

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. The Bible addresses parents and children; it speaks about those who are young and those who are old, but there is no mention of an in-between stage. Never the less it exists, we have to cope with it and I think we can do a lot to help our young people come through it if we apply those principles of family life we have already learned with a little thought and common sense. The starting point is to think about what adolescence is.

All 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 that happen during adolescence.

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.

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 to 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.

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.

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. New values are often formed or adopted in an idealistic way and have to be modified by experience. 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.

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 and peer pressure can have a big influence on behaviour.

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

Help Them Prepare

We can prepare our children for the changes of adolescence in advance, and if we do it will be a much less traumatic time, for them and for us. Here are some suggestions.

- ✓ Build a framework of good communication with them 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.
- ✓ Build a spiritual foundation that 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, as we have seen, is to bring them up in the teaching and discipline of the Lord,¹ 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 that it is possible to make God's standards work in the real world and let them see how we cope with the tensions that inevitably arise when we try.
- ✓ 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. Remember too to prepare them for the temptations they are going to face and teach them how to cope with a world where others may well put them under pressure to reach impossibly high standards of achievement.
- ✓ 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

¹ Ephesians 6:4

should have been it is more likely that 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!

Ride Out The Storm

Through the stormy time of change:

- ✓ Be aware of what is going on and be sympathetic. 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. Do not feel that you have to control everything. Do not react to every mood or every complaint. Do not make an issue of every difference. Remember what it was like when you were fifteen. Probably you cringe at the thought of some of the things you said and did: someday your children will feel the same way about the things they are doing now. Remember how everything looked different: so black and white: you had ideals: you had to take your stand for justice and fairness, but now the years have softened your views and you are not so quick to criticise: things you can see now you would not have believed had your parents told you about them — and your children are just like you.
- ✓ Encourage responsibility. Wrong actions must have consequences, duties must be fulfilled and commitments must be honoured. Allow them to feel the weight of the consequences of their actions as much as possible and let them deal with the fall-out when duties are not performed and commitments are not honoured.
- ✓ Avoid unnecessary pressure within the home. Be careful not to take on too much. Watch out especially for church and work related activities and keep them under control. Do not add to the pressures imposed by school by demanding unreasonable commitment to study. Make sure there is time for fun and relaxation together as a family. 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 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.² Remember too that our task as parents is to lead them toward responsible decision making and independence, not to produce replicas of ourselves.

- ✓ Get out of the habit of making decisions on behalf of your son or daughter. As the months and years go by you should find yourself less often in the position of saying, "You must..." By all means present your opinions, but whenever possible allow freedom to decide. Explain your reasons for those decisions you have to make which affect your child, honestly and as fully as his or her

² Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21

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 want 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 to cling to your child too tightly.

The Last Word

One last word. 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. To me, as a parent, that thought takes off a lot of pressure, but it also makes me very prayerful.

Some Things For You To Do

If you have been doing your homework over the past four weeks you have probably established a pattern of regular family Bible reading and discussion. Try to keep that pattern going. The book of Proverbs has been referred to as "Truth For Youth" Why not read it with your family over the next few weeks. Talk about what you read together, make sure you have all understood it and think about what it might mean for your family. As you read, consider these questions:



What are some of the wise sayings contained in the book of Proverbs which would be especially helpful to young people today?



What instruction is there that would be helpful to parents?



What instruction is there that would be helpful to husbands and wives?

Discuss these questions with your family.



Why do you think it is that the Bible does not recognise adolescence as a specific and problematic stage of development, and why has it become such an issue today?



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



How does the world today differ from the world you grew up in?



Thinking about the world we live in today, the pressures our children face, the way modern people think and the attitudes that are prevalent not only in the secular world but also among Christians, what are some of the things parents should major on when they set out to teach their children and prepare them for life?



What activities should the church provide for its young people?