Parenting teenagers for wise autonomy

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The Return of the Prodigal Son
Murillo 1667/1670

When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

- Attributed to Mark Twain

The challenge of the teenage years

Most parents are stressed by the foolish, anti-social and unpredictable behaviour of their adolescent children. It is very hurtful and surprising when teenagers become unruly and disrespectful, leading the parents to wonder, "Where have we gone wrong?" It is upsetting as teenagers reject the advice or example of parents, resist physical contact (such as a hug), retreat into isolation, depend on the approval of their friends, become media saturated, and are sometimes aggressive, sexually active, drug-abusive, depressed, law-breaking, self-harming and even suicidal.

These tribulations can arise from rebellion, but can also result from a largely unrecognised contradiction of expectations: parents want their teens to obey, but teenagers want to make their own choices. So the troubles of adolescence sometimes arise (in part) from the process of gaining independence that is badly handled by teens and their parents, though the inclination towards autonomy is a healthy part of maturation that should be welcomed. Parents can therefore come to realise that young persons must increasingly engage in a process of independent action, though it involves many difficulties.

The task facing parents is to accept teenage trauma as normal, and to minimise conflict wherever appropriate. Parents must support worthwhile attempts towards autonomy and avoid escalating the clash - otherwise any hope of reconciliation could be lost. The challenge is to bring calmness and reassurance to potentially explosive situations and then attempt to negotiate mutually satisfactory outcomes.

Replacing obedience training with coaching toward wise autonomy

While youngsters enjoy rewards given for good conduct, and soon stop actions that are punished, teenagers tend to outgrow parental dependence and lose the ability to be shaped meaningfully by parental punishment or reward. So in the teen years such responses must be replaced by coaching for wise autonomy. But this change of approach is resisted if parents try to apply to teenagers the Scriptural teaching on control and discipline that relates to youngsters, such as corporally enforcing their obedience.

Coaching teenagers towards independence requires enormous restraint when raising concerns, or congratulating, as both actions can be resented. Hence the instruction: *Fathers do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged* (Colossians 3:20).

The meaning of the teenage challenge

Understanding God's creational order and redemptive plan can enable parents to find meaning and purpose in the trials of the teenage years, which give us the opportunity to re-enact the story of grace.

According to the created order, God does not give us adult offspring, but babies who journey from happy infancy into turbulent adolescence. Built into creation, the joy between parent and infant is a role-play of mankind with God: *"When Israel was a child, I loved him ... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms* (Hosea 11:1,3). God also said, *"As a mother comforts her child so I will comfort you"* (Isaiah 66:13).

According to the redemptive plan, parents and their teenagers role-play humanity clashing with our loving God. Testifying to this divine drama, the struggle between parent and teenager portrays mankind resisting God who remains faithful and restrains his anger: *"My people are determined to turn from me ... all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger"*, though he raises his voice in rebuke: *When he roars his children will come trembling* (Hosea 11:7-10).

In the clash of parents and teenagers we depict God responding to restore humanity as it carries independence too far. So only when young people resist their parents can families show God's patient loving-kindness as a prophetic action that testifies to the story of grace. Instead of reacting to exasperate, parents can say to themselves, "Aha! - I understand why this is happening, and I embrace the opportunity to reflect God's character".

The fatherhood of God in the Parable of the Lost Son

Parents can draw great reassurance from the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15) as we recognise God as the father of two rebellious offspring - though his parenting is without fault. In this parable, the youngest son effectively could not wait for his father's death, but wanted the inheritance directly, and then squandered it. The older son was also wayward, falsely regarding their father as unkind: *"you never gave me even a young goat"*. He obeyed outwardly - *"I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed"* - but then resented his father's love for *"this son of yours"*.

Moreover, the parable commends "consequential learning", as the father allowed the youth to learn from painful choice, including going hungry while feeding unclean animals. But instead of disinheriting or rejecting the wayward youth, his father loves unconditionally and restores the young person with astounding generosity when he returns.

The story helps us move away from punishing teenagers, since it shows God as *slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness* (Psalm 86:15). Of him it is stated: *time after time he restrained his anger* (Psalm 78:38). Giving freedom of choice, he does not desire grudging obedience but the submission of a heart given freely - *not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver* (II Corinthians 9:7). Parents accordingly can follow the example of Paul - who served *as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging* (I Thessalonians 2:11) and the example of Solomon, who in Proverbs (1-7) made his detailed appeals - *"My son ..."*.

Church leadership standards and the behaviour of children

Wise and faithful parents are not to be blamed for the acts of their teenage or adult children, just as the father in the parable is not blamed for his rebellious offspring. So the requirement that a Christian leader's children *obey him with proper respect* (I Timothy 3:5) and *believe and are not open to the charge of being wild or disobedient* (Titus 1:6) must refer to young children. As leadership qualifications relate to ministry, the usefulness of church leaders is that they appreciate the various difficulties of family life - as noted by Paul who remarked: *those who marry will face many troubles* (I Corinthians 7:28).

Useful leaders respond lovingly in marriage, discipline their youngsters, and patiently encourage their teenagers. So their family troubles are necessary to the biblical qualification for leadership!

Practical strategies for the parents of teenagers

As wisdom is eroded by the pressure of life, parents should find time to refresh spirit, mind and body, as a foundation for creatively responding to problems in general, and teenage difficulties in particular. Daily prayer, reflection and exercise (to reduce stress) can help develop wisdom that *overlooks an insult* (Proverbs 12:16) enabling ministry such as follows:

- **Daily** share a two-minute devotion over the evening meal, even as everyone is eating (if teens would otherwise resist such devotions).
- **Weekly** spend an hour alone with each young person, somewhere outside the home - perhaps visiting a nearby coffee shop or going for a long drive (as cars soothe crying babies and help silent teens communicate!).
- **Monthly** invite another family to a shared meal or games night - to break patterns of dysfunction and practise good behaviour.
- Resolve disputes by visiting an inexpensive restaurant so the family can discuss issues calmly, on best behaviour, over a meal in a public location.
- Respond for the teenager's sake, and not for parental reputation.
- Invite, seek permission, and ask favours instead of making demands.
- Avoid unnecessarily asserting your views - if they are already known.
- Rescue only when help is wanted and is absolutely necessary.
- Serve the best food possible, to comfort and to boost self-esteem.
- Disarm criticism and disrespect by responding with humour.
- Meet with other parents, to share problems and creative solutions.
- Remain *patient*, *kind*, be *not easily angered*, provide unconditional love that *keeps no record of wrongs* but which believes the best, and *always hopes* and *always perseveres* (I Corinthians 13).

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