

# What is “Success” in Parenting Teens?



By Paul David Tripp

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## **What goals do most parents have for their teenagers?**

Many parents have a simple goal for getting through their child's teenage years: survival. But this goal focuses simply on getting *yourself* through a difficult time. In order to get through these years, parents tend to settle for external, behaviorist goals. We try to deal with our kids according the Nike way, “Just do it!” But parents who just want to regulate and control behavior don't give teens much to take with them when they leave home.

Naturally, every parent needs to have regulations to control the behavior of their children, but that is not enough of a goal. That sort of rule-keeping is behaviorism. It is disconnected from the heart and is repudiated throughout the Bible. “Rule-keeping” was the sin of the Pharisees. Christ roundly condemned it. Yet even Christian parents create new young

Pharisees who live with no sense of need for the gospel at all. Teens can be quite good at keeping external rules.

Many teens from Christian homes go off to college and then forsake the faith. But I suspect they never had a living faith in the first place. They had the faith of their parents but never internalized it for themselves. The true heart of the teenager, masked by years of parental control and regulations, comes out in the college years.

The final years of a child's life at home are a time of unprecedented opportunity. As a child's world unfolds before him and he experiences greater freedom, his heart is revealed. This means parents have to take every opportunity to be part of the final stage of preparation. Being involved with our teenagers at a deep level is a critical goal for these years.

Unfortunately, Western culture has a cynical view of the teen years. People tend to see teenagers as a collection of raging, rebel hormones encased in skin. Of course, you can't talk to a hormone. But this approach is a subtle denial of God and the gospel. This approach says that God didn't make teenagers. It says that the gospel doesn't work for this particular group of people. That is devastating, bad theology.

People think the world influences and directs teens. They say the problems of teen behavior results from association with other people (e.g., peer pressure) or circumstances

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(e.g., hormones). But the Bible says, in hundreds of ways, that human beings live out of their hearts. The world's blame-shifting comes straight out of the chaos of sin in Garden of Eden. The Bible says our relationships and circumstances are merely the occasions in which our hearts express themselves. The heart directs teens.

### ***What do you mean when you use the word "heart"?***

The Bible has a simple anthropology. God says that people consist of two parts: the outer man (your earth-suit) and the inner man (your spiritual self). The Bible uses a number of words—mind, emotion, will, spirit—to describe the heart. In a sense, "the heart" is one big basket term, biblical shorthand for the inner man and all its functions.

The Bible attributes many important functions to the heart. We feel, think, purpose, desire, believe with our hearts. We also receive or reject God's new covenant for our hearts. If the heart is the steering wheel of the human being, if it's what causes us to do what we do, then it's quite obvious that the focus of parenting has to be with the heart of the teenager.

Christ uses the example of the tree to explain the function of the heart. You look at the tree and its fruit and you say: "That's an apple tree, because it has apples." If it weren't an apple tree by nature, it wouldn't produce apples. In Christ's example, the tree equals the heart, and the fruit equals behavior and its consequences.

Imagine that I have an apple tree in my backyard that produces mealy, shriveled apples year after year. I say to my wife, "I can fix our apple tree." I go out and cut off all the old apples. Then I nail shiny Red Delicious apples all over the tree. From fifty feet away the apple tree now looks like a fine and healthy apple tree. But we all know what's going to happen. Those apples are going to rot, too. If the tree consistently produces bad apples, then something is wrong with the system, right down to its roots. We won't solve the problem by nailing good apples onto the bad tree. This is the problem with much of modern child rearing, even in Christian circles. A lot of what gets

called "biblical parenting" is nothing more than apple-nailing. Six weeks later, or perhaps six months, or six years, the child is right back to where he was before.

### ***Are you saying that many Christian parents are behaviorists?***

Yes. But the problem is that they don't realize they are. And much of the time it's because they don't know the difference. There are lots of hurting parents out there who understand that something is not right about what they are doing. The problem is that they don't use a "heart" model for child rearing. If you go to the average Christian bookstore you won't even see the word "heart" mentioned in books on parenting. The books are all about techniques and strategies for controlling behavior. They are "behaviorist" even though they appear in Christian guise.

The scary thing about these books and strategies is that they are often temporarily effective. I can control a child's behavior through a variety of means. If I lay enough guilt on my child, it will move him. If I manipulate my teen with something he wants, a new car or a new bike, I will be temporarily effective. If I threaten him, he may comply. But the problem is that none of these strategies have lasting effectiveness. The inner person, the teen's heart, hasn't changed. The minute the threat or the incentive is gone, the child goes right back to what he was doing. This happens in the general population and in the church as well.

