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## Shaping Your Teen's Character



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# Shaping Your Teen's Character

You will not find the word “teenager” in the Bible. However, the Bible does say everything relevant that teens and parents need to know. We are encouraged in *2 Timothy 3:16* that “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.*” We can also find comfort in the promise from *James 1:5* as we guide our children through the shaping process into young adults: “*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*”

The typical struggle of teenagers is powerfully captured in the first eight chapters of Proverbs. Solomon initiates the calling and connection with his child by using the phrase “my son” over 20 times in the book. *Proverbs 1:8* shares, “*My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother.*” Those calls are then followed by requests for action: “hear, consent not, walk, hide, forget not, keep, etc.” These chapters reveal that teens have to overcome many challenges such as no natural hunger for wisdom or correction, a tendency toward excessive “that isn’t fair” thinking, an unwise choice of companions, being susceptible to sexual temptations, a lack of insight into the world outside of their own, and a limited awareness of needs of the heart. Teens that grow with wisdom and parental/wise support can find success in the following relevant issues: searching for independence and identity, navigating physical and mental changes, confronting personal morality and values, pondering sexuality and marriage, and making decisions about the future.<sup>1</sup>

Author Paul Tripp refers to this amazing transitional stage as the “Age of Opportunity.” It is the parent’s blend of grace and truth that will help their teen see that fences or boundaries can be for safety and not just confinement. Parents get to lead the way in instructing their teen that wisdom is not a thing, but a process and a person. That person is Jesus Christ. Teens that are riding their rapidly changing mental, emotional and physical roller coaster usually give their parents many opportunities and moments to show Christ’s unconditional love. Not all of them will be planned, but often they will come in intense moments and test our reactions to their actions. The process part involves how we act and react and our ability to model Christ during those intense moments. Those opportunities provide a powerful testimony to our teens about the needs of a Savior for their heart and His grace working in our heart. This article will briefly highlight understanding teen development, talking with your teen, the role of boundaries, what teens want from parents, managing out of control teens, preparing teens for launch, and grace/truth basics.

## UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY TEENS

(As adapted from materials from Gary Chapman)

As a child enters the teen years, they are searching for independence and to establish self-identity. They desire answers to the questions of, “Who am I, and can I make it in this thing called life?” They are stepping out of their life as a kid and starting to view life through a new set of lenses. No longer a kid, yet not quite an adult. Two forces seem to emerge at this point – to separate and strengthen. Parents can lose their focus if they get too caught up in the dynamics unaware.

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1. Teens have a tendency to separate. As teens try and stretch away from being a “kid,” they will often take steps to separate from those things that they accepted before. Things they use to enjoy, places they went, who they spent time with, or ways they accepted your affection may all seem to no longer be well received. As parents, we can personalize this and feel that our teen is rejecting us . . . but it's wiser to see that our teen is trying to establish their self-identity as a young adult and may attempt that by avoiding the things they did as kids. Some of this separating behavior is normal, but some can be destructive. Teens that reject all authority and advice can find hurt in substance abuse, extreme risk taking, and promiscuous relationships. Parents are wise to consider if their teen's push for separateness is destructive or merely different. If their behaviors and interests are simply different from ours but not destructive, consider letting them develop rather than fighting them.
2. Teen have a tendency to strengthen. Stretching *away* from something also implies that teens are stretching *toward* something else. The need for social time with peer groups increases as teens try and establish their self-identities. Being around other teens is attractive as they can receive continuous feedback on who they think they are and who they want to be. The need to be connected and accepted is huge, and peer groups help fill that need. Being away from home is an opportunity to strengthen their independence. Again, parents can internalize this and feel as though their kids don't want to be with them anymore. But it's helpful to remember that like baby birds learning to fly, teens are just trying to figure out how to step out into life.

A piece of this stretching process will also challenge parents to learn to speak a new dialect of love for their kids through actions, words, items purchased for them, how time is spent, how physical touch is expressed, etc. Some teens will like things exactly the same as when they were little. But most are growing into wanting to hear or be shown a new way of appreciation or affirmation. Frustrations can occur when a child is looking for something new and parents keep speaking the same language.

A parent's love is the key to helping their teen transition into adulthood. They want and need our love as much as they need and want independence. The two are strongly connected. Sometimes as our teen is expressing their desire for personal space, emotional space, social friend space, intellectual space, values and religious space, and the ever popular fashion space . . . it can take a LOT of love to tolerate those growing pains. Your teen needs to increase independence in an effort to mature and prepare to step into adulthood. This can be a painful process for the parent and the teen. It is a wonderful thing if parents can encourage their independence while helping them realize independence is not the end goal. It's wiser and more principled to also grow in responsibility and understanding the importance of wise counsel.

