

TYNDALE

PREPARING YOUR TEENS FOR

COLLEGE

FAITH, FRIENDS, FINANCES, AND MUCH MORE

ALEX CHEDIAK

Foreword by Tedd Tripp

Author of *Shepherding a Child's Heart*

Praise for *Preparing Your Teens for College*

Preparing Your Teens for College is . . . an outstanding book about preparing [teens] for adulthood whether or not they go to college. Every parent who wants his or her teen to make a successful transition to young adulthood will profit from this book. As a grandparent I'm going to send copies to my own children to help them prepare our grandchildren.

JERRY BRIDGES

Author of The Pursuit of Holiness

Don't let the college years derail your teens. Too many are floundering in college, losing their connection to God and reality. Let Alex be your guide to preparing them for college.

JOSH MCDOWELL

Speaker and author of More Than a Carpenter

My only sadness in reading this book is that it was not available when my wife and I were parting with our children. Alex Chediak has provided a comprehensive manual, packed with biblical insight and practical wisdom. It should be required reading for all parents in preparation for the "bittersweet sorrow" of seeing our children in the rearview mirror as we drive away from the college campus.

ALISTAIR BEGG

Senior minister, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

Parents have no guarantees, but they can boost the likelihood of a successful transition to college by absorbing Alex Chediak's book. *Preparing Your Teens for College* is not a gassy theoretical work but a practical, easy-to-use map through the spiritual, social, sexual, financial, academic, and occupational minefields.

DR. MARVIN OLASKY

Editor in chief, WORLD News Group

My friend Alex Chediak has done it again. He has provided both parents and students an invaluable and reliable guide regarding the all-important college years. . . . The college years are years that will shape your child for the rest of his or her life. Read this book and let Alex, a parent and a college professor himself, guide you.

TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN

Pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and author of One Way Love

In *Preparing Your Teens for College*, Alex Chediak presents parents with all the tools needed to launch their young adults successfully into college life and beyond. But what I appreciate most about this author is his insistence that each son or daughter must have his or her own new birth. The faithfulness we desire for our children comes only by personally trusting in the goodness of God enough to actually obey Jesus Christ as Lord.

GREGG HARRIS

Director of Noble Institute, conference speaker, and father of Alex and Brett Harris (bestselling authors of Do Hard Things)

At a time when both college officials and employers are recognizing that certain “soft skills” essential to adult success are lagging among young adults, Alex Chediak’s primer on college prep is timely, informative, and effective. . . . Chediak lays out a sound and workable guidance plan, one oriented toward Christian faith, but accessible to all concerned parents.

DR. MARK BAUERLEIN

Professor of English, Emory University, and author of The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future

The common conception is that Christian teens head off to college only to have their faith, values, and character stripped from them. But Alex Chediak argues that it doesn’t have to be that way. This book gives parents a wealth of helpful information as they send their kids to the halls of higher learning.

JIM DALY

President, Focus on the Family

Alex Chediak has provided guidance for parents on preparing teens for college that is at once useful, practical, and insightful as well as undergirded with a clear biblical worldview. . . . This book will be a great resource to any parent, youth pastor, or school guidance counselor who is involved in leading, advising, and coaching a teen for responsible Christian adulthood.

DR. DEREK J. KEENAN

Vice president, Academic Affairs, Association of Christian Schools International

In *Preparing Your Teens for College*, Alex helps parents realize that our hard work of preparation has a lot more to do with getting them ready for life than with getting them into the “right” college. And, preparation involves much less doing everything for our kids and much more equipping them to be able to do things for themselves.

KAY WILLS WYMA

Author, Cleaning House: A Mom’s Twelve-Month Experiment to Rid Her Home of Youth Entitlement

In my work with Christian college students, I know that significant numbers of them arrive at school without adequate preparation for what they will encounter. . . . What many Christian families need at this point is some sturdy horse sense, grounded in Scripture. *Preparing Your Teens for College* meets this need in an admirable way.

DOUGLAS WILSON

Pastor, Christ Church, Moscow, Idaho; senior fellow and trustee, New Saint Andrews College; and author of Letter from a Christian Citizen and The Case for Classical Christian Education

This book does more than show parents that they can prepare their children for college. It offers specific, practical, wise advice on the larger task of raising teenagers. . . . In addition to useful tips for helping sons and daughters choose and succeed in higher education, whether at a university or a trade school, this book can function as a guide for Christian families in one of the most important tasks of parenthood: teaching children how to be adults.

DR. GENE EDWARD VEITH

Professor of literature and provost, Patrick Henry College, and author of Loving God with All Your Mind and Family Vocation

Alex Chediak has provided us with a much-needed and thoughtfully written guide for parents, guidance counselors, and educators alike. The insights found in this outstanding book will be most beneficial for those who invest the time to read and reflect upon Chediak’s wise words.

DR. DAVID S. DOCKERY

President, Union University

Combining practical experience with research, Alex Chediak helps teens (and their parents) prepare for the migration to adulthood. As that migration is made increasingly later in life these days, the wisdom laced throughout this book is welcome indeed.

DR. MICHAEL HORTON

Professor of theology, Westminster Seminary California, and author of Pilgrim Theology

Preparing Your Teens for College is relevant, accessible, insightful, and practical. But best of all it is biblical. This is not a book of helpful hints from a wise man on guiding older teens. It is instead a faithful book of soundly applied biblical wisdom on guiding older teens. Alex has a rare ability to lead the reader to not just compare the Bible to the culture's expectations of what is normal, but to demonstrate the beauty that flows from submission to the Word.


DR. R. C. SPROUL JR.

Associate professor of systematics, apologetics, and philosophy, Reformation Bible College (and father of eight)

This book helps calm parents' fears in sending their children to college. With tremendous insight and wisdom, Dr. Chediak helps to prepare parents to prepare their children for college. I know of no other book that deals with many of the hard questions this book helps to answer.

BURK PARSONS

Co-pastor, Saint Andrew's Chapel, Sanford, Florida, and editor of Tabletalk magazine



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PREPARING YOUR TEENS — for — COLLEGE

FAITH, FRIENDS, FINANCES, AND MUCH MORE

— ALEX CHEDIAK —



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Foreword by Tedd Tripp

ALEX CHEDIAK HAS done it again! This book is a needed addition to the universe of parenting books. Chediak brings his many years of experience both as a student and as a college professor to the task of preparing teens for college and for a useful future.

As a young man I spent a couple of years working as a resident director for a men's dorm at a Christian college. From that post I observed young people who were not prepared for college. They refused to accept responsibility for their lives. They lacked the foresight to postpone immediate gratification for the sake of future benefit. They did not understand how to internalize their faith and live as people of conviction. They made bad choices of companionship, not understanding that "the companion of fools suffers harm." They failed to comprehend the biblical truth that moral purity is essential to flourishing spiritually. Confronted with our consumer culture, they were tempted to squander money with high-interest credit cards. They did not understand

how to be stewards of God's gifts to them. They lacked self-consciousness about their own talents and natural abilities.

I remember watching teens like those just wasting their years at college. I would try to counsel them, but more often than not the die was cast. The character issues and lack of maturity that drove their daily choices kept them from receiving wise counsel. As I read Alex's book, I thought that the sacrifice parents make to *keep* kids in college would be more wisely invested in *preparing* them for college in the ways this book outlines.

