

## **Invalidate Your Teens' World Without Invalidating Their Space (Part 1 of 3)**

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"I'm sick of being a wimpy Christian," 15-year-old Jason confessed to his buddies in his discipleship group. "I act one way at church and around you guys, then another way with my friends at school. It's like I don't even know who I am at times."

Jason's comments had struck a nerve with the four other boys lounging on my living room floor. Chris and Andy, both 16, nodded their heads in agreement, and 14-year-old Brian - who was busy all evening stuffing his face with chips- perked up too.

"I know God doesn't like it when I act this way," Jason continued. "And I know I need to give up a few bad friendships so I can grow stronger as a Christian. But it's really hard." Suddenly, a serious expression washed across Brian's face. "I'm with you, Jason," he said. "I've been a wimp with my faith. I've got some stuff to change in my life too."

Just as I was about to jump in with a few words of encouragement, Chad- one of the older guys in the group- spoke up. "You're on the right track," the 17-year-old said. "Lose those friendships that are pulling you down. That's what I had to do. I used to care more about popularity than my faith, then one day I realized it's stupid to follow the crowd at school. I'm a Christian. I'm different, and that's OK."

I sat back and watched with amazement. *These guys are spurring each other to a deeper walk with Christ, I thought. My boys are growing up!*

Every Tuesday night I disciple five teen guys from my church's youth group. We call ourselves the Breakaway Boyz. It had taken three years for my discipleship group to reach a deep level of unity, openness and trust- three years of Bible studies, praying together and crying with each other (not to mention all the pizza pig-outs, video marathons and squirt-gun wars we'd shared).

My goal as a discipler is to help each teen...

- give up his own will for God's will.
- live daily a life of spiritual sacrifice for Christ's glory.
- strive to consistently obey our Lord.

Our goal as parents should be the same. Let's look at how we can accomplish this.

### **Love + relationship + time = parenting a teen**

A few months back I received a letter from a young man named Eric. He wrote, "Problems with drugs, alcohol and premarital sex happen among teens- even among Christian youth- when they aren't happy with

themselves. They're desperately searching for self-worth. All along, the answer is right in front of them: Jesus."

Eric is absolutely right. Young people are hungry for something to commit their lives to. They yearn for parents and youth workers who will help them find purpose in life. You have the answer. But affecting the life of a modern teen doesn't mean you have to suddenly become superhuman or a rock star or even a pyrotechnics expert. (Merely entertaining teens is out of the question.) Instead, just step into their world and show you care. That's what Jesus did, and He was the ultimate discipler. Those who followed Christ ended up being served by Him. (Imagine that- the Creator serving His creation!) His disciples also got a big dose of encouragement, mixed with some well-deserved correction from time to time. Jesus stretched His disciples as they struggled to receive the truth and to obey God's will. Want to have a greater impact on your teen? Follow Christ's example.

### **How to reach out**

To make your children happy, you do not have to spend extravagantly or give them the biggest and the best. In fact, the simpler the better. Listen to what 13-year-old Brady says on this topic: "I know my mom loves me because of the countless little things she does for me. She sews buttons on my shirt when they fall off and she helps me with my homework every night. All these things spell love."

Fifteen-year-old Michelle appreciates the material things she gets from her parents, but she prefers their attention. "My parents have given me everything I have," she said. "In my mind, that's love. They have given me not only the essentials but far more than I need. But the thing that means most is the time they spend with me."

Teens need affection from their parents. They need positive affirmation, emotional support, nurture and, most of all, they need their parents' time.

### **Time and Importance**

We spend time in the areas of life that are most important to us. That's a significant concept, and our teens have picked up on it. They might as well have put it in a formula like this:

$$\text{Time Spent} + \text{Interest} + \text{Commitment} = \text{Love}$$

Face it, your kids see where you spend your time. If you don't spend time with them, they quickly get the message: they're not important. When 17-year-old Mandy was asked, "How do you know your parents love you?" she responded, "Because they're always there for me. I can talk to them about anything. I know they'll take the time to listen and to help me solve a problem- instead of shoving me aside."

## **Quality and Quantity**

The statement “quality time is much better than quantity time” is wrong. Your child needs a lot of your time. When you short-change your teen, you short-change yourself. For example, consider your favorite meal. If you were limited to a tiny nibble of your favorite food, without quantity, would its quality still please you? I doubt it. You wouldn't agree that quality food is better than quantity food- especially if you were starving! To some degree, the fast-food mentality represents what some American teens get from their parents. Popular author and youth speaker Bill Sanders explains: “Sometimes Mom or Dad wants the same quality, but quicker service, faster times together- ‘I’ll take the hamburger now, instead of in ten minutes. Even though it won’t be fresh off the grill, that’s OK, because I have an important appointment a few minutes from now!’ Fast-food parenting doesn’t have a lot of benefits.”

A healthy balance of quality and quantity time is the key. This involves giving your teen your undivided attention- whether you're talking to each other, playing a game, or doing a project together. And for most of us, teens and adults alike, nothing is more important than the focused attention of those we love. Young people know that love shown by parents says, “Your life is important, daughter [or son], and I'm going to give you my time.” When you spend time with them, show them you will listen and talk and work things out together. Sixteen-year-old Jonathan was asked, “On a zero to 10 scale, how much do your parents love you?” Without batting an eye he answered, “Ten.” When I asked why he felt so strongly, he said, “Well, for one thing, they tell me. But most important of all, they show me every day! Even though my dad’s military career keeps him pretty busy- he’s in charge of 200 people and often gets called away in the middle of the night- he makes family time a priority. When he’s home, it’s like my mom and sister and I have his full attention. As a family, we always do stuff together. And both my mom and dad really seem interested in what’s going on in my life.” What Jonathan said next really caught my attention: “I’d say the most important message teens need to hear from parents is, ‘I love you!’ And the most important action they need to see is a mom and a dad getting into their lives and spending time with them.”