Gary Chapman summarizes this concept as follows: *“As a loving parent encourages teenage independence, so parental love means teaching the teen to be responsible for his own behavior. Independence without responsibility is the road to low self-esteem, meaningless activity, and eventually boredom and depression. We do not gain self-worth from being independent. Our worth comes from being responsible. Independence and responsibility pave the road to mature adulthood. The teenager who learns to be responsible for his own actions while developing his independence and self-identity will have good self-worth, accomplish worthwhile objectives, and will make a meaningful contribution to the world around him. Teenagers who do not learn responsibility will be troubled teenagers and eventually troublesome adults.”*<sup>2</sup>

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## GROWING CONVERSATION WITH YOUR TEEN

(As adapted from materials from Mark Gregston- parentingtodaysteen.org)

Most parents have already spent many years “telling their kid what to do.” Teens don't learn much from parents constantly telling them what is right. That's been downloaded many times in their early years already. Instead of parents pouring into them from the same cup of knowledge, we want our teens to develop the responsibilities of filling up their own cup and sharing back to us what they know. We transition into this type of dialogue through questions. The goal is to get our teens thinking about what we've been teaching them.

One way to accomplish this goal is by using a communication tool called “The Power of Asking Questions.”<sup>3</sup> This tool is an invitation for our teen to enter the adult world and an affirmation that parents value their thoughts and want to hear what they have to say. This principle is at work in our everyday lives. For example, most employees appreciate it when their bosses seek their input, and the same is true in marriage relationships. Fostering opportunities for teens to share their answers helps them reveal their heart and helps the parent to gauge their current strengths and weaknesses. Following are the 5 Keys to Asking Questions, which is a good starting place. Please consider that these are some general principles for creating dialogue, but there may be times that a parent will need to step in for safety's sake.

1. Think about what you want to cultivate or grow from the conversation. Especially if it involves a touchy or sensitive subject, write down some of the questions that you want to ask. Think ahead and plan for good dialogue. The more sensitive the topic, the more important the timing of the conversation.
2. Avoid YES or NO questions. To help generate deeper thinking, ask open-ended questions. Include wording such as “How did that happen?” “Tell me more,” or, “What do you think?” to get past yes or no answers. Most kids have learned that the “why” question is like a trap. When they have responded to a “Why did you do that?” question in the past, their answer has usually been wrong in the adult's eyes and chastised or corrected. It's not wrong to ask our teens “why” on occasion, but use it gently.
3. Ask the question – but don't answer it! If you ask a question, let your child grow in the process of giving a response. We spend more time answering for our kids and are therefore doing all the talking. Yes, we may have a better answer, and they might not have all the pieces of the puzzle in the right order, but we are giving them and their brain a chance to see what their answer and thoughts sound like. Learn from their answer, and don't give your thoughts unless they ask for them.
4. Let kids' answers be a spring board for further questions. We set aside the police officer interrogation scene and replace it with enthusiastic second graders asking their teacher questions after a lesson. If our teen is talking about driver's education class and brings up a new safety device in some current vehicles, we would spring board from their response with a question like, “Tell me more about this new thing – it sounds interesting.” There is no substitution for genuine interest and attention!
5. Don't shut down their responses. Most experts say that 80% of what we communicate comes through our body language and voice tone. Your teen will say things that are not fully factual, wise, or in alignment with Mom and Dad's ways. Check the body language of eye rolls, huffs, newspaper or laptop/cell phone up to face, etc. at the door! What is the goal? To get teens to practice dialogue and get their thoughts out of their head verbally. Be prepared. They may tell you more than you want to know and sometimes things you wish you didn't know. They may try and evoke a

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reaction from you or push a button, or maybe they're just sharing the realities of their world. Either way, we want them to try and learn to think deeper.<sup>3</sup>

## THE BLESSINGS OF BOUNDARIES

*Proverbs 4:23* states, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." Children need to learn how to internalize the boundaries that are being provided by loving parents through sound discipline practices. Boundaries build self-control, responsibility, freedom and love. As parents teach and implement boundaries with their teens, they will usually have three main roles.<sup>4</sup> The Guardian provides protection and preservation. The Manager makes sure things get done, goals are reached, and demands and expectations are met. The Resourcer is the bridge to the outside world of resources that sustains and enhances life. Each role has the opportunity to be a blessing if we can incorporate the teaching point element as well.

The Guardian Role: Provide the teen with a safe environment for learning and gaining wisdom. As parents set limits on freedom, the teen internalizes the limits as wisdom and slowly begins to be able to take care of himself.

Teaching Point: Too little freedom to gain experiences and the teen forever remains stuck in an incapable and childlike mindset. But too much freedom and the teen is in danger of hurting himself.

