

UNDERSTANDING YOUR YOUNG TEEN

Practical Wisdom for Parents

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Mark Oestreicher (Mark O) is a long time youth ministry veteran with an extensive list of books that he has authored and co-authored. He is a speaker, consultant, and leader, but more significantly he continues to be one of the leading voices for the church for young teen ministry.

This book is one of his best on the topic of young teens, but this time around he is not writing to youth pastors, but to parents. Like so many of his books it full of a wealth of insight and wisdom, while also being easy to read.

If you can only pick up only one book to help you understand young teens, this would be the book to pick up!

It Is All About Change

If you could sum up the young teen years (middle school/Jr. high) it can be summed up in one word- "change". You can try to summarize it or find other words to try to describe this time of life, but it is all about change. Everything is changing physically, mentally, emotional, relationally, and spiritually. It is the reason that this age is a curse as well as a blessing, and why parents need to truly understand their young teen.

Walking Hormones (physical & sexual development)

Young teens are a mix of intrigued and scared by the strange new things that are happening to their bodies. Their bodies are suddenly changing shape while at the same time they are growing up in new ways. Sexually and hormonally most of all dominate the biggest changes of this time period of life with voice changes, nocturnal emissions, and beginning of menstruation. All which lead to huge challenges and implications to being a Christian parent amidst a sexually charged culture.

Mind Warp (cognitive development)

With the onset of puberty comes also the transition of brain process. The shift from concrete thought to the ability to begin to process abstract thought is both a blessing and a challenge. While for Christian parents this may seem to be a scary time as young adolescents begin to questions the black and



white truths of faith, it also is a time for developing empathy, self-awareness, and identity. While the brain physically changes the thinking as well changes giving way to deeper thoughts and faith.

Roller Coaster Freak Show (emotional development)

This is the age of the “expanding color palette” of feelings. Pre-teens and young teens feel things in new and deeper ways, while still developing the ability to control and understand their emotions. Additionally, the difference between guys and girls become even more distinct physiologically and socially. It is important however for parents during this age to not make wide generalization about young teen emotions, but instead get to know their individual child. Parents must be very aware and watchful of the norms and ranges of their child’s emotional states.

Best Friends Forever (relational development)

Another shift during the young teen years is relationally, as they move from proximity to affinity based relationships. During childhood relationships were based on who was around most often (neighborhood, church,...) During the young teen years relationships become based on similarities (interests, hobbies, personality...). Relationships are further influenced by self-perception. With the new abstract thought process, young people at this age also become more self-aware. Relationships are developed based on how they see themselves, see others and what they perceive as to how people see them.

I Can Do It, Just Don’t Leave Me (independence)

For better or worse the point of adolescence is to prepare young teens to move toward adulthood independence. During childhood, children depend on parents to learn and grow. During adolescent, young teens begin to learn for themselves and make choices to grow for themselves. With this new independence comes the tendency to react in one of two ways- complete smothering or complete freedom, both of which are not good. Parents have the opportunity to give and take independence, allowing their child to fail and learn from it.

Operating System Upgrade (spiritual development)

While we think of spiritual things and faith as often black and white, we know honesty faith exist in the abstract. Young teens begin to realize that and move into a cycle of spiritual development as they: recall, value, speculate, try and do. It is a time to allow for honest doubt and questioning in order to

encourage personal ownership or faith.

White-Hot Temporary (early adolescent culture)

All of the changes that are happening in a young teen, do not happen in a vacuum. There exist an early adolescent culture that may have some similarities to a parent's young teen year, but with so many overwhelming differences. Most significantly are: 1.) The extended length of adolescents, with the early onset of puberty 2.) The acceptance of youth culture by the whole of culture 3.) The quickly changing technology that continue to impact relationship and human interaction.

The role of parenting in this changing culture and through the changes in their young teen is to become both a student and an interpreter of both the culture and the developmental changes. As Christian parents it is hard to parent through theses years, but it is the time of life that holds the keys to unlock life long faith.

