

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF TEENS**

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*"I wish I had an instruction manual!"* How many times have you said this or heard it said by parents or mentors of teenagers? While an instruction manual may not exist, there are many ways to begin understanding the teen in your life and making a difference in theirs. Here are a few practical ideas that can guide your interactions and attitudes about teenagers:

**Validate Feelings:** Many fights and power struggles can be avoided by understanding that you cannot control a teen's feelings. We may wish that they felt less selfish or happier, or valued the same things we do as adults, but attempting to force a change in feelings often ends up in attempts to guilt them into a feeling. Expressions of disappointment in their feelings get translated into disappointment in them as people. Allowing a teenager to have their feelings even when you disagree is a great way to create respectful space in your relationship in which appropriate feelings and values can be instilled. It is amazing how much better the relationship will feel for both of you when you give up needing them to feel a certain way!

**Help Them Process Anger:** One of the primary tasks of development during the teenage years is to break away from their parents and gain a greater sense of self and independence. Anger assists teens in making this transition by enabling them to push parents and other authority figures away. Anxiety about emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational changes, as well as sadness about the losses of growing up can also lead to much of the anger seen in teens. While we always advise parents to seek support if their teen is displaying violent or out-of-control anger, letting a teen express and process through normal bouts of anger is healthy, and teaching them to be angry in a constructive way is an important life lesson!

**There Is A Good Reason For Everything They Do:** Believe it or not, teenagers make sense. Just because you can't connect the dots doesn't mean that they don't have a great reason for what they are doing. It is definitely your job as a parent, grandparent, mentor, or youth leader to guide and direct, but that guidance should be grounded in a deep value of the teen and their point of view. Guidance or direction offered without understanding feels disrespectful (even to adults!). Try to get into their shoes, assume that there is a good reason for their feeling or behavior (this is such a hard one for parents!), and only offer solutions after that.

**Model, Model, Model:** Is the teenager in your life prone to a disrespectful tone of voice? Are they easily frustrated or apt to not listen when you speak? Chances are that you or other adults in their life are modeling the same kinds of behaviors with him/her. Ask yourself: Do I snap at my teenager when I am stressed or tired? Do I use a disrespectful or loud voice when I am angry? When my teen interrupts me in the middle of a task do I get annoyed or give only half of my attention? Teenagers are a wonderful and often painful mirror for us, but those who are willing to really look at themselves will discover many opportunities for personal growth as well as raising healthier kids.

**Try To Be A "Yes Man":** Power struggles with kids of any age are Lose-Lose propositions, and teenagers (like toddlers) are exerting a healthy desire for power and control at every turn. Try to avoid these battles by finding ways to turn a "no" into a "yes" whenever possible. Does your teen want to stay out past curfew? Consider why they are asking, see if you can understand their point of view, and even if the answer is no, see if you can find a way to compromise. Asking them for help coming up with solutions and compromises will teach them problem-solving skills and help you to both get what you want and deepen the relationship as you work on issues from a team perspective.

At The Center for Christian Therapy we are trained to assess and assist families and teens in healthy communication and growth. Contact us for further information or to set up a Free Consultation.