The Manager Role: See that things get done. Since most teens lack self-discipline, parents need to model and shape discipline into their teen's life. Managers provide this type of discipline by managing resources, teaching, enforcing consequences, correcting, chastising, maintaining order, and building skills.

Teaching Point: Setting limits and requiring the teen to take ownership (embracing the problem as his own) and responsibility (taking care of what he has embraced) involves a clear understanding of boundaries.

The Resourcer Role: As children enter the teen years, they need to learn how to receive and use responsibly what is given to them, while gradually taking over the role of meeting their own resource needs.

Teaching Point: If parents give without boundaries, teens learn to feel entitled and become self-centered and demanding, thus producing an ungrateful character trait. If parents hold resources too tightly, teens give up and do not develop the hope of reaching goals that bring gratifying results and satisfaction.

## INSIGHTS FROM TEENS

According to a recent survey,<sup>5</sup> teens' top three desires involved being heard or feeling like someone hears them, having their passions and interests acknowledged by others (although not always the same interests as their parents), and hungering for meaningful relationships with adults (especially from caring parents). To help accomplish those desires, here are their ten tips for moms and dads to assist in promoting positive relationships with their teens:

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1. Look at us.
2. Spend time talking to us.
3. Listen.
4. Be dependable.
5. Show appreciation for what we do.
6. Relax.
7. Show that you're interested.
8. Laugh with us (and at yourself now and then).
9. Ask us to help you.
10. Challenge us.

## OUT OF CONTROL TEENS

(As adapted from materials from James Lehman)

Even with the best attempts and efforts, parents can find themselves caught in a battle with their teen. The book of Proverbs identifies the characteristics and outcomes of a wayward heart and mind. What looks like “out of control” behavior usually has a purpose, meaning and goal. A child's inappropriate behavior is their way of dealing with everyday problems that other kids deal with through compliance. The teen has learned to use defiance instead of compliance to deal with relationships and responsibilities. To move towards change, it becomes more important to focus on what the child needs to do to improve than to focus on why he is misbehaving. Helping the child develop necessary problem-solving skills is the parent's opportunity and responsibility.

Are children really the victims of unmanageable emotions, or does their behavior point to a purpose? James Lehman states, “Inappropriate behavior can be understood as actions triggered by the need to compensate for an endless variety of perceptions, thoughts and feelings that the child finds disturbing but is unable to resolve.”<sup>6</sup> A teen's disrespectful, obnoxious and abusive behavior compensates for their faulty reasoning, poor problem solving skills, perception of powerlessness, need for control, low tolerance for frustration, intellectual and functional laziness, fears and insecurities. In other words, a set of actions can upset a teen who then reacts to stop the feeling of being upset or distressed.

Parents often struggle with accurately recognizing their child's behavior as obnoxious or abusive. Instead, some choose to label the behavior as a phase, or to identify (even blame) some outside source that is causing their child to act poorly. Unfortunately, this leads to parents giving in to the blackmail behavior instead of demanding change. The teen will then feel empowered by the passive response and proceed to become even more demanding. Teens don't react passively to passivity; they react aggressively to passivity, sensing it as a sign of weakness.

This negative downward spiral does not produce change, just hurt and frustration. It more often produces ineffective parenting and teens who try to take the role of authority. This spiraled parenting role seems to come from a “script” that the kid has written to fight what is right and get their own way at all costs. At this point, parents have two choices when confronted with difficult children: to continue to parent as if their child is the child they dreamed of parenting, or to develop the skills necessary to parent the child they actually have. Parents have the opportunity to become the type of parent their child needs them to be. Feeling shame for the situation or blame for why their kid is bad will only keep the downward spiral going. God's promises of His strength, mercy and faithfulness are also included to parents of tough teens! God's first two children (Adam and Eve) had struggles as well, so He knows that parenting pain. He also provided a way and the strength to get through.

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What can feel like an overwhelming and impossible task needs to be taken one small step at a time. Beaten down parents are good at identifying what's broken, but let's look at strengthening parenting roles that lead to accountability. Parents can play specific roles which affect the level of social skill building, problem solving and responsibility taking that occurs in families. These roles are defined by parental leadership, clarity, willingness and respect for a child's potential. As we develop our teens, there's a difference between knowing what's wrong, knowing something's wrong, and knowing right from wrong. Knowing what's wrong precedes training and coaching; knowing something's wrong precedes problem solving; knowing right from wrong precedes accountability or setting appropriate limits. It is important to know where we fall on the left side of the chart below so we can proceed with the corresponding action on the right side. These actions are further described in the following chart on this page.