Preparing Your Teens for College is a clarion call to parents to be people of influence in the lives of their teens. Alex proposes a wide-ranging series of conversations for parents to have with their teens: conversations about being responsible, making good decisions, forming good friendships, understanding faith, learning how to live as a Christian in ways that are wise and gracious, being smart with money, maintaining personal purity, developing convictions, living from convictions, discerning gifts and talents, working diligently as to the Lord, and many other topics. Teens need these engaging conversations with their parents. They are at the point in their life when they are forming opinions on a whole range of issues: identity, personal values, career goals, relationships, how to live as Christians in our culture, and understanding their gifts and talents, to name just a few. They need parents who have maturity, wisdom, and life experience to engage them in serious conversations. This book will equip you to do just that.

Alex identifies the important topics, outlines the content of the conversations, and even walks parents through possible approaches to these much-needed conversations. The importance of these conversations is simply impossible to overstate. Too many parents want to have these conversations but are not sure what to say. Sometimes, they haven't taken the time to work through the range of topics they want to cover and plan those conversations.

In each chapter, you will find a discussion of the spirit of the age and how young people think in our culture. Alex provides a biblical critique of modern thought as well as the Christian truths you will want to emphasize with your teens. At the end of each chapter, there is a series of discussion questions that will lead to fruitful conversations. Parents who take the time to engage their teens in the ways Alex recommends will accomplish things that cannot be achieved through any exercise of parental authority.

One of the most humbling truths we know as parents is that we cannot save our children. God must work in their hearts. There are limits to what we are able to do. It is encouraging to remember that God works through means. One of the means he uses is parents who diligently shepherd their children. I am happy to recommend this book as a sharp tool for *Preparing Your Teens for College*.

Introduction

The Questions Every Parent Is Asking

MY BOOK *Thriving at College: Make Great Friends, Keep Your Faith, and Get Ready for the Real World* came out in April 2011. One afternoon that summer I was sitting in my office waiting to do a radio interview. I had done a few by then, and I felt I was getting the hang of it. But the first question that day brought on a momentary glaze: “Alex, we know college is a big deal. So how can parents get their teens ready?”

I thought, *Wait. That’s not what the book is about!* I had written *Thriving at College* to help *students* get the most out of the college experience. I didn’t write it for parents.

A week later it happened again: “We’ve talked a lot about the challenges college students face. But how about the parents? How can *they* do a better job getting their teens ready?” At least I wasn’t caught off guard this time.

A few weeks later I received an e-mail about an upcoming conference. Would I give a seminar on how parents can prepare teens for college?

Since then, it seems I’ve been answering questions about

how to prepare teens for college as much as I've been talking about the college experience itself. At conferences, at churches, and in everyday conversations, it seems every parent is asking questions like these:

- Will my children's Christian faith be strong enough to withstand the tests of college—the party scene, the atheistic professors?
- Will they manage their time well or be overwhelmed with the amount of freedom that awaits them?
- Will they form solid, healthy friendships or be lonely and get in with the wrong crowd?
- Will they be happy, successful, and persevering in their studies, or will they wander aimlessly from one major to the next?

Those questions led to this book—a comprehensive manual for parents, pastors, guidance counselors, or anyone else getting teens ready for college. *Preparing Your Teens for College* is the overflow of my personal experience, both as a kid who once went to college and, more significantly, as a college professor who for the past eight years has worked every day with the “end products” of your labors—the students who leave home and head to college in search of professional preparation, a deeper sense of purpose, and a greater awareness of their place in God's world.

In the time since you and I have embarked on our adult lives, both the *cost* and the *importance* of college education

have dramatically increased. But high school graduates have also changed. Just as Gen Xers are different from Boomers, teens today are in a whole new category. Let me unpack the challenges that we, and they, are up against.

THREE ECONOMIC REALITIES

Preparing teens for college has never been more crucial, due to three economic realities that don't seem to be going away anytime soon: the importance of post-secondary education, the escalation of college tuition, and the sluggish state of the global economy.

First, the importance of college attendance. As recently as 1980, only half of high school graduates chose some form of college after high school. In recent years, that figure is in the 65 to 70 percent range.¹ Combine that with general population growth over a 30-year stretch, and you've got a massive upswing in college enrollment (an over 80-percent increase from 1980 to the present).²

Why all this growth? Because we're fast becoming a skill- and knowledge-based economy. Between 1973 and 2007, 63 million jobs were added to the US economy, while the number of jobs held by people with only a high school degree fell by about two million.³ And the "earnings premium"—the additional money earned by college graduates as compared to high school graduates—has been steadily rising for the last three decades. You're probably reading this book because you've gotten the memo: a college degree will give your child the greatest shot at getting and keeping a good job.

But the word *college* means different things to different people. While the highest-paying jobs (on average) are accessed with a bachelor's or an advanced degree (doctors, lawyers, engineers, business consultants), economists predict that nearly half of future job openings to be filled by workers with post-secondary education will go to people with an associate's degree or an occupational certificate⁴—think electricians, construction managers, and dental hygienists. These may not strike you as prestigious lines of work, but our economy needs them, and they pay better than most people think. They have the added benefits of not requiring a quarter of a million dollars in educational costs and of being difficult to outsource.

Which brings us to the second issue: college tuition. The annual price tag at a four-year, public university (the most common destination for college-bound teens) has risen three and a half times faster than the rate of inflation over the last 30 years.⁵ Yet despite this steep increase, enrollment in these and other four-year schools continues to dramatically rise. Why? Because if it gives our kids a better shot at a successful career, we're willing to foot the bill.

But that's not *quite* true. Amid economic weakness, parents have actually been shelling out *less* for kids in college (covering 27 percent of costs in 2012–2013 versus 37 percent in 2009–2010).⁶ What's picking up the slack? Subsidies (such as grants and scholarships) and loans. For the 2009–2010 academic year, six out of ten public four-year college students graduated with an average student debt load of \$22,000. Student borrowing that year was deeper and more widespread

at private schools: two out of every three students graduated with an average of \$28,100 in student loans.⁷ Loans to parents have jumped 75 percent since the 2005–2006 academic year.⁸ And it seems to get a bit worse each year: approximately seven out of ten 2013 graduates accrued some form of debt (including money owed to family members), totaling an average of \$35,200.⁹ About \$30,000 of this was student loan debt.¹⁰ Even after adjusting for inflation, student loan debt has increased by over 300 percent in the last decade.¹¹ As a nation, we owe over one trillion dollars in student debt, more than we owe in credit cards.¹² Add to this the fact that graduation drops students into a sluggish economy—one in which many bachelor's degree holders under the age of 25 are either unemployed or underemployed (as of April 2012).¹³

Which brings us to the third issue: the lackluster state of the global economy. Folks with 10 to 20 years of experience, laid off in the economic downturn, are now applying for jobs normally filled by new college graduates. And they're often willing to work for lower wages (since they have no alternative). Employers, given their options, are understandably going with the more mature, experienced applicants, leaving lots of new grads out in the cold.¹⁴

It's a perfect storm. More people are going to college than ever before, it costs a fortune, we're borrowing crazy amounts of money to go, and the newer graduates are competing with experienced candidates for precious few job openings. Oh, and one more thing. The maturity of students going into college is often woefully low—as are graduation rates.

KIDS THESE DAYS

Lots of freshmen haven't gotten the memo that college is a lot of work. They seem to think it's an expensive vacation funded by you (along with student loans). Roughly one out of four freshmen does not make it to their sophomore year, often due to immaturity or lack of focus.¹⁵ Other students get by, but never really grasp the purpose of the academic enterprise—they don't become lifelong learners; clearheaded thinkers; well-rounded, flexible, honest, hardworking, self-starting, responsible, mature, humble men and women. They never develop strong communication, problem-solving, or people skills—the very qualities employers are looking for.¹⁶



College Graduation Rates Are Terribly Low

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States now has the highest college dropout rate in the industrialized world. While we send as many as 70 percent of high school graduates to college, as of 2010 only 42 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds have a post-high school degree of any sort. At four-year colleges and universities, only 56 percent of students graduate in *six* years. At two-year schools, it's even worse: only 29 percent graduate in *three* years.¹⁷

Moreover, these traits equip us to love and honor God with all our minds and to do good works in the marketplace, in the laboratory, in the library, in the classroom, in the hospital, in the law courts, on the mission field, or wherever God leads us.

