? What could we have done to prevent this from happening?” These questions are not only painful to ask, but are equally difficult to answer. And it’s important not to jump to simplistic conclusions in trying to do so.

It is very likely that there is more than one reason why our teen is rejecting our values. And there really are many possible reasons. One that we noted yesterday is that it is simply the nature of adolescents to search for their own identity and independence. We also noted the role that innate temperament plays in teenage rebellion. A survey conducted by a group including Dr. James Dobson concluded that nearly 3/4 of children born with a strong-willed temperament exhibited some degree of rebellion during their teen years. There are, however, a number of other possible reasons why our teen is rejecting our values. It’s important to look beyond their behavior to the reasons behind it.

First, it’s possible that there are physiological factors involved. Young people who have learning disabilities, or attention deficit/hyperactive disorder are going to be much more inclined to rebel, in part over the frustration they are experiencing in meeting the expectations of their parents, teachers and other authority figures. Any physical illness, or even imbalanced or insufficient diet can affect a teen’s emotional and behavioral pattern. Even apart from such irregularities, the changes that are taking place in an adolescent’s hormonal system are apt to result in more volatile emotions.

Second, it is possible that there are difficulties of a psychological nature, or even disorders of a more serious nature involved. In this latter category would fall young people who are manic-depressive or schizophrenic. It is important to realize that many of these disorders have genetic and biological sources, requiring the attention of a medical professional. It is more likely, however, that a teen may be struggling with low self-esteem or depression...and may be engaging in conduct that is aimed at obtaining the acceptance of his peers, or at gaining the attention of his parents or other authority figures (even if it's negative in nature!).

Third, it is not uncommon for a young person to express his anger (and even guilt) over the tensions that may exist within the family at large or between his parents by acting in a rebellious fashion.

Traumatic experiences such as a death in the family, prolonged illness, or serious financial problems can be a source of rebellion. They may even result in a teen's questioning the existence or the goodness of God, and in rejecting of God's moral principles.

We must not fail to mention the negative influence of peers, and of the values portrayed and endorsed in today's movies, television, and by the lyrics of much of the music that young people listen to. All of these media are communicating a message that more often than not challenges the right of anyone (including parents) to limit their freedom or stifle their individuality.

Finally, it is not impossible that our own example as parents, or our parenting style has contributed to their rebellion to a greater or lesser degree. We will return to this issue later in the week, and tomorrow we will begin to look at the question of whether parents are always at fault when their teens reject their values.

A Parent's Reaction to His Teen's Rebellion

In the previous two programs we have briefly examined some basic facts about the nature of teenage rebellion and some of its possible sources. We noted that there are many possible reasons why a teen might choose to reject his parents' values. It is not uncommon, however, for those of us who are Christian parents to feel that we bear the greater (if not exclusive) share of responsibility. After all, have we not been taught that if we train our children "in the way they should go, when they are old they will not depart from it"? (Prov. 22:6). If they do depart from the way they should go, certainly it is our fault for not training them properly!

At the outset, we must affirm that parents are responsible before God to provide the training and instruction that will guide them in His way (Eph. 6:4b). The scriptures also warn us that it is possible for us to "provoke our children to anger" (Eph. 6:4a) and to "exasperate them so that they become discouraged" (Col. 3:21). When our teen is rebelling, it's appropriate for us to evaluate the impact that our own parenting style has had in our child's life.

We must just as emphatically, however, reject the notion that teenage rebellion is invariably the consequence of parental mismanagement. To believe that it is, is to accept the premise that all human behavior is caused by external influences. Behavior may be influenced (even very strongly) by genetic and environmental factors, but to say that there is no such thing as human will and choice is to deny a fundamental element of biblical teaching. In the final analysis, a young person's rejection of godly values is a personal choice.