<b>Knowledge needed before we act (precedes)</b>	<b>Action to take once we know</b>
Knowing WHAT is wrong	Parent can use Training and Coaching
Now I know SOMETHING'S wrong	Parent can use Problem Solving
Knowing RIGHT from wrong	Parent can instill Accountability (Limit Setting)

When parents work to learn these roles and implement them with their teens, they are moving towards a culture (a way of life or mindset) of accountability (being responsible for one's actions) in their home. It is the goal of parents to create a culture in their home that promotes responsibility for functions and accountability for actions.

Three parenting roles that are fundamental for creating this culture include the Training and Coaching Role, the Problem Solving Role, and the Limit Setting Role. A brief outline of the characteristics being taught in each parenting role are as follows.<sup>7</sup>

<b>Training and Coaching</b>	<b>Problem Solving</b>	<b>Limit Setting</b>
Focuses on skill building, rehearsal and repetition	Understands importance of problem solving as a process	Establishes and maintains parental authority
Keeps the child's eyes on the prize	Helps child to identify goals and obstacles	Understands the importance of standards and task completion
Teaches by example and utilizes social skills in everyday life	Encourages exploration and experimentation	Identifies the parent as the person you answer to
Understands the importance of skill rehearsal and repetition	Recognizes setbacks and failure as opportunities for life's learning experiences	Expects compliance with rules
Displays responsible love and concern.	Participates in mutual decision-making	Expects progress with problems
Provides strategic help and solutions	Accepts independence as a legitimate interest of adolescents	Perceives compliance as a legitimate interest of parents
Provides ideas for replacement and reciprocity	Sets firm outer boundaries with fluid, flexible center	Communicates belief in the child through expectations

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## PREPARING TEENS FOR LAUNCHING

This section can be difficult for parents as they consider the idea of their teen transitioning into adulthood. This may be the best time for a young adult to make this move, and it may be with the parent's joy, blessing and applause. In other cases, it may just need to be done because the young adult is no longer willing to abide by certain house rules and something has to give. Regardless of the circumstance, we can teach and model our beliefs and desire for them to be successful. In learning to successfully manage the expectations of the real adult world and grow towards wise independence, most teens will need some extra opportunities and specific guidance. Young adults have shown us that having a "Voice" (the confidence and skill set needed to influence things that matter to them) is very important to them.

Launching is a critical process that requires participation and involvement of parents as well as children.<sup>8</sup> The following process will help parents accomplish this. Sometime during high school, and certainly by the beginning of their senior year, begin a concentrated effort of moving the teen through a series of rites of passage that include increasing doses of responsibility and freedom.

### PARENTS' ROLE IN LAUNCHING PROCESS

1. List all the tasks for which the teens need to take charge.
2. List the "adult" responsibilities children need to step into.
3. List freedoms that will be given based on tasks accomplished.
4. Have a "This is what you can expect from us when you turn 18" discussion.
5. Verbalize confidence in their ability to be ready to move on.
6. Listen to them if they tell you they are not ready to move away.
7. It is fine, in fact sometimes preferable, for teens to be given additional freedoms provided there is a specific structure in place.
8. Consider carefully your expectations of them regarding grades or work. Share your expectations with them.
9. Give them overt and covert messages that you will be okay when they leave.
10. Make peace. Keep in mind the goal; forego the point. Don't get involved in useless power struggles and conflicts.

More details on teens' responsibilities in this process can be found in the appendix.

## REMEMBER THE GRACE/TRUTH BASICS

Remembering that your teen will not always stay a teen can be beneficial. It helps prepare a parent's mind for the future stage of being a friend and mentor to grown children. Jesus tenderly shared with His disciples that *"I have called you friends"* (John 15:15). He said that was possible because He shared everything with them that His Father had made known unto Him. Our witness of grace and truth in action will be magnified when parents can practice and promote these five basics of parenting adolescents:<sup>9</sup>

1. Love and Connect: Teens need parents to develop and maintain a relationship with them that offers support and acceptance, while accommodating and affirming the teen's increasing maturity.
2. Monitor and Observe: Teens need parents to be aware of, and let teens know they are aware of, their activities. This includes school performances, work experiences, after-school activities, peer relationships, adult relationships, and recreation. This a process increasingly involves less direct supervision and more communication, observation, and networking with other adults.

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3. Guide and Limit: Teens need parents to uphold a clear but evolving set of boundaries, maintaining important family rules and values, but also encouraging increased competence and maturity.
4. Model and Consult: Teens need parents to provide ongoing information and support around decision making, values, skills, goals, and interpreting and navigating the larger world. This can be done by teaching by example and ongoing dialogue.
5. Provide and Advocate: Teens need parents to make available not only adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter, and health care, but also a supportive home environment and a network of caring adults.