Many teens today are more dependent on their parents than we were at their age. They're more distracted by media and technology. They're less willing to discipline themselves and work hard. And they expect success to come more easily than is realistic. In a survey of more than 2,000 high school seniors in the Chicago area, sociologist James Rosenbaum found that almost half of them (46 percent) agreed with the statement: "Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true."¹⁸

Yet studies have shown—ironically—that overconfidence leads to underperformance. Those whose self-esteem is more reinforced, apart from objective accomplishment, exhibit declining performance over time and are most likely to quit.¹⁹ It makes sense. If you think you're better at something than you really are, you expect it to come easily. This makes you less likely to work at it, less likely to succeed, and more likely to be surprised and disappointed when you don't. As a professor, I have seen this happen many times.

I'm happy to say that some students are well prepared, get over the inevitable hurdles, and come out on the other side just fine. Others who start off poorly respond well to correction. They learn their lesson and graduate with a high degree of maturity and skill.

THE PARENTING ROLE IS IRREPLACEABLE

Training matters. Not just what we professors do on campus but what you do before your teens ever get to us. Thriving at college begins in the home. What you model and impart to

Thriving at college begins in the home.

your teens, day in and day out, makes a huge difference.

I've seen this play out countless times in the lives of my students, for good and for ill. Some students from churched backgrounds leave the faith while at college, either temporarily or permanently. Many fail to adjust to the rigors of college-level academics—even some of our most gifted students. And beyond academics, “failure to launch” is not uncommon—students preferring to linger in the no-man’s-land of adolescence rather than complete the journey to full-orbed adulthood.

Each of these topics is the subject of countless books in recent years. And while there may be disagreement on the best remedies for spiritually apostate, professionally wandering, or developmentally stunted twentysomethings, there's strong agreement on what can mitigate these ailments: godly, involved parents who intentionally and wisely invest in their children, in word and deed, at all stages, but particularly in the teen years. There's no doubt about it—what you and I do as parents, before our teens leave home, has the greatest likelihood of preventing these kinds of decline.

Shepherding your children in the direction of responsible Christian living in every sphere of life prepares them for the tests of post-high school life like nothing else can. “Train

up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6). “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth” (Psalm 127:4)—to be released with care and intentionality into the world to make a difference for the glory of God and the good of others.

So while *Thriving at College* is for students, *Preparing Your Teens for College* is for you. When I get to know college freshmen, I recognize that the worldview and character they bring to college are the result of 18 or 19 years of living with their parents. Their *worldview* (how they think) and their *character* (who they are) impact their *attitude* (what they think) and their *behavior* (what they do). Their attitude and behavior, in turn, give rise to their habits and their destiny, as they (like we) reap what they sow (see Galatians 6:7).

Worldview & Character → Attitudes & Behaviors → Habits & Destiny

And all of this is true whether our children become medical doctors or ultrasound technicians, engineers or electricians, businesspeople or beauticians. A four-year college is but one of several possible launching pads into a responsible, fruitful life.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The heart of this book is 11 conversations you’ll want to have with your teens before they head off to college. The conversations deal with issues of character, faith, relationships, financial discipline, academics, and finally the college

decision itself. To help you facilitate these conversations, I've included "Conversation Starters" at the end of each chapter. I know that talking to teens can be difficult, and it's not always easy to catch them at the right time. Sometimes you have to take time with them when you can get it—even if it means dropping what you're doing, or staying up until 1:00 a.m. to make yourself available when they're able to open up. But these open-ended conversation starters will help you to broach the topics in this book in a nonthreatening way.

Here's a short preview of the conversations in this book.

Character

We've all seen it: young people with enormous potential who flame out because of poor decisions. Perhaps it's substance abuse, reoccurring impulsiveness, or too much freedom before they're ready. As parents, we want to protect our children from turning out badly. And yet we cannot completely control what they choose. Their accountability is ultimately to God.

How can we help our teens develop critical thinking skills and an internal moral compass before they leave the home?

In conversation one, we'll talk about the dangers of "over-parenting" and "under-parenting." God expects us to shepherd their hearts. This involves instruction, correction, and admonition—delivered in love to influence them for their good.

In the second conversation we'll tackle the importance of delaying gratification, persevering, and building a life

of integrity. The ability to say “no” to one pleasure (sinful *or* legitimate) for the sake of something later—something *greater*—is very important. Many fail for lack of it (Proverbs 25:28), and no one reaches their potential apart from it.

Faith

When I speak to parents about getting their teens ready for college, I’ve found this to be the most acute concern: Will my children’s faith be strong enough to withstand the tests of college? Will they come out on the other side with their faith intact? We’ll divide this section into two parts: internalizing the faith (conversation 3) and developing a winsome posture toward those with other beliefs (conversation 4).

The process of internalizing Christian convictions is sometimes messy. But it’s one that must occur, at some point, for those raised in Christian homes. Some teens never see Christianity lived out and conclude it’s not real. Other teens are raised in stern homes where they fear expressing any religious questions, doubts, or struggles with sin. Consequently, their faith remains dwarfed—more external than internal, more their parents’ than their own. Our goal is to help them see, for themselves, that Christianity truthfully and satisfyingly explains reality.

In conversation 4, we’ll talk about how Christians can engage those who think differently with true tolerance—and without compromising their convictions. In engaging others, your teens need to remember that each person bears the image of God and is thus worthy of dignity, respect, and honor. They

ought not to demean or belittle those who think differently. At the same time, humanity is fallen, and sin impacts even our minds. That means some pretty smart people—including college professors—can believe some pretty dumb things.

Relationships

Your teens' close friendships will profoundly shape how they turn out as adults. "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Proverbs 13:20). As parents, we must help our teens realize that because friendships are so influential, they need to be chosen wisely. There's a place for friendship evangelism, but a Christian teen will generally not do well if their closest friendships are with non-Christians. They need the "iron sharpen[ing] iron" (Proverbs 27:17) benefit of those who share and reinforce the value system by which they aspire to live. In conversation 5, we'll discuss how you can help your teens be wise in their selection of close friends—being proactive and making relational choices, not reactions.

In conversation 6, we'll tackle relationships with the opposite sex. We live in an "if it feels good, do it" culture, yet the sexual arena is one in which, as Christians, we're called to go against the flow, to delay gratification so that we can say yes to God's best for us. In a day when the majority of adults cohabit before marriage and 40 percent of all children are born out of wedlock, we must raise our children to understand that God intends intimacy to be associated with marriage. Our teens must control their strong desires

for physical and emotional intimacy and channel them into the identification and pursuit of a quality, lifelong partner.

Finances

In conversation 7, we'll deal with the enormously important (and often neglected) task of helping our children internalize wise financial habits and disciplines. Though credit card usage among college students may have decreased since 2009,²⁰ the majority of card owners fail to make full payments on a monthly basis, racking up needless consumer debt.²¹ Other students take on excessive student debt with little regard to their future ability to make repayment.

While college students have little control over the global economy, they are responsible for their unbiblical attitudes toward money and for their inappropriate spending habits. Against this cultural tide, parents must teach their children the value of money. Raising children with a biblical perspective of money will go a long way toward short-circuiting the common financial mistakes young adults make during and after their college years.

