

Reaching the Hearts of Our Teens

Irritable. Disrespectful. Angry. Restless. All of these adjectives and more are often used to describe teenagers. Sometimes these descriptions are accurate. Interestingly, I often find that the behaviors teens exhibit are not intended to annoy the adults in their lives, even though it may appear that way. Instead, these behaviors are reactions to a stage of life that feels very uncomfortable to them. Teens are trapped in bodies that sense they should be moving on to bigger and better things yet circumstances such as age, need for further education, inexperience, lack of self-awareness and confidence may hold them back. This can lead to confusion and anxiety which they do not know how to handle. As their frustrations build, the consequences spill out onto everyone around them, especially their parents.

How can parents help their struggling teens? Paul David Tripp's book "Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens", provides great wisdom concerning interactions between parents and their teenagers. Tripp not only reminds readers of teens' perspective on their daily struggles, he instructs us on how to relate to them. "Strategies for Developing a Wise Heart" is my favorite section. In it, Tripp encourages parents to do the following:

1. See those annoying moments with your teen not as sources of frustration or conflict, but as opportunities to correct and guide. Be thankful when you catch your adolescent in some unacceptable behavior; if you catch him, you can help him.
2. Teach her to make wise decisions instead of making all of her decisions for her. This means extending trust even when you are afraid. Will she mess up at times and make wrong choices? Yes. But you will both be able to use the new information gained from her experience the next time. Gradually she will make better decisions, growing in confidence and gaining your trust.
3. Appeal to the heart of your teen. This means asking questions that are meaningful and get to the core of what is going on inside his heart and mind instead of lecturing him or making accusations. Ask him why he did what he did or why he believes what he believes. Ask what brings him to his conclusions and why the issue matters to him. Ask him about the outcomes he prefers and what he can do to get them. Engage him in conversation and gently lead rather than merely instruct.
4. Remind her that you love her. Be patient when she seems resistant. Remember she is unsure of herself and the world around her.
5. Explore whether or not your teen has crossed or desires to cross the boundaries of your family's convictions or beliefs. Help him seek wisdom regarding his struggles by gaining his perspective while pointing him toward truth.
6. Choose your words. Parents often use examples from their own lives and typically have a lot to say on any given topic. But too much information at once can become background noise to a

teen. Strive to use fewer but more effective words that have a greater impact. There will be many opportunities to talk with your teen as he makes his way toward adulthood.

I would add another suggestion to Tripp's very helpful list. Share your own heart with your teen. Not only remind her every day that you love her, but also let her know when you are afraid for her. Apologize when you realize you are wrong, especially when you err in your dealings with her. Let her know when her actions make you feel sad, disappointed or especially, happy. Encourage her and let her know that you will love and support her no matter the circumstance.

"Train up a child in the way he should go. Even when he is old he will not depart from it."
Proverbs 22:6 NASB