Five basic points. Ten action verbs. Parenting teens is not a passive calling or occupation. It will require effort and action, dedication and follow through, thankfulness and humility, learning from mistakes and saying, "Oops, I blew that one, I'm sorry." The Book of Esther challenges us to seek and not avoid "such a time as this." This time of shaping the character of teens may not always be smooth or without some struggles. We can be thankful for the grace and mercies that are new every day as we enjoy and appreciate our teens in this age of opportunity.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Books

Chapman, Gary. *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers*. (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2000).

Tripp, Paul. *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens, 2nd ed.* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

### Websites

Focus on the Family: [www.focusonthefamily.com](http://www.focusonthefamily.com)

Family Life: [www.familylife.com](http://www.familylife.com)

Heart Light Ministries: [www.heartlightministries.org](http://www.heartlightministries.org)

The books and websites listed above and other helpful resources related to parenting teens are available on our website at [www.counseling.org/parenting](http://www.counseling.org/parenting).

## References

Referencing of these materials is not meant to imply an endorsement by the Apostolic Christian Church of America of the author, publisher, or organization that created the materials.

1. Gary Chapman, *The Five Love Languages of Teenagers* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2000).
2. Ibid., 180.
3. Mark Gregston, [parentingtodaysteen.org](http://parentingtodaysteen.org).
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6. James Lehman, *The Total Transformation Program* (Westbrook, ME: Legacy Publishing Company, 2010).
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8. Janice Gabe, *Preparing Teens Workshop*, 2003.
9. Rae Simpson, *Raising Teens: A Synthesis of Research and a Foundation for Action* (Boston: Center for Health Communication, Harvard School of Public Health, 2001).

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## Appendix A TEEN RESPONSIBILITIES FOR LAUNCHING

This principle of responsible independence is a powerful one for teens. The following “launching” sequences help guide the teen’s thinking with some concrete examples of responsible adult living. The teaching point is for teens to check in and see if they are aware of such opportunities and if they are making progress in these areas. There are certainly more than 10 items to consider, and just doing all 10 may not necessarily guarantee continued responsibility. Three areas where teens need to grow in responsibility include their behaviors and actions, emotions, and spiritual growth.

### LAUNCH SEQUENCE: Teen’s Behavioral Responsibilities

10. Demonstrates self-discipline: study, work, establishes healthy sleep patterns, and follows curfew.
9. Demonstrates ability to maintain and manage one’s schedule and shows independence in regards to schedules, appointments, and commitments.
8. Demonstrates a willingness to speak up on own behalf, seek appropriate assistance, speak with adults and authority figures.
7. Demonstrates financial responsibility and is able to budget money, pay bills, and prioritize spending.
6. Demonstrates willingness for personal responsibility, laundry, getting self up in the morning.
5. Demonstrates ability to think ahead, plan, organize, and focus on tasks at hand.
4. Demonstrates ability to implement self-imposed limitations regarding use of computers, cell phones, games, and other leisure activities.
3. Displays ability to address conflicts with others in a direct, healthy, and appropriate fashion.
2. Maintains at least part-time employment and has a driver’s license.
1. Maintains a balance in leisure, work, and social activity.

### LAUNCH SEQUENCE: Teens’ Emotional Responsibilities

10. Displays ability to control and regulate emotional reactions to situations.
9. Displays stability with emotional, behavioral, and learning problems that may arise.
8. Manages stress and has a variety of activities which are relaxing.
7. Focuses on achievement vs. independence.
6. Begins process of making peace with parents.
5. Demonstrates some ability to use logic and cause-and-effect thinking in decision making.
4. Demonstrates the ability to function outside a highly structured routine and schedule.
3. Takes responsibility for mood states and does not act impulsively based on moods.
2. Makes arrangements for taking care of mental health issues through transitioning toward greater independence.
1. Begins development of identity independent of peer group and activities.

### LAUNCH SEQUENCE: Teen’s Spiritual Responsibilities

Strong discipleship provides a solid foundation for a teen’s spiritual goals. As they grow and make personal decisions for Christ, those goals will change and deepen as well.

10. Understands they are under authority.
9. Recognizes right from wrong.
8. Knows basic spiritual disciplines are a part of the family such as prayer and reading.
7. Begins to develop an understanding of God.
6. Recognizes that God is the ultimate authority over them and their parents.

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5. Sees God's love for them.
4. Understands man is inherently sinful and in need of forgiveness.
3. Understands God's plan for salvation which centers on God's love and holiness, man's sin and separation from God, and the work of Christ on the cross.
2. Comes to salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ.
1. Lives a Sanctified Life as their spiritual disciplines mature and produce the Fruit of the Spirit through the work of the Spirit.