Academics

In conversation 8, we'll talk about modeling the goodness of work to our teens so that they develop a biblical motivation for their academic pursuits. The work of students is to develop their intellectual capacities, understanding that well-trained minds prepare them for all that God has in store for them in the future. Because all truth originates in God, teens

should approach all of their schoolwork with an attitude of worship.

Helping our teens to see their schoolwork as a God-assigned responsibility and to find joy in the learning process is the first stage of their academic preparation for college. The second stage, which we'll take up in conversation 9, is helping our teens discover their specific areas of academic interest and talent. We want our teens to become accurately and confidently aware of what they're naturally good at (talents) and love (interests). Wisely selecting a college major—one that taps into the intersection of their God-given talents and interests—is also of practical value if we hope they'll graduate in a timely manner.

The College Decision

In conversation 10, we'll discuss how to find a four-year college or university where a student can receive a high-quality education, excellent preparation for the job market, and vibrant Christian community on and off campus. We'll talk about the importance of a four-year college having a strong program not just in the area of your teen's major but in its liberal arts (or general) education as well. When done well, a liberal arts education teaches a student how to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complicated problems. These are foundational competencies not just for a particular job but for *life*.

In conversation 11 we'll talk about a few overlooked paths to a rewarding career: trade schools, apprenticeships,

and associate's degrees. Though less appreciated than in the past, being mechanically inclined is important for many lines of honorable work—ones in which millions of jobs are currently unfilled, as employers cannot find enough skilled workers (or people willing to make the effort to become such workers). God doesn't view skilled labor as less important, and neither should we.

LET'S GET STARTED

So there's the layout for the book. My aim is to provide a comprehensive handbook on getting teens ready for college (in all its forms). Although the six sections build on each other, feel free to read the book in whatever order you find most helpful.

Are you ready to help your teens develop responsibility and a work ethic that will persevere into their college years? Are you ready to coach them through smaller failures so they succeed over the long haul in the crucial areas of life?

Are you ready to help your teens internalize their faith and engage a lost world with conviction and compassion?

Are you ready to help your teens discern the character qualities to look for in friends and to embrace God's plan for purity?

Are you ready to help your teens cultivate a biblical perspective on money and draw up a plan to avoid the vortex of debt that captures so many college students?

Are you ready to help them assess academic interests and

talents so they can make an informed decision regarding a college major?

Are you ready to help your teens ask the right questions about prospective colleges so that they get the best value for their dollar?

Then let's get to work on preparing your teens for college.



**PART 1
CHARACTER**

CONVERSATION 1

Teaching Responsibility

A HUGE SIGH broke the awkward silence as Frank pulled up at another red light. In the passenger seat sat Matthew, a red-faced teen, staring out the window.

“Dad, the plan *was* to hang out at Johnny’s Pizza. I’m not lying! I had no idea Josh was going to insist that we go to his house instead.”

Frank’s eyes didn’t move. He was afraid to look at Matthew, who had alcohol on his breath. Frank’s mind was racing: What had happened to the innocence of Matthew’s childhood? Frank remembered Matthew’s first year in Little League and how much fun they’d had going to his games. Ever since Matthew had turned 14, things had taken a turn

for the worse. He was hanging out with the wrong crowd, neglecting his homework, and often seemed to have a chip on his shoulder.

It's not that Frank had been unconcerned. He and his wife, Mary, took Matthew to church every week and encouraged him to attend the youth group's activities. They just didn't want to dictate his every move. That's why they let him make his own choices. *But look where that led*, Frank thought.

With a pained expression, Frank glanced at his son. "What happened, Matthew? How could going over to Josh's lead to my getting a call from the police?"

More awkward silence. Then Matthew replied, "Josh insisted we all come over. Once we got there, he disappeared and came back with a few bottles and a flask with a weird shape. It was Jim's 16th birthday, he announced, and we needed to celebrate. Soon there were probably 30 people in the house.

"Look, I wasn't going to drink anything. Seriously. But once everyone got there, they started playing a game that involved sampling the bottles. *What could go wrong?* I figured. It wouldn't hurt to try a little. I never felt out of control. Not until Josh started getting on my nerves. Next thing I knew, he was going after me in the backyard, screaming. He tried to fight me, Dad. What was I supposed to do? The neighbors must have heard something and called the cops."

Frank was speechless. He stared at the road ahead. He didn't know if he wanted to scream or cry. *Something has to change*. He replayed the last few years in his mind. He had

never talked to Matthew about the temptations of teenage life. Not just alcohol, but also the desire to fit in. To not only be accepted, but respected. He just figured it would all work out. Matthew had been such a sweet kid. Frank wanted his little boy back.

Slowly, Frank realized that he and Mary were parenting Matthew as if he were still a boy. This incident would give him a chance to begin a new kind of conversation—one about freedom, choices, responsibility, and accountability. But Frank felt overwhelmed. He had no idea where to start.

AUTHORITY AND INFLUENCE

As Christian parents, we must always seek to shape the character of our children, to set them on the right course, with an internalized, biblically informed moral compass. That's our duty: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). In the early years, this often comes with a high degree of structure. "Eat your vegetables." "Brush your teeth." "Get to bed." And discipline. Children must know that we're in charge and that God, for their good, has put us in authority over them.

As our children grow into the teen years, their ability to do things we disapprove of increases, and like Matthew's parents, our ability to control them decreases. They can lie to us, hide things from us, and even live double lives. We can't spank them; they may even be bigger and stronger than we are! If we're banking solely on positional authority, we're in trouble. What we need is moral authority: *influence* in their

lives, at the deepest level—a level we can't reach without their consent.

Positional authority is God-given; moral authority must be earned over time. Think of moral authority as the permission to speak into the inner core of someone's heart—to shape the person's heart and, in turn, life (see Proverbs 4:23). We must win the hearts of our teens so that they *want* us involved in their lives, leading them into adulthood, interpreting the fast-paced biological and social changes they're experiencing, helping them process their shortcomings and insecurities, and encouraging them that with God's help they can do great things.

But how? By seeing the hard moments as God moments—opportunities rather than irritations. When our teens make sinful choices or are caught in a web of deception, we have to fight the temptation to give them a piece of our minds. It's easy to show them “who's in charge around here.” It's harder to remember that *God* is ultimately in charge and that he has put us in their lives to prepare them for adulthood. Their failures are opportunities to come alongside them, helping them to understand cause and effect and that (as a college mentor once told me) we never really get away with anything. It's a chance to remind our teens that the greatest happiness always lies in the sometimes hard path of obedience and to let them into our own lifelong discovery of this principle.

Please don't misunderstand. The quest for moral authority doesn't mean we abrogate positional authority. I'm not saying we turn household rules into mere suggestions for our teens

The Foundational Importance of Conversion

One possibility is that Matthew is not yet a Christian. Jesus said, "A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit" (Matthew 7:17-18, NLT). In other words, the fruit doesn't define the tree; the tree defines the fruit.

Matthew's dad should consider that Christian behavior can only flow from someone who has experienced the miracle of being born again (see John 3:3-6). The new birth makes us alive to God. A dead tree withers in the sunlight, but one that's alive grows in the sunlight. A non-Christian naturally chafes at Christian teachings—he has no desire to please God. A true Christian longs to please God, even though temptation and sin remain a lifelong struggle.