### ***In what ways can the trials of the teenage years reveal what is really going on in the parents' hearts?***

I have four children, all of them now grown up. I wish I could say that the only time I got angry was when one of them broke God's law! However, the truth is that often I wasn't angry because they had sinned, but because their sin had gotten in *my* way. And what often gets in the way of parenting teenagers are the idolatries of the mother and father.

As a father, I too often live for comfort, appreciation, success, respect, and control. None of those things, in and of themselves, is wrong. But they must not rule my heart. If they do rule my heart, then in a moment of teen

trouble, I will likely personalize what is not personal and be adversarial in my approach to them. At that moment, I will be enraged because the teen has stopped me from doing or having what I really most want. I'll settle for a quick solution because I just want to get it over with. I'll turn a moment of God-given ministry opportunity into a moment of anger. I won't see how to wisely go towards his heart.

The key to being used by God with your children is to start with your own heart. Think about this scenario for a moment. Let's say that my love of possessions rules my heart. I'm very proud of my car, my house, and furniture. My teenage son comes in one Friday night and announces that he's smashed up my car. When he breaks this terrible news he is nervous and sits on my new audio system and wrecks it. He spills his can of Coke all over my oriental rug. Now, if I live for material things, I will fly into a rage. But God uses such accidents to reveal things to me about my teenager and about myself so that I can learn to become part of what God wants to do in my teen's life.

idolatry first, then all the strategies for dealing with your teens will not help. Goal-setting won't help either, because you always end up serving what rules your heart. It's like the law of gravity—it's always in operation. The Bible gets to the heart of this problem through its radical view of human nature. God declares that worship isn't an *activity* for human beings; worship is an *identity*. We are worshipers; we can't help *but* worship. We are always in the service of one thing or another. If I'm not serving God in the life of my teenager, then I'm serving other things.

***What's the problem with adult hearts when they begin to resent their teenage children?***

In the teen years a dynamic relational change takes place. When my child is young, he is pretty much caught up in whatever my agenda is. I am in total control. He goes wherever I take or tell him. The only friends he has in the house are the ones that I approve. However, the more my teenager's world widens, the less that's true. This adolescent sinner has a

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My immediate problem at that point is not *his* sin. The first problem is *my* idolatry. The real crisis for me at that moment is not my son's negligence, but the fact that he trashed my idols. Parents confess their idolatry in roundabout ways all the time: "I do all this for you and this is the thanks I get?" Or a father says, "How dare you do this to me!" as if the teen has deliberately plotted against him. It feels personal to a parent because the teen has prevented him from serving the idol that rules his life. It can be a huge struggle for the parents at times. But the teenage years are a time of unprecedented opportunity. The first important thing I can do is search for idolatry in my own life. Then, as I find it, I can confess it. I can find Christ's mercy. I can forsake my own wrong. And then I can clearly and lovingly begin to address my teen's wrong (Matt. 7:1-5).

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remarkable ability to mess up my world. His choices can increasingly collide with mine. A teen struggles to come to terms with life, to grow up into an adult identity. Every teenager is also a sinner trying to learn how to live in God's world and the kindness of Christ—hopefully learning what it means to be godly and learning about the dangers of sin. These dynamics have a huge impact on my life as a parent. If parents don't respond in godly ways, it makes sense that they will sometimes resent their teenagers.

Teenagers are completely different from those sweet babies that we once held in our arms. We loved to hear them coo. They smelled so fresh. It seems so ironic that the tiny person who brought us so much joy is the same young man I now resent. Perhaps I'm so mad at him, I don't even want to sit down and have a meal with him. He's made my world uncomfortable, and I don't like my world being turned upside-

down. I like a world that's predictable and controlled. I deeply resent the fact that I have lost my previous level of comfort and control.

When I get angry and frustrated with my teenager, it reveals the depth and consistency of my self-love, one of the horrible effects of sin. Paul reminds us that Jesus came that those "who live, should no longer live unto themselves but for Him who for their sakes died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15). Jesus says that selfishness expresses sin. Sin makes you self-absorbed.

What do I really want for my teens? Typically, I want pre-sanctified, self-parenting children! I want children I can take to a restaurant without being embarrassed. I want children who will do their homework without being nagged. I want an easy life for myself. Frankly, I never expected that becoming a parent meant I would have to lay my life down for my children. But that's exactly what God calls me to do. My redemption not only cost Christ His glory; it also cost Him His life. Christ models how I need to live as someone redeemed by costly love.

