

A crisis really is a time of change: a time when goals have to be re-evaluated, old ways left behind and new ways taken up. The process of making these changes can be a difficult one which, even with our best efforts, takes time: time during which we need the support and encouragement of others. Change is threatening. Change can leave us feeling lonely and insecure and may bring with it symptoms of stress or depression. Change shakes us out of our safe and comfortable routines and often leaves us vulnerable to temptation.

It is easy to think of something like bereavement as a crisis, or even the loss of a job, or the onset of a severe illness. These are examples of unexpected crises, but have you considered that there is also another type of crisis we all have to face? I am thinking of what are called developmental crises: those times of enforced change which we all have to face just because we are progressing through life. These crises, although they do not come upon us so suddenly, can be just as traumatic. We must not forget that they too are times when extra support and encouragement may be called for.

Here is a list of some of the events I have in mind.

- Starting school.
- Moving to secondary school.
- Adolescence.
- Starting employment.
- Being married (Who would have thought that was a crisis?).
- The birth of children.
- Moving home.
- Middle age.
- Children moving away from home.
- Retirement.
- Old age.

Let us give some thought to adolescence now but remember we are taking these as examples. We do not have time to look at the whole list, but the other events on it are just as important so you will have to give some thought to them yourself.



It is interesting to note that before the present century adolescence as a specific and problematic stage of development was not recognised. There also seems to be no recognition of it in Scripture. Why do you think this is, and why has it become such an issue today?

Adolescence Is A Time Of Change

We all know that adolescence is a time of change, but just to say that is not very helpful. We must be more specific if we are to understand what is happening so, let me list some of the changes of adolescence.

- Adolescence is a time of physical change.
- Adolescence is a time of change from being under the control of others to being free to decide.
- Adolescence is a time of change from being relatively sheltered to taking responsibility.
- Adolescence is a time of change from accepting the goals and values imposed by home to setting ones own goals and values for life.
- Adolescence is a time of change of identity.

Now let me go on to comment on each of these.

1. **Adolescence is a time of physical change.** Many young people become very aware of the changes taking place in their bodies. As they come to terms with them they may feel awkward, self conscious, or embarrassed, especially if they develop much earlier or later than their peers. With these changes come sexual awareness and the experience of new impulses which must be brought under control.
2. **Adolescence is a time of change from being under the control of others to being free to decide.** As children many of our decisions are made for us, but through adolescence we must learn to decide for ourselves. It can feel good exercise freedom of choice on more and more issues, and most young people are very keen on that aspect of growing up. Sometimes parents are understandably not just so keen to let it happen, and tensions inevitably develop. Bear in mind too that, even though not many young people would acknowledge it, the responsibility of decision making can be a little threatening, especially when, through lack of experience, wrong choices are made.
3. **Adolescence is a time of change from being relatively sheltered to taking responsibility.** Along with freedom to make decisions comes the burden of taking responsibility for those decisions. That means taking the consequences of bad decisions as well as enjoying the benefits of good ones. It also means paying ones own way and fulfilling duties to others. Some will readily shoulder responsibility and some will want to run from it but, whichever is the case, becoming a responsible adult involves learning new skills, developing new styles of relating to others, and accepting new burdens which others have shouldered for us in the past.
4. **Adolescence is a time of change from accepting the goals and values imposed by home to setting ones own goals and values for life.** What should emerge at the end of adolescence is an adult with his or her goals set for the future and a clear set of values to live by. As these are being formulated there may well be a period of adjustment. It may be a period when the values of home are questioned. Some may be rejected, especially if they are found not to work in the real world, and some may be altered. There may be some experimentation with alternative ways of doing things and in the process mistakes may be made and tensions may develop with parents who are convinced, often rightly so, that their way is best.
5. **Adolescence is a time of change of identity.** Children most commonly think of themselves in relation to their families. To be loved and secure at home is the all important thing, but as they grow the views of others outside the home become increasingly important. It becomes important to be well thought of. It becomes important to be accepted by friends. It becomes important not to be isolated. Put together a whole group of young people who are working to find their identity in relation to others and intense competition can develop.

Perhaps you can think of some other changes and potential causes of difficulty which I have overlooked, but let me move on to suggest some ways in which you could be helpful to young people going through adolescence.

Help Them Prepare

Young people may be prepared for the changes of adolescence in advance, and if they are it will be a much less traumatic time, for them and their parents. Here are some suggestions.