The first thing we must aim for in our parenting is the conversion of our children. Godly character traits will naturally flow from an authentic conversion experience. That said, a well-behaved, orderly, non-Christian teen is more tolerable in the home and a better influence on his siblings than one who is rude and disorderly. We can and must maintain propriety in our homes, even if our children are not yet saved. But as we do so, let's not forget that good behavior can never save anyone. We need to remind them of their need for Jesus even as we seek to preserve a sense of order, dignity, and respect in our homes.

to consider. We're still in charge in our homes. And while spanking is no longer an option as our children get older, there are other consequences that can prove instructive, such as curtailing certain expressions of freedom (e.g., driving a family car) until they've demonstrated an appropriate degree of maturity. But the *demeanor* of our authority must increasingly be one that appeals to their consciences. We have to go

beyond our teens' external behavior to the internal motivations of their hearts.

The goal is to shepherd our teens' hearts while recognizing that their ultimate accountability is to God, not us.

We *are* in charge, but we're not just bosses. We're coaches and mentors to guide our teens into the years when they'll be on their

own. Our deepest desire is that they internalize godly principles and the Christian faith from which they originate so that they're obedient in our presence *and* in our absence, and not just to us, their earthly parents, but to God, their heavenly Father.

What does all this have to do with preparing teens for college? It's simple: the character of your teens is as determinative of their success in college as their intelligence, if not more so. I've seen this play out in countless students over the years: some come in with excellent ACT or SAT scores and solid high school GPAs, but their inner lives are a mess. They got by because high school was too easy. They lack self-control. They make reckless decisions. Before too long, they're in serious academic trouble. Thankfully, I've also seen

the opposite: students whose academic ability is at best average but who through discipline and consistent effort have a seriousness about them that inevitably results in improvement. They find their niche and flourish academically and socially. Success in college really is more perspiration (discipline and effort) than inspiration (talent).

Because character is so important, we'll cover it first. This chapter and the next are devoted to helping you shape the character of your teens so that they leave your home college ready. To do that, we have to grapple with a tension—one that Frank was thinking about as he drove Matthew home: If we give our kids too much freedom and space, how do we know they won't go off the deep end and make some really bad choices? On the other hand, if we don't loosen the reins, how will our children learn to exercise critical thinking skills and make moral judgments for themselves? If we don't allow them to exercise greater freedom, even if it means the occasional blunder, how will they become more responsible?

Was Matthew's problem too much freedom? Or was it too little preparation? We need to think hard about the goal of our parenting and living between the extremes of under-parenting and over-parenting. The goal is to shepherd our teens' hearts while recognizing that their ultimate accountability is to God, not us.

UNDER-PARENTING

There are various ways to sidestep the struggle of parenting teens, all of which I'd put under the umbrella of

under-parenting. I read an article recently about a man who was embarrassed by his wife's behavior. Since their daughter had turned 13, Mom had changed. She began to shop with her teen daughter and to buy the same clothes, preferring to both look and act like a high school girl. Why? She thought it would develop a special bond with her daughter, make her a more approachable mom, and prevent them from being drawn apart during the pivotal teen years. If you think about it, it's the same kind of fear Matthew's parents had—a fear of being too preachy and coming across as fuddy-duddies. We're afraid our teens will turn against us, preferring the acceptance of their peers to the wisdom of their parents.

When we as parents act like teens, we send a clear message that being an adult is less interesting than being a teen. Adulthood, and the responsibilities that come with it, are to be avoided for as long as possible. When we simply put off difficult conversations for fear that our teens will reject us, we send the message that we lack either the wisdom or the interest to help them transition into adulthood.

I have adult friends who tell me that when they were in high school, their dads would grunt and walk away if they disapproved of something. That sent the message, I suppose, but spared Dad the stress of uncomfortable conversations.

We get in trouble when we pursue friendships with our teens by becoming their peers and when we limit our involvement to clucks or grunts of disapproval. Either way, we're failing to provide what we alone can: preparation for entering the adult world. We're abdicating our God-given

role as authority figures in the lives of our children. What teens really want from their parents is structure, wisdom, and guidance. Even secular psychologists recognize that this kind of authority gives a teen security.

Teens today spend the majority of their time with their peers, people who (whatever their strengths) are not in a

Rehoboam's Folly

King Solomon's son Rehoboam ascended to the throne and was immediately confronted with a thorny situation (see 1 Kings 12:1-11). He wisely sought counsel from a cluster of older men who had advised his father over a 40-year reign. He also checked in with a group of young men who had grown up with him. Their recommendations diverged, and Rehoboam was forced to issue a make-or-break decision that would determine the trajectory of his administration and the nation of Israel itself. Rehoboam foolishly sided with the ego-boosting advice of his peers ("show the people who's boss!"), rejecting the judicious, seasoned perspective of the older men who looked to the future and to the greater good ("take care of the people, and they'll serve you forever"). It was downhill from there. Rehoboam lost his moral authority and soon had an insurrection on his hands.

position to lead them into responsible adulthood. If we don't take the initiative to prepare them, our teens are left vulnerable to the powerful voices in their social scene, for better or worse. Either through impulse or ignorance, they'll probably make some regrettable choices, possibly with long-lasting, even devastating, consequences. Many would testify that parental abdication of leadership in the teen years can swell into a source of deep resentment between adult children and their parents.

Under-parenting can be subtle. Matthew's parents, from a distance, appear to be good and honorable people. They take their children to church every week. But on another level, they're actually taking the easy way out. They want to respect Matthew's space, so they choose to "let him make his own decisions." But what's their real motivation? They have no idea where to start the conversations. They've underparented by default. It was easier to treat Matthew like a child even though he had begun the journey to adulthood.

The book of Proverbs assumes that parents are to be regularly teaching their children the lessons that will equip them for adulthood. It speaks of the need to heed parental wisdom (e.g., Proverbs 2–4) and of the fool who refuses to do so (see Proverbs 10:1; 15:5, 32). In the long run, the fool pays for it. My wife and I still have young children. When they're disobedient and I discipline them, I try to explain that the pain of discipline, though real, is much less than the pain that comes with habitual violation of God's standards. The way of the wicked is hard (see Proverbs 13:15). The undisciplined,

in the end, wish they had heeded instruction (see Proverbs 1:20-33). In contrast, “it is good . . . [to] bear the yoke in . . . youth” (Lamentations 3:27) because that’s when character is formed and when correction, discipline, and instruction are most crucial. In the words of J. C. Ryle, as true for young women as they are for young men:

Youth is the seed-time of full age, the molding season in the little space of human life, the turning-point in the history of man’s mind.

By the shoot we judge of the tree, by the blossoms we judge of the fruit, by the spring we judge of the harvest, by the morning we judge of the day, and by the character of the young man, we may generally judge what he will be when he grows up.¹

Many teens who disregard loving authority may wind up paying the price their entire lives. You can go to prisons all across the country and ask inmates to recount their regrets. In many cases, the earliest regret you’ll hear is this: “I wish I had listened to my mom.” (And the fact that many prisoners don’t even know their fathers ought to tell us something.)

As parents, we need to *be* parents. We need to teach, model, encourage, and train. We must intentionally shape our teens into the kind of adults we hope, with God’s help, they become. The last thing our teens need is for us to try to be cool or hip, to wear the same clothing, or to engage in the same sorts of conversations in the same way as their peers. If

we do, we're more likely to look foolish than to impress them. And deep down, parents trying to be peers are not even what teens really want.² Offer your teens what they cannot get elsewhere, and you'll lay the foundation for a deep, lifelong relationship.

This parental instruction doesn't always have to be something formal. It can be listening to an update on your teen's life while working in the yard and then relating the things you've learned from your parents, someone else, or the "school of hard knocks." It can be taking your teen out for ice cream after a basketball game and talking about how character (good and bad) was exhibited on the court that night. It's in drawing your teens out, taking the time to get into the nitty-gritty of their lives, listening and looking for those opportune moments when they're most teachable. (From working with students, I've learned that these moments can come without warning. But we need to take them when we get them.)