### ***What sort of attitudes and approach should parents have when dealing with their teens?***

First, define "a successful life" in terms of family relationships, not career. The modern workplace has devalued the importance of family relationships. This trend began with the industrial revolution. Two hundred years ago, when industry was cottage-based, if the family was in crisis, the shop shut down to settle the problem because the family ran the business. But when you remove men from the home and relocate the place of work, all of a sudden industry begins to dictate lifestyle. What man today would call his boss and say, "I'm going to be two hours late because I'm sorting out a difficult problem in our home and it needs to be dealt with now." Instead, you say to your wife, "I can't talk about that now because I have to be on-time for work."

As work and family life became separate, men began to define success in terms of their performance on the job rather than on their success in the home. Now women also define success in terms of job performance. Sadly, our society rarely stresses the importance of family relationships when defining a successful life. But

we need to. We must come to a position where we say, "Nothing that I will ever be or do will rival the importance of God's work in the formation of my children's souls. Nothing is more important than that. That demands some hard choices.

When I speak in churches, I often single out the men and challenge, "Some of you are so busy in your careers that you're seldom home, and when you are, you are so physically exhausted that you have nothing to offer your children. You don't even know your own kids. I offer a radical challenge to you. Go to your boss and ask for a demotion. Take less pay. Move out of that dream house and into a smaller one. Sell your brand new car and drive an older one. Be willing to do what God has called you to do in the life of your children." In a culture with two-income families, increasingly that challenge must also be made to women who also sacrifice family for career.

I made that appeal at one home-school conference and it angered a man in the crowd, although I didn't know it at the time. Two years later he came over to me during a conference break. As he got closer, he began to weep. He said, "Two years ago I heard you give the challenge you just gave tonight and I got angry. I thought, *What right do you have to say that?* But I was haunted by your words. I thought, *He's speaking about me. My whole life is away from the home and I don't know my own kids.*

I finally went to my boss one morning and said, "I want to talk to you about my position." My boss said, "Look, we've advanced you as much and as fast as we can." And I said, "No, no, just hear me, I want a demotion." The boss looked startled. He asked, "What are you talking about?" I said, "The most important thing in my life is not this job. The most important thing is that God has given me five children. I'm His instrument in forming their souls. But right now, I don't even know my own kids."

The boss said, "I've never heard this kind of conversation before and I'll probably never hear it again. I'm very moved. We'll find you a position where you can work forty hours a week. You can punch in and punch out and have less responsibility. But I'm not going to be able to pay you enough." I said, "That's fine."

We sold the house of our dreams, got rid of two luxury cars and bought a mini-van. It's been two years now, and not one of my kids has come to me and said "Dad, I wish we lived in a big house," or "Dad, I wish we had new cars." But over and over again they have come and said, "Dad, we've been having so much fun with you. It's great to have you around." Now, for the first time, I can say I know exactly where my children are. I know their hearts. I know what I need to be doing in their lives. I'm actually being a father."

There are obviously many other crucial attitudes, but I'd start with "make parenting a priority."

***What are the most helpful ways to understand teenagers if we are to play a vital role in their spiritual development?***

The most helpful thing to remember is that your teenager is more like you than unlike

It's a whole different approach. The "I'm more righteous than you" approach closes down teenagers, just as it closes you down when some other person does that to you. The best way to understand a teen is to understand yourself.

***How is the Bible helpful in preparing us to meet the challenge of the teenage years?***

The Bible is transcultural and transgenerational. We divide human beings into subcultures, believing that we are very different from one another. In some ways we might be, but the Bible casts its net in a way that catches everyone.

The Bible speaks to the typical struggles of young people in every culture. It works in a situation when a son says to his dad, "Father, I forgot to bed down the camel," and it works when a son says, "Dad, I forgot to put gas in the car." It spans generations. It's not hard to look at Scripture and realize that the Bible is right when

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you. Too often, we have this view that teenagers are a separate class of people, as though they're aliens who've dropped from the sky. But there are very few struggles in the life of my teenager that I don't recognize in my own heart as well. For instance, imagine my child has gotten into trouble because he's procrastinated on a school assignment and now he can't possibly get it done on time. Haven't I done the same thing? Of course, I have. And if I realize that, I can't come to him and say, "How dare you! How could you? In my day I would have never thought of doing this!" Instead, I come as a fellow sinner.

It's because of this that my dealings with him become based on the gospel rather than law. Here's my opportunity to point him to Christ. So I say: "Son, there's a rescue provided for us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's hope for both of us. I need it every bit as much as you do. And I stand with you. However, don't expect me to write a note to the teacher to get you out of the assignment."