- Build a framework of good communication with parents from an early age. We must form friendships with our children by spending time with them and being interested in what interests them from their earliest years — it is too late to start thinking about it when they are 14. Unfortunately we are not very good at this in Christian families. Often we are too busy with church activities.
- Build a spiritual foundation which sets clear goals and values that are seen to work in practice. It is a mistake to think that we have fulfilled our spiritual obligation to our children by teaching them Bible stories. Our duty is to bring them up in the teaching and discipline of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), and that includes teaching practical Christian living by word and also by example. Often Christian parents are guilty of setting very high standards in their teaching and then not living by those standards themselves. Children are not daft. If we do that we cannot expect them to live by those high standards when they start to think for themselves. We must show them how to make God's standards work in the real world.
- Teach responsibility from an early age. Young people will not start to act responsibly at the age of 14 if they have not been taught to act responsibly from early childhood. Children can be taught, through wise discipline, that wrong actions have painful consequences which must be borne. They can be taught that money does not come out of a bottomless pit, and if it runs out you have to do without it. They can be taught self denial: a rare quality in a world where everything a child desires seems to come so readily.
- Foresee problems, warn and educate on the important matters. In particular do not overlook matters to do with sexuality: dating, masturbation, and social pressures to conform.
- Provide opportunities for social encounter. The passage through adolescence will be much easier for those young people who have a peer group with a similar Christian background to their own. If there is no such group in your church then start one or allow your young people to mix with others from another church, but do not force them into isolation or restrict them to adult company.
- Lay a foundation of consistent love and discipline. When young people move out into the wider world it is not inevitable that they will adopt the values of their peers. If home has been all that it should have been they will associate the love and security of home with the values taught at home. As they grow they may experiment with new values and may differ with home on relatively minor issues, but generally speaking as they find the world to be a threatening place, full of insecurities, they will return to the values of home in later life. Unfortunately, from a parent's point of view, the in-between time may be a little stormy!



What are the main problems facing young people today in your locality?

Riding Out The Storm

Through the stormy time of change:

- Be aware of what is going on and be sympathetic. Especially be aware of sensitivity and embarrassment, and do not make it worse. Show respect for developing modesty and, where possible, make allowances for the strong desire to be seen to be grown up.
- Encourage responsibility. Wrong actions must have consequences, duties must be fulfilled and commitments must be honoured.
- Avoid unnecessary pressure within the home. A happy and peaceful home means a lot, even when it does not appear to be appreciated.
- Distinguish between issues on which you must take a firm stand and matters for which freedom to choose can be granted. As a parent you may not, for example, agree with a decision your son or daughter has made. It may not be consistent with your standards, or you may consider it to be unwise, but before you forbid action on that decision consider these questions:
 - Is this a matter of your child's safety or future well-being, or merely a difference of opinion?
 - Is this a matter of breaking the law of God or a difference on those matters in which God gives us freedom to choose?
 - Is this issue so important that it is worth causing tension over, and possibly reducing your influence over your child in the more serious matters of life which will arise when he is older?
 - Is the decision your child has made one which, although unwise, you should allow him to proceed with, knowing that although he may reap unpleasant consequences he will not suffer serious harm, and may well learn wisdom by his mistake?
 - In opposing this decision is your real concern about what others will think?

Of course, the answers to these will depend on the age and maturity of your child, but in coming to a decision remember that God requires us to grant our children dignity and not to provoke them to resentment (Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21). Remember too that our task as parents is to lead them toward responsible decision making and independence, not to produce replicas of ourselves.

- Explain your reasons for those decisions you make which effect the life of your child, honestly and as fully as his developing understanding will allow. If you do you will avoid much unnecessary tension, but you will also teach by example how wise decisions are to be made.
- Do not be overprotective. We all desire to shield our children from the hardships of life, but hardship is often the best teacher. Values which are tried and tested, like faith which is tried and tested, become stronger, and the conflicts of adolescence, far from being harmful, teach wisdom and bring maturity. Resist the urge to make it too easy and the desire, which every parent has, to cling to your child too tightly.



What activities should the church provide for its young people?



The book of Proverbs has been referred to as "Truth For Youth" What are some of the wise sayings there which would be especially helpful to young people today?

One last word on this subject. Our greatest desire for our children is that they should be saved, and that is how it should be, but never forget that if your child is saved it will not depend upon your efforts. The conversion of your child will be no less a miracle of grace than that of any sinner. That thought takes off a lot of pressure, but it should also make you very prayerful.