

# What to Say to a Teenager in Crisis



by Paul David Tripp

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If you live with teenagers or soon-to-be teenagers it's easy to think that they're from another planet. The way they dress, the music they like, the words they use, and the friends they hang out with are very different from you. Your world seems so far from theirs. What can you say that will help them when they hit a rough patch? Is it possible for you to communicate effectively when someone so unlike you is in a crisis?

Yes, it is.

## What You Need to Know

First, *communication is possible*. Effective communication with your teenager begins when you look past the surface differences and see that your teenager is more like you than you might think. Your teen isn't an alien. Your teen is becoming a reflective human being (just like you). This presents you with an unprecedented opportunity to be used by God in your child's life. There are two reasons for this:

- Your teen is now capable of sophisticated thought and self-reflection. Your son or daughter is becoming mature enough to discuss issues and recognize things in a

way that was not possible a couple of years ago.

- As your child makes more independent decisions, this will reveal issues of the heart (loves, desires, and wants) and create openings for conversation.

So look past the surface issues and use these openings; communication is possible.

Second, *your teen's "trouble" is your opportunity*. The revelation of your teenager's heart through words, actions, and decisions is what makes the teen years the best of times and (sometimes) the worst of times. It's the best of times because you have many opportunities to talk about what really matters. It's the worst of times because you will have to accept the reality of your teen's true heart condition. You might know from reading the Bible that everyone's heart is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9). But it's hard to see this on display in your own dear child. It's not always easy to accept that your teenager's actions are controlled by the heart and not by hormones, circumstances, or pressure from friends.

This is a time of wonderful opportunity, but the opportunity is *in* the trouble. If you want trouble-free teen years, you will have a hard time appreciating the opportunity God has given you. But when you remember that God is using trouble to reveal important things about your teen's heart, then you will see these times as God-given moments of ministry.

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Paul David Tripp (M.Div., D.Min.) is president of Paul Tripp Ministries ([www.paultrippministries.org](http://www.paultrippministries.org)) and Executive Director of the Center for Pastoral Life and Care in Fort Worth, Texas. He has authored many books on Christian living, including "Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens."

In one sense this makes your parenting job so much bigger. Instead of just trying to keep your child problem-free, you are looking for personal transformation at the deepest level. But when you remember that only God can change a human heart and you are only his instrument, then your parenting task becomes much smaller. You are called to be faithful; only God can do the work of change.

Third, *your words are shaped by your heart*. What does this have to do with talking to your teen? Everything! The Bible says that all of us speak out of our hearts. Our thoughts and desires shape the words we say. Have you ever

### What You Need to Do

First, *do not personalize what is not personal*. Our natural tendency is to make our teenager's misbehavior more about us than it really is. When we do this we say things like, "I can't believe you would do this to me!" or "Do you have any idea what my day was like?" These statements make you the central issue instead of your child's need for a changed heart and a deeper, more honest relationship with God. Here are some things that happen when you take your teenager's actions personally:

- You will often *turn a moment of ministry into a moment of anger*. When you feel personally

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apologized after a moment of anger by saying, "I didn't mean to say that."? That wasn't exactly true was it? Those words started as thoughts in your heart, and that's why they came out of your mouth. God tells us in the Bible that all of our words and actions start in our hearts (Matt 12:34; 15:18; Luke 6:45).

Your words are shaped by what you want for yourself and for your teenager. Useful and productive conversations with your teen are only possible when your heart is in the right place. Your teenager *will* mess up your schedule... *will* try your patience... *will* challenge your authority... *will* make unwise decisions... *will* embarrass you... *will* struggle with living for the approval of friends... *will* cause you to get up earlier and stay up later than you want to... and *will* think up trouble that isn't even on this list. But here is the important point: your words in all of these situations will be shaped by the true condition of *your* heart. When you have God's perspective on your teen's life, then your words will be used by God to bring hope and change to your teenager. But when your heart is focused on yourself and on your desires and fears, then your words will bring discouragement and tension. If you are living for control, your words will be angry and fearful. If you are aiming to influence your teen toward what is good, your words will be constructive.

offended, your words will be shaped by irritation and anger. You will say things like, "You don't want to even think about what will happen if you ever do this again!" or "Do you wake up every morning and think about new ways to drive me crazy?" These words are not the wise and carefully crafted words of someone who desires to be a part of the ministry of change that God has lovingly planned for this moment in your teen's life. They only express your anger and your frustration.

- Because you have turned a moment of ministry into a moment of anger, you will be *adversarial in your response*. Your words will communicate, "It's me against you!" Since you have not dealt with your heart, your teenager is, at that moment, your enemy. Because your child is standing in the way of what you want (peace, comfort, control, etc.), you will say things like, "You don't want to push me!" or "Do you want to take me on? I wouldn't try it if I were you!"

- You will be tempted to *look for a quick solution* that doesn't get to the heart of the problem. It's much easier to yell and throw a punishment at your teenager than to take the time to find out what is going on in your teen's heart and relationship with God.

How helpful is it to relate like this to your teenager? As you are angrily lecturing, do you think your child is thinking, "Wow, this is great; I am seeing myself more clearly than I

ever have. Now I know I need to change, and I am so thankful for the way my mom and dad are helping me.”? No, when your words are shaped by your anger and irritation, you are not part of what God is doing in your teenager. You’re in the way of it. Your anger will provoke your teen to the very things you would like to see changed.