A caution for parents: one of the problems with lists is that it becomes easy to measure or judge our kids with "all or none" thinking. These lists are not going to be very helpful if the teens are just told how many of the points they're failing at. Just like a boss or spouse putting the list of the Fruit of the Spirit in front of us and pointing out all the ones we are lacking rarely produces a heart changing desire to improve, teens are no different.

Some parents have found success in using a rating scale that allows for the teen and parents to rate the items from "exceeds" to "not yet".

An example from the Behavioral Launch Expectations:

2. Maintains at least part-time employment and has a driver's license.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Exceeds				Meets/Adequate					Not Yet

This system guides toward growth and provides the opportunity for meaningful and caring conversation about getting teens ready for the next season of life. Ideally, our teens will see and identify what is lacking and will seek direction or assistance in pursuing mature growth in that area. Just as our Heavenly Father is pleased when His children make right choices in serving Him, parents also are blessed when they witness their children growing in wisdom and maturity.

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## Appendix B

### TEN FACTS EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THEIR TEEN'S BRAIN

Nixon, Robin. Livescience.com (April 22, 2011).

They are dramatic, irrational and scream for seemingly no reason. And they have a deep need for both greater independence and tender loving care. There is a reason this description could be used for either teens or toddlers: After infancy, the brain's most dramatic growth spurt occurs in adolescence. Here are 10 facts every parent should know.

#### **Critical period of development**

Loosely defined as the years between 11 and 19, adolescence is considered a critical time of development – and not just in outward appearances. “The brain continues to change throughout life, but there are huge leaps in development during adolescence,” said Sara Johnson, an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who reviewed the neuroscience in *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development* (Johns Hopkins University, 2009) by Clea McNeely and Jayne Blanchard. And just as a teen may go through an awkward growth spurt, new cognitive skills and competencies may come in leaps and stutters, said Sheryl Feinstein, author of *Inside the Teenage Brain: Parenting a Work in Progress* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009). Parents should understand that no matter how tall their son has sprouted or how grown-up their daughter dresses, “they are still in a developmental period that will affect the rest of their life,” Johnson told LiveScience.

#### **Blossoming brain**

Scientists used to think only infants have an overabundance of neuronal connections, which are “pruned” into a more efficient arrangement over the first three years of life. But brain imaging studies, such as one published in 1999 in *Nature Neuroscience*, have discovered that a second burst of neuronal sprouting happens right before puberty, peaking at about age 11 for girls and 12 for boys. The adolescent's experiences – from reading vampire novels to learning to drive – shape this new grey matter, mostly following a “use it or lose it” strategy, Johnson said. The structural reorganization is thought to continue until the age of 25, and smaller changes continue throughout life.

#### **New thinking skills**

Due to the increase in brain matter, the teen brain becomes more interconnected and gains processing power, Johnson said. Adolescents start to have the computational and decision-making skills of an adult –if given time and access to information, she said. But in the heat of the moment, their decision-making can be overly influenced by emotions, because their brains rely more on the limbic system (the emotional seat of the brain) than the more rational prefrontal cortex, explained Feinstein. “This duality of adolescent competence can be very confusing for parents,” Johnson said, meaning that sometimes teens do things, like punch a wall or drive too fast, when, if asked, they clearly know better.

#### **Teen tantrums**

Adolescents are in the midst of acquiring incredible new skills sets, especially when it comes to social behavior and abstract thought. But they are not good at using them yet, so they must experiment – and sometimes they use their parents as guinea pigs. Many kids this age view conflict as a type of self-expression and may have trouble focusing on an abstract idea or understanding another's point of view. Just as when dealing with the tantrums of toddlerhood, parents need to remember their teen's behavior is “not a personal affront,” Johnson said. They are dealing with a huge amount of social, emotional and cognitive flux and have underdeveloped abilities to cope. They need their parents – those people with the more stable adult brain – to help them by staying calm, listening and being good role models, Feinstein told LiveScience.

# Shaping Your Teen's Character

## **Intense emotions**

“Puberty is the beginning of major changes in the limbic system,” Johnson said, referring to the part of the brain that not only helps regulate heart rate and blood sugar levels, but also is critical to the formation of memories and emotions. Part of the limbic system, the amygdala is thought to connect sensory information to emotional responses. Its development, along with hormonal changes, may give rise to newly intense experiences of rage, fear, aggression (including towards oneself), excitement and sexual attraction. Over the course of adolescence, the limbic system comes under greater control of the prefrontal cortex, the area just behind the forehead, which is associated with planning, impulse control and higher order thought. As additional areas of the brain start to help process emotion, older teens gain some equilibrium and have an easier time interpreting others. But until then, they often misread teachers and parents, Feinstein said. “You can be as careful as possible and you still will have tears or anger at times because they will have misunderstood what you have said,” she said.