And there's something to be said for persistence. What you say may sometimes seem to fall on deaf ears. But you'll be surprised at what your teens remember.

OVER-PARENTING

Over-parenting controls teens instead of coaching them. It's too much positional authority and too little moral authority. It tells teens what to do but not why to do it. It conveys the message, "You need me to do things for you. I'm afraid

you'll blow it if you do it yourself." The "helicopter parent" falls into this category.

What kind of teens are we trying to produce—the kind who will continue to depend on us like children? Or the kind who can one day relate to us as competent, functionally independent friends? If I check my daughter's math homework every night, whether she asks for it or not, I'm telling her that she's incapable of finishing anything on her own and that she doesn't need to check it herself. Instead, if I first *show* her how to check her homework, and then *expect* her to do it, she often will (not just now, but also in college). She'll be both empowered and motivated to take ownership for this area of her life.

It's a common misconception that high performance comes from high self-esteem. "If you believe, you'll achieve." It's true that extremely low self-esteem can lead to failure as a self-fulfilling prophecy. But it does not follow that high self-esteem guarantees high achievement. Plenty of people think they're good at math but aren't. And others think they're not good at math when in fact they are.

What I've found more commonly is that high performance comes from high expectations, and high performance, over time, gives rise to healthy, objectively justified self-esteem. Confidence and self-esteem grow in proportion to the expectations of others and actual accomplishments.³

But what about the consequences of failure? Shouldn't we want to protect our kids from the emotional or physical repercussions?

Yes and no. Playgrounds didn't always have foam padding below the equipment. They do now. Kids used to have sleepovers and ride their bikes alone in the neighborhood, often without a helmet (if you can believe it). Not anymore. Bombarded with headlines of child abductions and sexual predators, we have a deep-seated sense that the world has

become a more dangerous place. As parents, we've become more safety conscious, and in some cases, for good reason.

High performance comes from high expectations, and high performance, over time, gives rise to healthy, objectively justified self-esteem.

But occasional failure is inevitable. Everyone who has ever achieved any level of greatness in life knows that failure is one of the

best teachers. Knowing what doesn't work is crucial. Henry Ford, who failed twice in business before building the Ford Motor Company, said that failure is an opportunity to begin again more intelligently. Thomas Edison tried thousands of materials before he found one that would work as the filament in the lightbulb.

The only kind of self-esteem that failure shatters is the unhealthy, unsubstantiated sort. In Romans 12:3, Paul writes, "By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." In other words, we ought not to entertain exaggerated notions of our status or abilities. If failure shatters unjustified self-esteem, so much the better.

When I was a teen, my father used to ask me to bring in firewood from our garage to our living room fireplace. Sometimes, eager to resume my prior activities, I'd try to do it all in one trip. My dad would watch as all the wood fell out of my hands. Then he'd say, "*El vago trabaja doble*" (Spanish for "the lazy guy ends up working twice as hard"). His words would ring in my ears as I collected the scattered logs. At the time, I didn't give him the satisfaction of knowing I was listening. Your kids might not either. But I remember what he said now, more than 20 years later.

Learning from failure—and picking ourselves up after failure—often leads to future success and enhances healthy self-esteem. In raising teens, there's another angle: small mistakes made while they're *in* our homes are often far less consequential than the larger mistakes they can make when they *leave* our homes. And while they're still with us, we can help them process what happened and why.

NOT ALL PROTECTION IS OVER-PARENTING

But aren't there some kinds of failure that are so serious we should do everything in our power to prevent them from happening? Absolutely.

We should prevent our children from developing sinful habits.

It would be irresponsible to allow our children to practice habit-forming behavior that clearly violates God's commands. There are plenty of things that our teens don't need to do to know they're dumb (recreational drugs, drunkenness, being

romantically involved with non-Christians, pornography, and so on). I'm not claiming any of us can provide continuous, 24-7 vigilance on the actions of our teens, but we can and must forbid things that God says are wrong.

Of course our teens might do those things when they leave our household (or even now, behind our backs). That's why mere dos and don'ts aren't enough. We have to come alongside them and be as winsome as possible—helping them to see the benefits of a godly life and to want to grow in grace. But “you won't do that in my house” is by no means unfair, especially if we consider the impact of sinful behavior on siblings.

We should protect our teens from excessive temptation.

As Paul Tripp writes in his excellent book *Age of Opportunity*, the instruction to Timothy to “flee youthful passions” (2 Timothy 2:22) presupposes that certain desires are more acutely felt in our youth.⁴ One temptation is certainly sexual immorality. For example, leaving teen boys with an Internet-accessing device in the privacy of their bedrooms is giving them access to unlimited pornography (unless you have software to stop it). It's at least worth a serious conversation or two (the average child is first exposed to Internet pornography at the age of 11, in most cases unintentionally), if not a more overt limitation on their freedom until they are older.⁵

Again, it's true that when our teens leave our homes, either to college or elsewhere, they'll have unfettered access. But we have until they leave to train them. Personally, I'd

rather they not have additional opportunity for sexual sin at the time when they are first coming to know themselves as sexual beings. And there is plenty of research to show that early exposure to pornography can be particularly damaging and addictive.

We should prevent our teens from failures that would have long-lasting and far-reaching implications.

Teens sometimes act impulsively. (You might consider that an understatement.) Their ability to perform a risk-reward assessment is often highly skewed: they are motivated by thrills but underestimate risks. When I got my driver's license, a friend and I thought it'd be fun to race down side streets at night in "stealth mode" (no headlights). What were we thinking? We weren't. A kid I knew accepted a dare to jump out a window. He broke a leg, and not in a figurative sense.

As parents, we should consider the severity of the consequences when allowing our teens to make decisions with which we disagree. It's one thing to let your 14-year-old son spend most of his life savings on a skateboard that you *know* will be collecting dust in about three months. That can serve as a memorable object lesson on the perils of impulse purchases. It's quite another to let your daughter quit school at the age of 16.

An unwise purchase won't mess up your 14-year-old for life. It might even make him a *better* money manager when he leaves home. Quitting high school, in contrast, would have long-lasting, far-reaching, life-changing implications,

almost certainly for the worse. If your teens still hate school when they graduate two years later, that's different. There are plenty of nonacademic careers they can pursue. What matters is that while they're under our authority, we prevent them from making impulsive decisions that can truly put them at a long-term or even permanent disadvantage.

TWO CASE STUDIES: AMANDA AND CHRISTOPHER

Amanda and Christopher had very different experiences at home and therefore at college. Their stories exemplify the differences between over-parenting and good, solid preparation.

Amanda's parents really wanted her to be academically successful. So from the time she first started school, they had done her homework with (and occasionally *for*) her. They had planned her extracurricular activities around her schoolwork to make sure she got everything done. They set up strict schedules for her. And their efforts paid off! Amanda graduated high school with a 3.8 GPA and was accepted to a moderately selective college on a full scholarship. She began college eagerly, but by her second semester, she was barely scraping by with Bs and Cs. Soon afterwards she lost her academic scholarship. Amanda learned that she had no idea how to manage her schedule or her workload, especially under the rigors of college.

Christopher's parents took a different approach. He brought home all Cs his first semester of high school. His parents were disappointed but not defeated. They decided to use this occasion to draw closer to their son and teach him

responsibility. They asked Christopher if those grades reflected his true abilities. Christopher said they didn't, but he wasn't sure how to improve. So they talked about it. Christopher walked his parents through a typical school day and how he went about his assignments after school. It became apparent that Christopher needed help taking notes in class, so his mom taught him some strategies. When Christopher would get home from soccer practice, his dad would have him quickly write a list of which assignments had to be completed that evening and which needed doing later that week. They would review this list over dinner, and Christopher would knock out the assignments one by one in order of importance.

