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### Parenting adolescents in today's world

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# Parenting Adolescents in Today's World

ALINA BALTAZAR

## Introduction

Adolescence can be a scary time for many parents. This is the when children become more independent and parents aren't always able to keep an eye on them. This is also the time when parents reap the benefits of the discipline that was taught through childhood. Everything learned up to this point finally starts coming together. Try to see this as a time of opportunity. By the time children reach adolescence, they are well on their way to becoming the person they are going to be. It is in the teenage years that they begin to experiment with different ways

of expressing themselves which helps with the development of their identity. Though it appears you are no longer needed, this is the time you are needed most, but just in different ways.

- The first goal of this presentation is to help you better understand where your teen is coming from and the unique challenges that he/she faces.
- The second goal is to share biblical wisdom from multiple sources that can better equip you for the challenges you will face as a parent of a teen.

51

## APPLICATION EXERCISE

What fears do you have about parenting teenagers? Discuss as a group or with a partner.

This table gives a summary of the development that happens during the teen years (Popkins, 2009).

<b>Pre-Teens (about 8-11 years old)</b>	<b>Young Teens (about 12-14 years old)</b>	<b>Older Teens (15-18 years old)</b>
Puberty begins (girls 8-13; boys 9-15)	Mood swings	Physical and sexual development is complete
Growing sense of independence and self-sufficiency	Identity exploration begins	Develop ability to think more abstractly
Develop close same-sex friendships	Start worrying what others think of him/her	More aware of how the world should be compared to what it is now
Develop more concrete logic skills	Can think more critically, but still thinks he/she is invincible	Able to identify with other people's situations

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## 1. Adolescent Development

Though people often talk about teens' "raging hormones" and their effect on adolescent behavior, research does not support these views (Shirtcliff, 2009). This is due to the slow gradual nature of hormonal changes. Hormones can however exaggerate an individual's tendency to act in certain ways. A child who is easily angered and acts out with physical aggression may act out in more extreme ways when puberty starts and actually do damage to property or harm an individual.

In addition to the hormonal changes, the brain continues to grow and change (Popkin, 2009). The development happens in order:

1. Begins with the part of the brain that controls physical coordination and sensory processing.
2. Next the part that manages motivation.
3. The seat of emotions.
4. The last part (which isn't complete until the mid-twenties) is the executive functioning part of the brain that manages:
  - Decision making
  - Empathy
  - Being aware of consequences
  - Regulating emotions
  - Self-awareness
  - Morality

Having this knowledge can help explain some of the stupid things you did as a teen and what you have observed about your own children. This is why guidance and supervision are so important.

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### EXERCISE

What are the implications for parents regarding adolescent development, especially as it relates to brain development?

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## 2. Know Thyself

Many parents approach the teen years with fear and trepidation. They may think back to the fights they had with their parents or the mistakes that they made. Parents ready themselves to battle their teens in order to keep them from the many temptations they will face and protect them. In actuality, what is happening is a spiritual battle, a battle for the heart (Tripp, 2001). Satan wants a child's heart and he will use all of his powers of persuasion to pull your teen away from God.

Teens and adults all have faced temptations. There are temptations to which you are more susceptible than others. Though you may think your teen isn't watching you, he/she is watching more than you know. Research has found that parents are the biggest influence on a teen's development. Part of that influence is role modeling. A parent's struggles may become their teen's struggles. It is good to be open about our challenges and the negative consequences that we have experienced. We should also talk about and show the ways in which we cope with temptation so our teens can learn from us. This is a good time to address bad habits or addictions. If we are unable to address these between us and God, there are plenty of resources available to help. These resources are listed later.

It helps to be aware of our parenting style. Baumrind identified three basic parenting styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative (1967).

### Authoritarian Style: The Dictator

This is the old school way of parenting where father knows best and children should be seen and not heard. The parent is the one in charge with teens kept in line by threat of punishment. Teens are told what to do and how to do it. Many of us were raised this way and may have followed this parenting style when our child was young. When a child raised in this environment reaches the teen years, unfortunately it can also lead

to rebellion. In the U.S. today the focus is more on equality than hierarchy so your teen is going to increasingly expect to be treated with respect (Popkin, 2009). Teens resist the restrictions put on them and they start to challenge what they have been told. In addition, teens raised with this parenting style often struggle to know what to do when faced with challenges, especially when parents are not around to tell them what to do.