## **Peer pleasure**

As teens become better at thinking abstractly, their social anxiety increases, according to research in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* published in 2004. Abstract reasoning makes it possible to consider yourself from the eyes of another. Teens may use this new skill to ruminate about what others are thinking of them. In particular, peer approval has been shown to be highly rewarding to the teen brain, Johnson said, which may be why teens are more likely to take risks when other teens are around. “Kids are really concerned with looking cool – but you don’t need brain research to tell you that,” she said. Friends also provide teens with opportunities to learn skills such as negotiating, compromise and group planning. “They are practicing adult social skills in a safe setting and they are really not good at it at first,” Feinstein said. So even if all they do is sit around with their friends, teens are hard at work acquiring important life skills.

## **Measuring risk**

“The brakes come online somewhat later than the accelerator of the brain,” said Johnson, referring to the development of the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system respectively. At the same time, “teens need higher doses of risk to feel the same amount of rush adults do,” Johnson said. Taken together, these changes may make teens vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviors, such as trying drugs, getting into fights or jumping into unsafe water. By late adolescence, say 17 years old and after, the part of the brain responsible for impulse control and long-term perspective taking is thought to help them reign in some of the behavior they were tempted by in middle adolescence, according to McNeely and Blanchard. What is a parent to do in the meantime? “Continue to parent your child,” Johnson said. Like all children, “teens have specific developmental vulnerabilities and they need parents to limit their behavior,” she said. Research on the different rates of brain function development during adolescence was published in the journal *Developmental Review* in 2008.

## **Parents are still important**

According to Feinstein, a survey of teenagers revealed that 84 percent think highly of their mothers and 89 percent think highly of their fathers. And more than three-quarters of teenagers enjoy spending time with their parents; 79 percent enjoy hanging out with Mom and 76 percent like chilling with Dad. One of the tasks of adolescence is separating from the family and establishing some autonomy, Feinstein said, but that does not mean a teen no longer needs parents – even if they say otherwise. “They still need some structure and are looking to their parents to provide that structure,” she said. “The parent that decides to treat a 16 or 17 year old as an adult is behaving unfairly and setting them up for failure.” One of the most influential ways to parent your teen, in addition to being a good listener, is to be a good role model, especially when dealing with stress and other life difficulties, as teens are actively trying to figure out their own coping strategies. “Your adolescent is watching you,” Feinstein said.

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## **Need more zzzzzzzs**

It is a myth that teens need less sleep than young children. They need 9 to 10 hours a night, although most fall short. Part of the problem is a shift in circadian rhythms during adolescence: It makes sense to teen bodies to get up later and stay up later, Johnson said. But due to early bussing and class schedules, many teens rack up sleep debt and “become increasingly cognitively impaired across the week,” Johnson said. Sleep-deprivation only exacerbates moodiness and cloudy decision-making. And sleep is thought to aid the critical reorganization of the teen brain. “There is a disconnect between teen bodies and our schedules,” Johnson said.

## **I am the center of the universe – and this universe is not good enough!**

The hormone changes at puberty have huge effects on the brain, one of which is to spur the production of more receptors for oxytocin, according to a 2008 issue of the journal *Developmental Review*. While oxytocin is often described as the “bonding hormone,” increased sensitivity to its effects in the limbic system has also been linked to feeling self-consciousness, making an adolescent truly feel like everyone is watching him or her. According to McNeely and Blanchard, these feelings peak around 15 years old. While this may make a teen seem self-centered (and in their defense, they do have a lot going on), the changes in the teen brain may also spur some of the more idealistic efforts tackled by young people throughout history. “It is the first time they are seeing themselves in the world,” Johnson said, meaning their greater autonomy has opened their eyes to what lies beyond their families and schools. They are asking themselves, she continued, for perhaps the first time: What kind of person do I want to be and what type of place do I want the world to be? Until their brains develop enough to handle shades of grey, their answers to these questions can be quite one-sided, Feinstein said, but the parents’ job is to help them explore the questions, and not just give them answers.