Many Christians, however, find themselves adopting an essentially behavioristic and deterministic philosophy in their acceptance of a common interpretation of the verse we alluded to a few moments ago, Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Many a parent has concluded from this proverb that if his teen does "depart from the way

he should go," it is because he has failed to provide the training he needed. But that this proverb (as many proverbs) should be taken as general observation about life, rather than as an absolute divine promise, can be deduced from two facts. First, if we do take this proverb as an absolute promise, then other proverbs in the book must be also. Yet there are a number of proverbs for which exceptions can be found on a regular basis. For example, Proverbs 10:27 says that "The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened." This is a general truth. But there are innumerable examples of the wicked who have lived long on the earth, and of the godly whose lives have been cut short. A second reason is that to take it as an absolute promise would contradict the teaching of many other proverbs that it is possible for a young person to reject the training his parents provide. Proverbs 15:5 says, "A fool rejects his father's discipline." The writer of Proverbs also appeals to sons to "receive" and "be attentive" to their parents' instruction (2:1-2), and warns against "neglecting" and "abandoning" their teaching (4:1-2). (Cf. also Deut. 21:18-21)

We must conclude, then, that when our teen rejects our values, we must prayerfully discern to what degree both we and they are responsible for what is happening, as well as what other influences are at work. In some cases, the parents may bear a great deal of responsibility; in others they may bear very little. The important thing, however, is not so much "who is to blame," but what ought we to do from this point on in our relationship with our teen.

A Plan for Parents

We have looked at the nature of teenage rebellion. We've also addressed the question of whether it is always the parents' fault when their teen rejects their values. But today, we want to focus on how we should respond as parents of a challenging teen.

Our first response must be to look beyond the rebellious behavior to the sources that lie behind it. If we suspect there are factors of a physiological nature, we

must not neglect to enlist the help of a qualified physician. Nor should we reject the aid of a godly counselor in addressing issues of depression or self image that may lie hidden in our teen's heart. But neither should we neglect to look to the Scriptures as our ultimate source of wisdom.

As we do, it will be tempting to look initially for ways in which we can promote change in our teenager's behavior. But the one factor in our child's life over which we have the most influence is our own character and approach to parenting. And this is where we must begin—by reflecting on the model which God himself provides in his character and in his relationship with us as his children. In God as our Father we find that perfect balance of judgment and grace, of discipline and love, compassion and firmness. This is a standard from which all of us fall short, the one to which we will never fully attain in this life; but the one by which we must measure our lives, and toward which we must continually strive! Larry Crabb has said, "The key to becoming a more effective parent is to become an increasingly godly person." (*Parenting Adolescents* by Kevin Huggins, p. 258) Wise is the parent who makes this his primary goal!

Wise too is the parent who resists the impulse to project a perfect image to his teen, but who echoes the prayer of David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart...see if there be any hurtful way in me; and guide me in the everlasting way" (Ps. 139:23-24). Wise is the parent who is willing to offer a sincere apology to his child, and to seek forgiveness for ways he has genuinely fallen short as a parent. But wise also is the parent who refuses to brood over past failures, but who having learned from his mistakes sets out in a new direction! (Phil. 3:13-14). And wise is the parent, as well, who guards against trying to "atone" for past mistakes by becoming overly kind or permissive.

As we seek to allow God to shape our lives after his own model as the divine parent, we will do well to keep two primary qualities in view. The first is an unconditional love for our child. This is the kind of love God manifests toward us. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners

(while we were his enemies!), Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). This is the kind of love He seeks to instill in us for our teenager, regardless of how much anger or contempt he or she has shown toward us—a love that asks not how they can meet our needs, but how God can use us to minister to their genuine needs.

But the second quality is an uncompromising commitment to help our teenager grow toward responsible maturity. “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines;...but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness” (Heb. 12:6,10). As God guides us in the path of righteousness, and establishes clear expectations for our lives, so must we for our teen. As God disciplines for rebellion through appropriate consequences, so also must we.

Above, we proposed that there are two primary qualities God seeks to instill in those of us who are parents of a teen who is rejecting our values: an unconditional love and an uncompromising commitment to guide them toward responsible maturity. But how do these qualities take shape in our day to day lives?