If Christopher did poorly on a test, his parents would help him assess what went wrong and determine how he could do better. They also talked to him about what kinds of things he could see himself doing after high school. Christopher was interested in architecture, so his parents found ways to connect him with friends from church who worked with or for architects. Christopher's motivation grew. By the time he graduated, his GPA had risen to a respectable 3.4. His first year in college, he earned a 3.5 GPA, maintaining the discipline his parents had encouraged.

What was the difference between Amanda and Christopher? Amanda's parents had ensured her high school success through a high degree of external structure and control. Christopher's parents had given him the freedom to fail and to learn from it. But they didn't stop there. They motivated him at the heart

level and empowered him to take steps that, over time, facilitated earned success.

The irony is that over-parenting, in seeking to protect teens from failure, often makes future failure more likely. Scary as it may seem, the day is coming when our teens will be on their own. Resilience is formed in the crucible of experience, even—and perhaps especially—failure.

CULTIVATING RESPONSIBILITY

Mindful of the dangers of under-parenting and over-parenting, how should we cultivate responsibility in our teens? In the words of Stephen Covey, we ought to begin with the end in mind.⁶ Our long-term goal is to work ourselves out of a job. We want our teens to take their places in society as responsible adults, never independent from God or isolated from others, but no longer needing us to provide structure and management for their day-to-day lives.

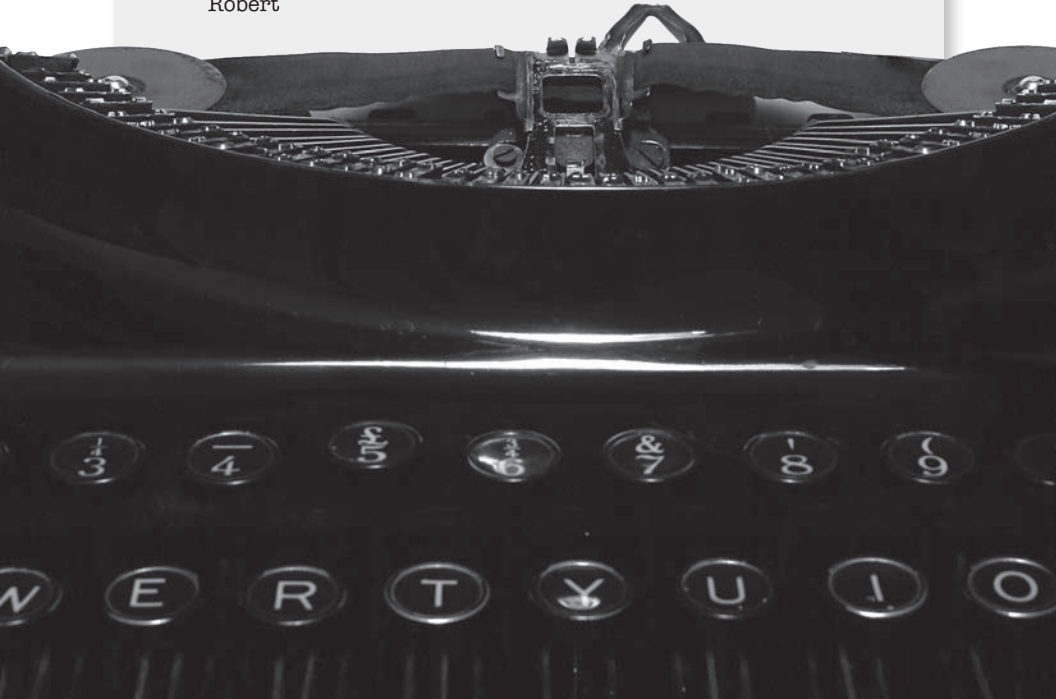
As we think about preparing our teens for college (or whatever comes next), are there specific character traits we ought to be aiming for? Our children need to learn how to exercise discernment, make choices for themselves, and accept responsibility for the outcome of those choices. Matthew, for example, needs to learn what led him down the path to his dad getting a call from the police: identification with his friends and a fear of disappointing them or being ridiculed for his scruples. Frank should draw his son out so that Matthew can see his actions and motivations objectively, against the backdrop of biblical standards. If Matthew rejects

those values, that needs to be discussed honestly (and we'll talk about internalizing faith in conversation 3).

When we think about raising teens who accept responsibility, what related character traits should we seek to instill?

Each of our boys at some point during high school was a weekly Sunday school teacher. At first they were under the supervision of an adult, and later they each became the lead teacher for their group. They had to show up on time, know the lesson, teach it, and show genuine interest in their group. To me it was important that neither Kim nor I was in the classroom so they could observe and serve under other Christian adults. This was part of a larger strategy: we wanted them to make connections with other Christian adults who could serve as examples and mentors. Each of our boys loved doing this and did so for many years.

Robert



Two big ones, in my view, are taking initiative and accepting correction.

Taking Initiative

I first heard the buzz word *self-starter* when I was an undergraduate looking for summer jobs. The staff person in the career office of my college told me to put it on my résumé. Apparently, prospective employers were looking for people who didn't need to be told that they should start doing something. They wanted interns who had an internal motivation and drive to contribute to the team's efforts. (I suppose it would have been more "self-starting" if I had thought to put that descriptor on my résumé myself.)

We want our teens to have a sense of purpose that animates them to useful activity. We want them to get off their duffs and make things happen rather than sit back and watch them happen. True servants (and servant-leaders) don't sit around waiting for a command; they anticipate needs and respond to meet them.

The teen years are often a time of identity crisis because boys and girls are becoming men and women. The "Who am I?" question is wide open. They're coming to a greater awareness of their abilities, intellectually and otherwise, but they're doing so in a cultural milieu that regards pleasure, popularity, and power (be it social, athletic, or academic) as ideals to be pursued—and responsibility and work as punishments to be minimized or avoided. This faulty perspective must be

confronted and replaced. Teens need to learn that work is a gift of God and that with greater *ability* comes greater *responsibility*. In a world where God is supreme over everything, freedom and opportunity are never divorced from accountability to others and (ultimately) to God. On the contrary, “to whom much [is] given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

Start with the natural goodness of work. God himself is a worker, and being made in his image, it’s not surprising that we find dignity and satisfaction in the use of our faculties and skills in productive labor. The Fall did not create work; it distorted our relationship with work. It made it often painful and sometimes tedious and frustrating. Nevertheless, for Christians, work is a sphere in which we’re to bring glory to God and good to others. As Dorothy Sayers wrote in her classic essay “Why Work?”:

[Work] should be looked upon, not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. . . . It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.⁷

Our teens need to know that transitioning to adulthood is a good thing, a normal thing, a necessary thing. God intends their burgeoning intellectual, athletic, and musical skills to be developed through regular effort, so that they might be equipped for a lifetime of good works for which he's preparing them (see Ephesians 2:10).

Okay, but how? Here's where modeling comes in. Teens are *listening* to the way we talk about our workloads, our bosses, and our responsibilities—and they're *watching* the way we respond to them. If we have the attitude that “a bad day fishing is better than a good day at work,” they'll take away the lesson that work is drudgery to be avoided. We should be honest. Yes, work is hard and sometimes unpleasant. But it's also an avenue by which we can serve others and experience the joy of using our skills. Work is a big part of our lives,

Teens are listening to the way we talk about our workloads, our bosses, and our responsibilities—and they're watching the way we respond to them.

so it's important to pursue work that we both enjoy and have the potential to do well.