There are cultural variations in how children respond to this type of parenting style. In cultures where this style is the norm, parents and older adults are treated with high regard, and the culture is more oriented towards the community and less towards the individual. Children in these cultures tend to have less negative reactions than teens who live in the U.S. or those who have a European background. It bears noting, however, that excessively harsh and abusive parenting is harmful to all children regardless of culture.

### **Permissive Style: The Doormat**

This parenting style is the opposite of the authoritarian style. With this style teens are allowed to do their own thing and have the freedom they so often desire. Few restrictions if any are put on the adolescent. Teens typically don't have a curfew and no responsibilities are expected to be fulfilled.

Parents don't typically plan to be a doormat to their child. Parents who develop this style of parenting often do it as a reaction to being raised in a harsh environment where the parent wants to be different than his/her abusive parent(s). Another scenario that characterizes this parenting style is seen when busy or overwhelmed parent has to deal with a child who has a strong and defiant personality. It is easier for the parent to default to a permissive style. Though the permissive style of parenting seems easier initially, it leads to unintended and sometimes very serious consequences.

Children and teens raised with the permissive style have higher rates of behavioral problems. They are more likely to be involved in risky behaviors, such as sexual activity, drug use, and criminal behavior. Since restrictions have not been put on them at home, they do what they feel like. These teens have a hard time being aware of the potential dangers and overestimate their ability to handle problems that may result. Teens raised in the permissive household can also be more anxious because they haven't learned how to manage their own behavior and desires. Teens need limits set by a more knowledgeable adult who cares about them.

### **Authoritative Style: The Active Parent**

This parenting style is the middle ground between the authoritarian and permissive styles of parenting. The active parent gives the freedom teens so often desire, but within limits. The parent is the leader of the household, but the teen is entitled to respectfully express thoughts and feelings to his/her parents. The Active Parenting method of parenting acknowledges the importance of equality in the household where everybody is treated with respect (Popkin, 2009). Think of the parent as "benevolent dictator." The parent is still in charge, but he or she will listen to requests for reasonable adaptations and accommodations.

Research has found this parenting style to be the best for child development. There is typically a closer bond between parent and child than the authoritarian style, but the teen can feel secure knowing the parent is in charge and watching out for him/her. Children and teens raised in this environment know they are being guided and monitored so they are less likely to get involved in risky behavior because they are aware of the consequences when rules are broken. They are more likely to follow your rules even when you are not around because the reasons for the rules are known.

The downside to this parenting style is that parents are not the ultimate authority. Teens will argue and may not take no for an answer right away. It can be hard for to see teens being distressed with the punishments he/she receives because of the parents close relationship with them, but the parents know that it is for the best. It is not too late to switch to this style of parenting if you are a permissive parent. Teens who have been raised in the permissive environment will initially resist this parenting style, but once he/she realizes that their parents are doing this out of love, they typically buy into it.

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### EXERCISE

What parenting style do you tend to follow? What are the pros and cons you have noticed about your parenting style?

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### 3. Unique Challenges

We live in a sinful world. All have experienced the horrible results of sin. The teen years are not exempt from that fact. Satan is a liar and tempter and will take advantage of your teen's natural inclination to want more freedom, strong desire for pleasure, and their limited awareness of the consequences. Some of the challenges teens face are not new, but others are new or have intensified in recent years.

#### *Alcohol and drug use*

Alcohol is the most commonly used legal substance. Though legal and potentially very harmful to adults, it does even more damage to teens. Teens who become addicted to alcohol become emotionally and often cognitively stuck at that age. They basically don't grow up and continue to make the mistakes teens make without awareness of consequences throughout adulthood. It is also much harder to maintain sobriety. Even if not addicted, when alcohol is abused it increases the chance teens will participate in even riskier behavior than they do when sober. This is particularly problematic during the college years where college students are more likely

to abuse alcohol than non-college attending peers. Though Adventist college students have much lower rates of getting drunk, there are still some who feel alcohol use is just part of the normal college experience.

Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal substance in the U.S. and the world. With more states in the U.S. and countries around the world legalizing marijuana there will be more marijuana available for teens to find and try. Since it is legal in many places, especially medical marijuana, it is seen as being less harmful. Though technically less harmful than alcohol, it is not without risk.