Second, *start with your heart*. If you want God to use you in your teenager’s life, you have to be willing to examine your own heart. Your teenager is not the only sinner in your home. Like your teenager, the tendency of your heart is toward self-centeredness, deceit and wickedness

*and organizes life*. Don’t just say, “This is what I think,” or “Do it because I said so.” Instead, tell your teenager what the Bible says about the issue at hand. Each circumstance your child faces provides an opportunity to demonstrate how the Bible makes sense out of all of life (2Tim 3:16–17).

- *Be willing to share your own struggle*. Don’t minimize your own struggle with sin. Share with your teenager how knowing Jesus has helped you in your struggle with sin. (Paul modeled this in Romans 7:14–25.) Don’t let your words convey to your teenager that you have arrived spiritually. Let your child see that although your outward sins might be different,

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(Jer 17:9). The only cure for your self-centeredness is daily repentance for sins and daily dependence on Jesus’ death and resurrection for forgiveness and the power to change. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8–9).

As you learn to live a repentant and God-dependent life, you won’t see your teenager’s bad behavior only as an inconvenience or an embarrassment, but as an opportunity. That doesn’t mean it will be easy to see your child make bad choices, but it does mean that God will be able to use you as an instrument of change in your teenager’s life.

Third, *speak wise words*. “The tongue of the wise brings healing” (Pro 12:18). How can your words and attitude do your teenager some good? Here are some principles to keep in mind as you speak with your child:

- *Stay calm*. There is a God. He is in control. All he does is good (Rom 8:28–39). Remind yourself of these truths and then take a moment to pray, to listen, to get all the facts, and to ask good questions.
- *Keep the conversation going*. Sometimes your teenager will share just a little bit of what is going on inside. It is up to you to continue to pursue your teenager with expressions of concern, commitments to prayer, and simple questions (not interrogation!).
- *Demonstrate how the Bible interprets, explains,*

they are just as wrong in God’s eyes. Your need for Jesus is just as deep.

- *Keep Jesus and his work central*. The most important relationship in your teenager’s life is not with you. Relationship with Jesus is most important. Be alert for opportunities to point to the forgiveness, deliverance, and power that are only found in him.

- *Words of mercy and grace must be said with mercy and grace*. Times of correction must not be times when a loud voice, pointed finger, inflammatory words, and stomping off in parental disgust are the norm. If you fail to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15) it will cease to be the truth, as the purity of its content becomes corrupted by your frustration, impatience, and anger.

There is no script for talking to a teenager. Each teen and each situation is unique. As parents we need to humbly ask Jesus for the wise, kind, helpful, patient, useful, heart-changing words that come from a heart that his Spirit is making wise, kind, and patient. When Jesus is at work in our hearts, our words will be appropriate and productive, even in the most difficult situations.

Fourth, *take the time it takes*. You might be saying to yourself: “What you’re describing sounds like it takes a lot of time. What if we are just too busy?”

It’s a mistake to try to squeeze a one hundred dollar conversation into a ten cent moment. Don’t try to have that serious

conversation just before your teen runs out the door or goes to bed. If you know you need to have a long and potentially difficult discussion, schedule a time to have it. This protects you from dealing with an issue in the heat of the moment. It lets you take the time to clear your mind and settle your emotions. It protects your teenager, because you are creating a setting in which you will be better able to work through emotions and hear what each other has to say.

Honest and constructive communication does take time. But communicating with your child should be so important that you are willing to rearrange your schedule and priorities. Think about how you are spending your time now, and evaluate your schedule according to the eternal significance that each activity has. Remember that working at building a relationship with your children and pointing them toward Christ is investing your time in something that will last forever.

*Fifth, learn how to handle the times you fail.* When you try to have a good conversation, your child might make some remark or comment that really angers you. Be prepared.

One of the sweetest things Jesus did for us on the cross was to break the power of sin over us. This means we don't have to go wherever our emotions and desires lead us. We can, in fact, say "no" to powerful passions (a motivating emotion) and powerful cravings (agenda-setting desires) and go in another direction (Titus 2:11–13). As God's child you must decide to exercise this power. How can you do this?

- Prepare yourself by admitting your need to God. Pray for the help that only he can give you.

- Think carefully and clearly about what you need to communicate and how you should say it.
- Identify where you might get trapped. What does your child do or say that gets you angry or irritated?
- Have an anger strategy. Decide what you will do when you start to lose it. Will you stop and suggest that you pray together? Will you excuse yourself and leave the room until you have regained your composure? Will you confess your struggle to your teen and ask for help so that together you can avoid the traps?
- Believe God's promise that even in a moment of raging emotion and powerful desire you can say "no" and go in another direction. Let your belief in God's promises set the agenda for your communication with your teenager rather than what your teenager says and does. Then watch the good things God does as you depend on him for help.

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What can you say to a teenager in crisis? If you see your teen's trouble as an opportunity for you to offer godly care to someone struggling to mature, you will find many things to say. Fight your natural tendency to make your child's misbehavior a personal affront to you. Instead, start with your own heart before God. Ask him to help you to see these crises as opportunities—opportunities to share your own story of struggle and faith, and to invite your teen to follow Jesus too.

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