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The book of Proverbs is very clear in reminding us that teenagers don't usually hunger for wisdom and correction. I've never had one of my children say to me, "Dad, you are a really wise man. I love to sit at your feet and drink in your wisdom." Or, "Dad, when you correct me, you show me your love. Would you like to give me more correction?" Wisdom and teachability are crucial to pleasing God, and yet my teenager does not hunger for this.

Now I have my job description. It is to sell my teenager something that he is not seeking. I decide to do it by being a wise man. I want to show him that wisdom is a beautiful and wonderful thing. I want to sell wisdom to him so that he becomes a keen consumer. In each area of the teenage struggle there is wonderful opportunity.

Teenagers tend to be very legalistic. They

see things in black and white. They love to debate the boundaries. They push hard to get what they want. They don't particularly love God's law. God's law is like a fence to them—it keeps them away from the good things they want. But you don't solve the problem of teenage legalism by debating where the boundary is. The child who presses his face against that fence believes a significant lie: the good stuff is out there but God and parents keep him from it. I want my teen to know that nothing he could possibly desire compares with wisdom.

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom,  
the man who gains understanding,  
for she yields better returns than gold.  
She is more precious than rubies;  
nothing you desire can compare with  
her.

Long life is in her right hand;  
in her left hand are riches and honor.

Her ways are pleasant ways  
and all her paths are peace.

She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;  
those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

(Prov. 3:13-18)

Show your teen the glory of what God has called us to. Can you imagine living in a town where everybody was gentle and kind; no one ever stole; there were no such things as envy, murder or adultery; no one coveted; everyone was always patient? That's God's world! So in each one of those areas of teen struggle parents have wonderful opportunities.

The Bible is vital for dealing with teens. In the first few chapters of Proverbs, a father gives advice to his son. "Son, pay attention to my wisdom." "Son, give heed to my instruction." As a father, I decided to read the first eight chapters of Proverbs over and over again. I literally read those chapters hundreds of times. A number of repetitive themes rose to the surface. I know that if I have to repeat something several times to my children, it means I have identified a struggle within them. Likewise, the themes in Proverbs give us a wonderful picture of the typical temptations or struggles of a young person. And they give me a nice template for thinking about the kinds of things I am going to encounter as I go through my children's teen

years.

What should be the basic spiritual goals for parents in dealing with their teens? It's more than simply regulating their behavior. A lot of parenting is reactive. It's not goal-driven. Something comes up and I react to it. However, Scripture expects us to move well beyond reactive parenting. Scripture sets up deeper goals. When I help my teens deal with issues of dating, or use of the car, or behavior at school, their individual situation gives me a God-given opportunity to help them assess and change their heart goals. For each of my children, I have tried to look through the individual situation to the goal for their hearts that I hope to achieve.

One of these goals is to teach my child to understand and participate in the spiritual struggle. The Bible tells us that the most important things to happen in life are unseen. It also tells us that there's a real enemy who wants control of our hearts. That war goes on in every situation of life. I want my teenager to get beyond the surface level of clothes, friends, and sports in order to see the significance of sin and temptation in every situation of life.

What rules our hearts? Our idols. Teenagers need to be challenged about what governs them. Teens have three idols: appearance, possessions, and acceptance. I want to them to understand what is really going on in their hearts and lives.

### ***How should we train our children to make a difference in our culture?***

When you try to squeeze the biblical worldview into a Western culture and value system, it just doesn't work. It's like trying to squeeze an elephant into a thimble. Parents become frustrated because they understand that something's wrong, but they just can't figure out what's not working.

The Bible gives us a culture. The Christian worldview is a culture of its own. And we're not just keeping our kids from doing bad things in the world's culture—such as taking drugs, having sex, getting drunk. We are trying to "enculturate" them in a different way. What does that look like? We focus on issues of identity: Who in the world am I? How do I define my identity? How do I look at material possessions? What defines success for me?

The Bible's definition of success is to love God above all else and to love your neighbor as yourself. It certainly isn't the size of your house or the nameplate on your door at work. It's not how athletic or good looking you are. Those are not biblical indicators of success. In fact, you can have a life that is an unmitigated failure but be fabulously successful in the world's terms.

We have to redefine "success" for people. But I never get to live just in God's world; I live in the secondary realm of human culture. This has always been a struggle for the church. When Israel goes into the Promised Land, God warns them: "You're going to intermarry. You're going to do commerce with these people. You're going to worship their idols." And that's what happened. There was a huge cultural struggle.