Teens are particularly vulnerable to the side effects of regular marijuana use. They are more likely to experience a cognitive decline that can be permanent especially when used regularly at a younger age. Marijuana is also known to be associated with increasing depression and anxiety and school drop-out rates. It is linked to triggering schizophrenia in those with a genetic tendency towards the disease.

One positive trend regarding teen substance use is the decreasing use of cigarettes, but that substance has increasingly been replaced with e-cigarettes or vaping. This is seen as less harmful and more socially acceptable than cigarette smoking due to the more pleasant aroma. Though it doesn't have the cancer-causing chemicals that cigarettes contain, they still have chemicals with unknown consequences. Since they contain nicotine, they are still addictive.

The opioid epidemic, though scary and increasing over the last few decades, classic heroin addiction is relatively rare in teens. That doesn't mean your teen won't be affected. Opioid addiction typically begins with pain medicines being prescribed for an actual injury or medical problem. Once that prescription runs out, some don't want to go without the benefits received from the pain medicine. Though teens aren't known to suffer from chronic pain, they do experience sports injuries or have wisdom teeth removed that

require pain medications to be prescribed. It is important to monitor and limit the use of these powerful painkillers as much as possible.

Teens are also known to abuse other prescription drugs, especially medication that treats anxiety or depression. It is recommended that you keep an eye on your medicine cabinet for any unusual change in the amount of pain or psychiatric medicines you may have. You should safely discard of any old pain or psychiatric prescription bottles you have at home in order to better protect your teen from this life-altering and potentially deadly addiction. Your local drug store can give you guidance. If necessary, you may even need to lock up the medications you have that could be abused by a teen or his/her friends. If you are concerned your teen may be abusing drugs or suffering from addiction, there is help. See the resources listed later.

### *Technology and entertainment*

In today's modern world we often think of technology as a blessing and a curse. This is true for your teen as well. Your teen is able to access information and resources that help with academics in ways we never had when we were teens. It is also easier for parents to stay in touch and monitor teens' behavior.

The growth of technology has also provided more entertainment opportunities using various devices. You probably grew up with at least one television in your house that your parents complained was rotting your brain when you watched it too much. Parents back then were told to limit television usage to less than two hours per day. That advice is still true today, but it is harder to monitor all the different devices available for our teens to be entertained. Pornography is especially dangerous due to its easy accessibility, addictive quality, ability to damage sexuality, and put teens at risk of being victimized. There are systems that can be purchased that will help you monitor and restrict your teen's access to dangerous websites and entertainment options. Today's teens do have lower rates of engaging in risky behavior, probably due to increased use and easy access to a variety of

enjoyable entertainment options (Twenge, 2017). The downside is its addictive and socially debilitating qualities.

Social media is a wonderful way to stay in touch with friends and make new friends from every part of the globe. The downside is the more time spent on social media, the higher chance your teen will experience depression and anxiety. In fact, your teen's generation, called Generation Z or iGen, experiences more anxiety and depression than previous generations (Twenge, 2017).

This generation is growing up with easy access to Smart phones so they spend more time in front of a screen and less time in face to face interactions, but humans still have the same human contact requirements as always. This isolation can lead to depression and anxiety and makes teens more vulnerable to bullying that happens in-person and on-line. You can't get away from the bully by leaving the school; the bully can follow you 24/7 on-line. Not only is this generation more isolated, but this isolation leads to gaining less real-world life experience, which is required to be successful in adulthood. Our kids are not the only ones spending more time in front of the screen, parents are increasingly sucked into its addicting qualities as well. Parents aren't engaging with kids and giving them the undivided attention they often crave. Our teens need more face to face interactions with their peers, parents, and other caring adults, but there are other activities that absorb our attention.

Gaming is a favorite activity for many teens. There is a good chance you have had many arguments with your teen on the dangers of computer/video games. Generally, the biggest concern is the link between violent video games and increased aggression in children and adolescence, depending on the type of game and the amount of time spent. Recent research has found that teens who play meant for mature audiences that glorify risk-taking with anti-social heroes have higher rates of reckless driving, substance use, delinquency, and risky sex (Hull, Brunelle, Prescott, &

Sargent, 2014). Generally, the more violent the game and the more time spent playing it, the more problems a teen might experience. Also, with more time spent gaming comes the risk of becoming addicted. This then leads to increased chance of academic failure and mental and physical health issues because the game becomes more important than anything else. Generally it is best to limit gaming time and not to allow playing the more violent games. Ideally, all forms of screen entertainment should be limited to no more than two hours per day, even if it is educational. Teens benefit most from face to face interactions, real life experiences, and time in nature.