How do we show this kind of love toward our teenager? First, we love them when we praise and reward them for the good that we do see in their lives, as God does with us. We love them when we show respect for their feelings and opinions, though not always agreeing with them. We love them when we show interest in and participate with them in activities that are meaningful to them, and refrain from squeezing them into a mold for they were not designed. We love them when we restrain our anger from erupting in violent acts and hurtful words, when we relate as a “fellow struggler,” when we don’t try to be better than they are at everything, when we handle our own sin in the same way we expect them to, when we listen to their explanations before disciplining them, when we keep alive a sense of hope and excitement about discovering God’s purpose for their life!

But the love toward which we strive is also one that guides and disciplines (Prov.13:24). states that “he who loves (his son) disciplines him diligently.”

Researchers have found that teens are less likely to rebel who grow up in homes that are neither too permissive nor overly authoritarian, where parents gradually allow them more participation in decisions and relinquish more responsibility, while maintaining final authority (*Teen Shaping*, by Len Kageler, chaps. 3 & 12).

What are a few marks of a parent who has this kind of commitment? First, he provides instruction in the ways of the Lord. One teenager who refused to accompany his family to church, was willing to read a chapter of scripture with his father several times a week. By his senior year, they had read through the entire New Testament together! Second, he communicates clear expectations regarding personal conduct (even if parents of his child's friends do not): expectations concerning the use of language in the home, honesty about whereabouts and activities, household chores, attendance at school, curfew, use of the car, payment for gas, insurance and traffic tickets, drinking, and sexual conduct. Finally, such a parent will enforce meaningful consequences for wilful rebellion. There are some things we are obliged to provide for our child no matter what: a place to live (though it need not be our own home in all situations), food, clothing, and personal respect. But many things that young people take for granted today are privileges that can and must be suspended as a result of irresponsible behavior: use of the phone or TV, tuition for school, use of our car, or even a driver's license. Teenagers who engage in activities that are not only irresponsible but illegal, should have every expectation that their parents will notify the authorities. We do our children no favor when we shield them from the painful consequences of foolish choices. Some teens will become skilled at manipulating their parents through guilt or intimidation. But we must resolve to render such tactics ineffective by refusing to let them work.

God does not hold us responsible for all of our teenager's actions. But He does hold us accountable for the way in which we relate to them as parents—with unconditional love, but uncompromising commitment to responsible maturity.

Yet, even when we do, God provides no guarantee that they will always (or even

ever) respond positively. But He does ask that we persist in doing what is right . . . praying for them, gradually relinquishing them to Him who knows them far better than we . . . remembering his exhortation that we “not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary” (Gal. 6:9).

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Addendum from the author, after his teenagers finished growing up:

It was over twelve years ago that I wrote the article you have just read. Since then, I’ve had a lot of time to reflect on the matter of parenting. If there is one thing I would add to the article, it is the statement in Psalm 127:1, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.”

I’m more convinced than ever that though I believe God’s word does give us guidance concerning what we as parents should and should not do in relating to our children, being a parent is much more than simply “doing all the right things.” It is at root a matter of trusting God to work in our children’s lives in his own way and time . . . to accomplish in their lives what only He can. And of course, to trust that He will do the same in our own hearts and lives as well. Sometimes His ways are far beyond our understanding. I have met some who came from very difficult homes, who nonetheless have turned out to be wonderful people. On the other hand, I have met others who grew up in wonderful families, who nonetheless have chosen to walk a very painful path in life. All of this should cause us to make prayer our first priority as parents. There is no greater responsibility or privilege we have as parents than to pray for the children the Lord has entrusted to us. May we never cease to do so.

Resources on Parenting Teenagers

Emotionally Healthy Teenagers, by Jay Kesler (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998)

Bound by Honor, by Gary and Greg Smalley (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998)

Parenting Today's Adolescent, by Dennis and Barbara Rainey (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998)

How to Really Love Your Teenager, by Ross Campbell (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983)

Parenting Adolescents, by Kevin Huggins (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992)

Teen-Shaping: Solving the Discipline Dilemma—What Works, What Doesn't, by Len Kageler (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1990)

Parents & Teenagers, ed. by Jay Kesler (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984)

Parents in Pain, by John White (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1979)

Parenting Isn't for Cowards, by Dr. James Dobson (Waco: Word Books, 1987)

The Wounded Parent, by Guy Greenfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991)