With regard to the principle that “from those to whom much is given, much is expected,” the Parable of the Talents (see Mat-

thew 25:14-30) is instructive. We're told of three servants, each of whom is entrusted with a different amount of money. Apparently, their master regards them as having different levels of ability (see verse 15). No detailed instructions are given; the master expects each to take personal initiative to invest the funds wisely.

Q: *How can we prepare teens for college responsibilities? Is there an area where they typically fall short?*

A: College involves far more homework and many more recreational options than high school, especially if a student lives on campus. Freedom is a powerful feeling for first-semester freshmen. But if they don't use their time wisely, it quickly leads to another powerful feeling: stress!

Parents can prepare teens by developing their time-management skills. Encourage them to use a calendar or planner to track assignments. They should begin by recording when papers and projects are due or when tests will be given. Next, they should schedule adequate time to complete each task before the deadline. Third, they need to regularly look at their schedule to make sure they're following it. Just as a budget helps our spending reflect our financial priorities, a schedule helps us to be good stewards of our time. But the only way to learn this skill is by doing it.

The 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement of over 81,000 students found that 90 percent of respondents studied five hours or fewer *per week*. If your teens are planning to be full-time students at a reputable college, they'll only be in class three to four hours per weekday, but to be successful, they'll need to put in about 30 hours per week of out-of-class work. That's five hours *per day* (taking Sunday off). Adjust their expectations.

The first two servants get to work immediately—they take personal initiative. And it pays off, literally—each reaps a 100-percent return on investment and receives identical praise from the master: “You have been faithful over *a little*” (Matthew 25:21, 23, emphasis mine). The similarity of this praise is interesting, considering that one servant had earned more than twice what the other had (not to mention that biblical scholars regard even one talent as representing a considerable amount of money). What mattered to the master, however, was not how much they had, but what they *did* with what they had.

And then there’s the last servant. He buried his talent in the ground, earning nothing with it. It doesn’t seem *that* bad; it’s not like he spent it or lost it. But the master calls him “wicked” and “slothful” (Matthew 25:26). He’s wicked because he received something of value and didn’t put it to good use. But he’s also slothful because with minimal effort he could have at least earned some gain.

Our teens need to “remember . . . [their] Creator in the days of [their] youth” (Ecclesiastes 12:1)—when they first come to recognize themselves as talented in particular ways, in ways that differ from others in kind and degree. God made them that way, and he did that so they might develop those talents and use them to serve others and glorify him. As the apostle Paul says, “None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:7-8).

Youth is the time to learn this—as our teens’ bodies and minds are coming into maturity. We were not made to live for ourselves. We’re to love God and love others, by serving them with the gifts he has entrusted to us. This gives birth to initiative, to a sense of personal responsibility, to a fire in the belly to do great things—not for worldly reasons but for God’s glory and the good of others.

So how do we help our teens catch this vision? By encouraging them to process the events and opportunities in their lives as chances to give rather than get. Student government is a chance for teens to serve their classmates; being captain of the volleyball team is a chance for them to motivate their teammates to excel. And watch out for a common youth idol: popularity. Teens naturally angle for praise, but taking initiative must have a higher aim. Encourage them to pursue faithfulness, service, and doing the right thing even when nobody is looking.

Of course, don’t expect them to always seek out your wisdom. And if they won’t talk at the dinner table, don’t give up. Tell them how you’ve learned that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). They’ll be listening better than you think.

Accepting Correction

I’m often asked in interviews if there are any differences between what college students are like today and what they were like when I was a student. At first I thought my critical answer proved only that I was getting older. When has it *not*

been true that the older people get, the more disappointed they become with “kids these days”? It seems that pastors and leaders of every age have offered many protestations about the laziness, rudeness, arrogance, and carelessness of teens.

But perhaps we're on to something if the young people themselves affirm the shift. And they do. In a June 2009 national poll of over 1,000 college students, two out of three agreed with the statement “My generation of young people is more self-promoting, narcissistic, overconfident, and attention-seeking than previous generations.”⁸ Related traits such as assertiveness, dominance, brashness, arrogance, and lack of empathy are likewise on the rise.

Narcissism is self-esteem on steroids and divorced from actual accomplishment or even ability. Many of our young people feel great about themselves even while they fall behind the rest of the world in academic metrics. I once surveyed incoming freshmen at a nonselective college. The majority *expected* to go on to graduate school and become leaders in their fields. The chest-thumping of our day is in stark contrast with the humility, restraint, valor, and obvious accomplishment of previous generations.

We all want our teens to have a healthy self-confidence, to not cower in fear at the social complexities of teen life or the many pressures of high school. We want them to have a strong sense of personal initiative, since it's so closely tied to taking responsibility for their lives. But if we don't simultaneously cultivate humility and a willingness to accept correction, they'll be unprepared for the real world, a world in

which everyone must be deferential to someone (see 1 Peter 2:13-17).

Of course, teens can get defensive when confronted. They often interpret concerns as personal attacks, which leads to blame shifting or making excuses to deflect the issue. So we need to be gracious and winsome—ready to model humility by apologizing for our shortcomings. And by asking questions and listening, we can hopefully neutralize the impact of their (often) short attention spans, keeping them engaged in the conversation.

We want them to feel our love for them—and that our correction is an overflow of that love. For every time we catch them doing something wrong, we should catch them 10 times doing something right. If every “talk” we have with them is a rebuke, they’ll learn to run the other way when they see us coming.

I often do a midsemester survey with my students. I bring a stack of paper and a cardboard box with a slot in the top, encouraging them to submit anonymous feedback. One time I had a student who went ballistic, slamming me for a hundred things. At the end of the next class period I made a public offer to buy a Coke for anyone who was willing to offer me significant criticism face-to-face. Everyone cleared the room except the offended student. We had a great conversation in which I acknowledged his concerns and pledged to work harder to earn his trust. He felt he was heard. A few weeks later he told me he was enjoying the course. That conversation, I think, was the start of a stronger relationship.

Modeling humility for our teens will go a long way toward developing it in them. We also need them to persevere in their commitments, even if something better comes along. This requires delaying gratification—a quality in short supply among many teens. And delaying gratification requires a future-orientation, the subject of conversation 2.

SUMMARY

- Teaching responsibility to our teens is a marathon, not a sprint. Cultivate a long-term perspective.
- Positional authority is effective when our children are young, but we must work to earn moral authority as they grow older. As our *control* decreases, we must aim for increasing *influence*.
- We should strive to protect our teens from catastrophic mistakes with long-term consequences while still allowing them some freedom to mess up in smaller ways in the short term.
- It's good to help our teens assess their mistakes and learn from them. It's bad to shield them from all negative consequences. The prodigal son “came to his senses” when he was broke and hungry (Luke 15:16-18, NLT).
- To become responsible, our teens must learn to take initiative for their lives and to accept (and, even better, *solicit*) correction and instruction.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Describe under-parenting and over-parenting to your teens. Then be vulnerable: ask your teens how they think you're doing at avoiding these extremes. Discuss expectations going forward.
2. Identify an area of strength in your teens' lives—perhaps an area of responsibility that they are managing well, or maturity in relating to siblings, or diligence with homework, or cheerfulness in completing household chores. Let your teens know you appreciate them.
3. Identify a growth opportunity in your teens' lives—an area in which they need to take more initiative, ownership, and responsibility. Describe it, and then listen. Offset defensiveness, aim for winsomeness, and try to make wisdom sweet.
4. Confess any ways you may have sinned against your teens. Remind them that you have their best interests in mind, even though you sometimes fall short.