### ***Sexual Issues***

Our teens' reproductive organs are typically mature by early adolescence, but young people are getting married at later years. In the US the average age of first marriage for women is almost 28 and men it is almost 30 (US Census, 2018). That doesn't mean young adults are waiting until that time to experience sexual intimacy. The average age of first sexual intercourse is 18 years old in the US, with 16 years old being the legal age of consent in most states. Teens in the U.S. have higher rates of pregnancy than any other industrialized nation because of lower rates using birth control, though pregnancy rates have been steadily declining. Sexually transmitted diseases are also common during adolescence.

Though Christian teens are less likely to participate in risky sexual behaviors, that doesn't mean your teen isn't at risk. Sex is a difficult subject for many parents to talk to their teens about, but this is a must. The discussion should actually start in childhood when children are naturally curious where babies come from. As children get older the subject becomes more taboo, especially in Christian households. Just because you don't talk about it, doesn't mean your teen is not interested. They are just finding out about it from other sources, which you may not like. Your teen needs to know your values and

how you coped with sexual urges when you were young. A close father-daughter bond and open communication about sex has been found to delay sexual activity among girls. Another thing you can do is to get your teen involved in extra-curricular activities. They have been found to delay sexual activities, as long as the activities are properly monitored by responsible adults.

Recently we have seen a trend in the widespread acceptance of different sexual and gender identities. This has been helping to address the high rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among these minority populations, but has led to some increasing identify confusion for many adolescents. There are higher rates of teens identifying as bisexual or not having a gender identity. It is during the teen years where teens explore different identities and modern times are allowing for a larger variety of identities for experimentation. The worst thing you can do is to reject your child if they choose a gender outside of their biological gender. It won't change the behavior and it leads to resentment and emotional pain. Do your best to be patient and understanding and show unconditional love, but also share your concerns with his/her chosen identity. This should be done with love and not out of anger or embarrassment.

### ***Peer relationships***

Peer relationships become increasingly important as children age, especially as our teens start to be less dependent on their parents. This is a healthy sign of maturity. The scary part is not always knowing who your teen is spending time with and what he/she is doing. It helps to guide your children to peers who will be a positive influence, but if you push your teen too hard away from some peers and towards others, he/she may resent you and engage those relationships behind your back. This can be a trying time, but don't give up. Take advantage of sharing observations regarding your concerns in subtle and less direct ways. You have more influence than you realize.

### ***Mental health challenges***

As mentioned earlier, this generation has higher rates of anxiety and depression. In addition, suicide rates have been steadily increasing every year for the past 10 years among teens. Social isolation, substance use, and social media saturation are partly to blame. Family conflict can be especially problematic during the teen years, especially between the teen and his or her parents and between the parents themselves. Teens need to know their parents will be there for them when they need them. Your love for your child should be demonstrated and communicated clearly. If he/she feels rejected by a parent, it can be devastating.

Another issue teens face is trauma. Teens who experienced abuse at younger ages or for the first time during the teen years may also struggle emotionally. If you notice your teen withdrawing and exhibiting strange behavior, don't be afraid to get professional help. (See resource list below)

### ***Academics***

Academics have become increasingly problematic for many teens. There is now more pressure than ever to succeed academically due to more competition to get into good colleges in order to land high-paying, secure jobs. Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities make it difficult to succeed the farther one gets in education. Teens can learn to adapt, but what used to work in elementary school may not work in high school. More teens are going straight to college after high school, but a large percentage drop out after the first year for multiple reasons. Teens worry about being unsure of what they want to do with the degree, and most have great concerns over student loan debt. Do what you can to be supportive and find the resources your teen may need to succeed academically.

### **EXERCISE**

What challenges have you noticed your teen face (don't give details)? Share

with the group what you have found that helps your teen cope with his/her challenges.

## **4. Parental Role in Guiding Teens**

The relationship between parents and children changes in the teen years. As mentioned earlier, they begin to pull away and identify more with peers. For parents who had a closer relationship with their younger children this can be an upsetting time. At some point during your child's adolescence he/she may say terrible things to you, but this is all part of the detachment process. Don't be discouraged, the bond you formed when your child was young is still important even now. Showing unconditional love is vital to his/her development.