It's not enough to train your children to live in isolation from the world. That is a fake safety and a selfish choice. God says He wants me *in* the world but not *of* it. Neither is it safe to assimilate, because then I become like everybody else. We have to be able to live

the church car park so that it can be seen, and then we go in and sing songs of worship to what is supposed to be our God.

### ***Why are Christian parents often frustrated in their efforts to cultivate a heart for God in their teenagers?***

Cultivating a heart for God in teenagers is the hardest work a human being could ever do. We must realise that there is no hope apart from Christ. If I could turn the human heart by the force of my voice, the strength of my personality, the logic of my argument, or the wisdom of my parenting strategies, then Jesus would never have needed to come. As a parent, I've hit something that I can't do by myself. It makes me angry. It frustrates me. It discourages me. I want an "instant fix." Just give me the three steps to producing godliness in kids. But the Bible doesn't do that. It doesn't give us a system of redemption; it gives us a Redeemer.

Here's the really scary news. No matter how righteously I act with my son, *he* must deal

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successfully within the culture without picking up its God-denying values.

I want to teach my kids to think in a God-centered way and give them analytical skills to understand the culture. I want to help them recognize light from darkness. I want to show them where they can participate in society and where they must withdraw. My job is to start with my own kids and create a mini-culture at home. You see, it's not enough to be passive as a parent and say: "Well, at least my kids aren't doing the 'biggies' like dope and promiscuous sex." Our kids may look all right on the outside, but their hearts may be owned by the core values of the surrounding culture.

That happened to the children of Israel. They would do homage to Baal on their way to sacrifice to Jehovah. Sadly, we do the same things. We worship the Mercedes we drive to the worship services. We park it prominently in

with God or there won't be any hope for him. No matter how righteously I act with my daughter, *she* must deal with God or there won't be any hope for her. I can't do that for them. What I do in my frustration is try to do God's job with my kids. I try to force my child. I put guilt on him. I think of everything I can do to change him. I forget that only God can turn the heart. At some point, I must realise as a parent that my children must internalize this or they will never turn out to actually love and need God. Parents must accept their helplessness. Then they'll quit trying to be God and start being His instrument.

Sometimes I engage in conversational overkill with my teens because I'm trying to do God's job. When we do this we make our kids very angry. We exasperate them and push them into bitterness. I once had a father in my office who firmly grasped his son's face with his hand and said, "If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm

going to make you respect me!” Imagine if you were that young man. You’re not going to sit there and think, *This is really helpful. Instead, you’ll think, Yeah, like that’s ever going to happen!* This frustrated father tried to do what only God could do. That will never produce respect. It stimulates the very rebellion you try to get rid of. This father declared war on his son.

When it finally clicks that you can’t change your kid’s hearts, get down on your knees. Begin praying for your teens and confessing your own sin to God and to your teens like you’ve never done before. As a father, I want to be a sharp instrument in the hands of the Redeemer because I know that only Christ can renew my children’s hearts.

***How can parents help their teens leave home grateful for the life preparation that they’ve received?***

Parents should remember that the best climate for a relationship is a climate of honesty and humility. Restoration takes place when parents are willing to be honest about their own struggles. Parents who are all talk but no action drive teenagers crazy. These parents hold up standards but never keep them themselves. How can you talk about God’s grace and be bitter and angry? After a while, the child just can’t wait for that first moment to make his exit.

I preach the Gospel by declaring my own need for it. That can be done every day. I was talking to my seventeen-year-old son recently. I’d been impatient with him. I said: “It’s not going to be any surprise to you that I’m going to say ‘I’m a sinner.’ There are times when I think of myself more than you. Last night was one of those times.” And my son said, “I do the same thing with you Dad, and I forgive you.” After that exchange we felt genuine warmth between us. However, there would have been a very different outcome if I had said: “You really ought to be glad that you have a dad like me. I’m always going out of the way for you. Why do you mess up all the time after all I’ve done for you?” It would’ve been a whole different ball game if I had done that.

Here’s the point: If I’m willing to admit my need of Christ, then I come before my child with the evidence of what he also should do. He has not only seen his need, but he has seen the changes Christ is able to make in me. I preach the gospel by living my life. That’s powerful. But it’s an opportunity that we miss because we believe we compromise our authority when we admit our own sin. My authority is representative anyway; it’s not based on my righteousness. My righteousness is based on Christ. When I model this for my teens, I am an instrument in Christ’s hands.