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## Appendix C TROUBLED TEENAGER WARNING SIGNS

1. Your teen refuses to abide by anything you say or request, and his or her resulting behaviors put your teen or your family in danger or high risk leading to constant fear or stress in the home.
2. Your teen is displaying behavior that is a marked change from what has been normal (sleeping little or too long, forgetfulness, lack of motivation, aggression, depression, anxiety, grades slipping, hating what they once loved or loving what they once hated, always wanting to be with friends or away from home, or avoiding friends altogether and spending too much time alone).
3. Your teen has become increasingly disrespectful, dishonest, disobedient and openly displays rebellion, no longer veiling his or her feelings or caring about the consequences.
4. There is a blatant ignorance or profound rebellion toward the boundaries, Belief System or rules of the home. This can be shown in passive aggressiveness or open defiance that is unusually excessive for your teen.
5. There are outright or veiled threats of suicide, or self-mutilation/cutting, excessive risk-taking, dangerous drug use or blatant sexual promiscuity – seemingly a loss of a conscience or moral compass.
6. Treatment by your teen of people, pets, or belongings is threatening or out of control.
7. Your teen thinks he or she is the center of your family and shows blatant disregard for the feelings of other family members, their time or their possessions.
8. Months of counseling is providing little or no positive progress for your teen.
9. Your teen refuses to do anything with the family and displays a growing hatred for the family.
10. You cannot keep your teen away from peers who are obviously leading a lifestyle counter to your beliefs and your teen is buying into their destructive behavior and attitudes.

Contrast the above list with what would be considered more normal teenage behavior:

1. Cooperates with and cares for others.
2. Thinks realistically about their need for family and other people.
3. Suffers personal discomfort to accomplish positive life goals.
4. Bases their actions and behavior on convictions and beliefs rather than feelings.
5. Takes care of their own personal needs without imposing on others.
6. Treats people, pets and things with respect.
7. Has feelings of purpose and an excitement for the future.
8. Maintains relationships even in difficult times.
9. Defines who they are without giving in to what everyone else thinks they should be.

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## Appendix D

### The Five Love Languages Test for Teens

Remember, you're going to see 30 pairs of things that parents do or say to show love to their kids. They may be things your parents do or say or that you wish your parents would do or say. Pick only ONE item in each box that you like the best, and circle the letter that goes that that item. When you finish looking at all 30 pairs, count how many times you circled each letter and transfer that letter to the appropriate blank at the end of the test.

1. Asks me what I think Puts his/her arm around my shoulder	A E
2. Goes to my ballgames, recitals, etc. Does my laundry	B D
3. Buys me clothes Watches TV or movies with me	C B
4. Helps me with school projects Hugs me	D E
5. Kisses me Gives me money for things I need	E C
6. Takes time off of work to do stuff with me Rubs my shoulders or back	B E
7. Gives me cool things for my birthday Reassures me when I fail or mess up	C A
8. Gives me high-fives Respects my opinions	E A
9. Goes out to eat or shops with me Lets me use his/her stuff	B C
10. Tells me I'm the best son/daughter in the world Drives me to places I need to go	A D
11. Eats at least one meal with me most every day Listens to me and helps me work through problems	B A
12. Doesn't invade my privacy Holds or shakes my hand	D E
13. Leaves me encouraging notes Knows what my favorite store is	A C
14. Hangs out with me sometimes Sits next to me on the couch	B E
15. Tells me how proud he/she is of me Cooks meals for me	A D

16. Straightens my collar, necklace, etc. Acts really interested in stuff that I'm interested in	E B
17. Allows my friends to hang out at our house Pays for me to go on school or church trips	D C
18. Tells me I look good Listens to me with judging me	A B
19. Touches or rubs my head Sometimes lets me pick out where we go on family trips	E D
20. Takes me to the doctor, dentist, etc. Trusts me to be home alone	D C
21. Takes me on trips with him/her Takes me and my friends to movies, ballgames, etc.	B D
22. Gives me stuff that I really like Notices when I do something good	C A
23. Gives me extra spending money Asks me if I need help	C D
24. Doesn't interrupt me when I'm talking Likes the gifts I buy for him/her	B C
25. Lets me sleep late sometimes Seems to really enjoy spending time with me	D B
26. Pats me on the back Buys me stuff and surprises me with it	E C
27. Tells me he/she believes in me Can ride in the car with me without lecturing me	A B
28. Picks up stuff that I need from various stores Sometimes holds or touches my face	C E
29. Gives me some space when I'm feeling upset or angry Tells me that I'm talented or special	D A
30. Hugs or kisses me at least once every day Shays he/she is thankful that I'm his/her child	E A

### Your Score

A = \_\_\_\_\_ *Words of Affirmation*

B = \_\_\_\_\_ *Quality Time*

C = \_\_\_\_\_ *Receiving Gifts*

D = \_\_\_\_\_ *Acts of Service*

E = \_\_\_\_\_ *Physical Touch*

The letter or love language that receives the most points is your primary love language. If you score the same score for two love languages, than you are bilingual. If your score high on one love language and have a close second score, that second highest score is your secondary love language!