Though teens are often busy pursuing their own interests and you may start getting busier in your career, parents should have regular communication with them. Teens spend more time with family than with peers so you have many opportunities to share your wisdom, you just need to be strategic. There may be some topics that can be difficult for teens to talk about, you may just have to wait until the right time. Remember hating parental lectures when you were young. It works best to dole out guidance in short spurts, with a healthy dose of listening included. Teens are more likely to open up to parents when they feel heard and supported when they talk. Take advantage of those times to clearly communicate your values regarding the challenges your teen is facing.

Teens are increasingly living with just one parent or in a shared custody situation. This can be a challenging time for teens feeling torn between loyalty to one parent over the other. Estranged parents might fight over rules and values they want taught to their teen. This can be a struggle for teens who are already wrestling with the issues mentioned earlier. Do what you can to find a middle ground with your child's other parent and be civil to one another. If there isn't another



parent, particularly a same-gender parent to your child, encourage a connection between your teen and a same-gender mentor. That mentor can give unique guidance to your son or daughter on how to become a man or a woman. Take advantage of mentoring programs at your local church or with Big Brothers Big Sisters program in your area.

Though teens desire and benefit from increasing freedom as they age, they still require monitoring. Research studies have shown that teens fare better when they know that their parents are monitoring their behavior, especially risky behaviors. While a parent may not catch him/her doing everything, chances are they will be aware when there is potential danger. Parents walk a fine line of being too nosy or being too hands off. Teens are trying to figure things out for themselves so they require space in order to do that. This will take some trial and error and may differ from child to child, but parents should remain engaged with their teens.

58

### *Spiritual Development*

Spiritual development in the adolescent years seems to be like a roller coaster that mostly goes down, but it can be an incredible time of growth and spiritual development that makes parents proud. Modeling a healthy spiritual life, taking your teen to church, and encouraging involvement in youth programs are things you can do to help your teen's spiritual growth. The adolescent years can be a time of questioning and curiosity that scares some parents into thinking their child won't be prepared for the Second Coming of Christ. Have patience and realize this is a normal part of spiritual development. Baptism is more like a birth certificate than a graduation diploma. It is just the beginning of your child's spiritual walk that develops over a lifetime.

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### EXERCISE

What role do you see yourself playing in your role as a parent in guiding your child through adolescence? What have you found to be the most helpful, share with the group.

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In summary, here are some dos and don'ts of parenting teens in today's world.

1. **Don't control.** As much as you may not like your teen's choice in music or dress, this is not the time to force them to comply with all of your expectations. Establish rules and expectations for your teenager, but if you are too strict and bent on controlling every situation and decision, they will probably just do it behind your back without your guidance.
2. **Don't discourage.** Colossians 3:21 states, "Fathers [parents], do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (NKJV). Paul gave specific instructions on how family members should treat each another. Don't constantly express disapproval of your teen's choices or frequently lecture them on what they should or should not be doing. They will make mistakes. This is the best way for them to learn and prepare for life. Be there when they fall in order to provide encouragement and guidance.
3. **Do give them some freedom, but continue to monitor.** It is in the adolescent years when parents increasingly leave teens alone at home or in public places. This freedom is important to develop the independent thinking skills they will need as adults. However, parents still need to monitor adolescent behaviors, because teens can be impulsive and not likely to think through how severe the consequences may be to risk-taking behaviors. Parents of teens walk a fine line of allowing a certain amount of freedom while keeping an eye out for potential danger.
4. **Do be there for them.** Though your teen wants you to "back off," he/she does want you there when you're needed. Your teen wants someone he/she can turn to for guidance when difficult times come or when they get in trouble. This is not the time to lecture, this is the time to listen. Being a teen today is different than when you were a teen. They are facing pressures

you never had to deal with. Listening is the best way to understand and show you care.

5. **Do pray!** You can't always be there, but you know the Lord is watching out for them. It may seem like your teen is pulling away from God, but the foundation you laid when they were children will always be there. When you become discouraged with your teen, remember as long as there is life, there is hope. Never give up on your child no matter how far he or she may seem.

To find professional help in your area, within the U.S., if you have substance abuse and/or mental health concerns go to this website <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

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