

Big Doubts

What to do when your child expresses second thoughts about his faith.
by Mark Oestreicher

A nervous set of parents met me in my office. Tears came quickly. Judy, the mom, spoke in-between honks into her tissue: "Johnny, our 7th grader... [honk!]... he's always been such a good boy. And he's always loved Jesus."

The dad nodded.

Judy continued: "But the other night at dinner... [honk!]... Johnny said, 'I'm not sure I want to be a Christian anymore.'" [honk!]

I slapped my desk and exclaimed, "That's fantastic!"

As they picked up their sagging jaws, I explained: Questioning and examining (usually called "doubting") Mom and Dad's faith system, or his own childhood faith system, is a necessary part of early teen faith development.

Parents (and plenty of youth workers) are usually threatened, even frightened, by their kids' doubts. But in my years of working with teenagers, I've found that those who don't go through this process reach their early 20s with a stunted, childish faith that, quite frankly, often doesn't hold up when they're faced with the challenges of adulthood.

The Task of Discovery

Psychologist Stephen Glenn developed a helpful little timeline for human development back in the 1970s. He said the first four years of life are all about "discovery." The next four years (5 to 8 years old) are all about "testing." And the years from 9 to 11 (Glenn actually said age 12, but the average age of the onset of puberty has shifted down a year since then) are focused on "concluding."

Then a shift of seismic proportions—usually called puberty—comes along and wipes that slate semi-clean. And the cycle begins again: 11-13 are years of "discovery"; 14- to 16-year olds tend to focus on "testing"; and those over 17 shift to forming conclusions.

Undoubtedly, you can see that pattern in your young teen. They're in the midst of a massive adventure of discovery. That's why they want to try everything—four sports, three clubs, five friendship groups, a new hobby or collection each month. They're trying to gather data about the world, about how people interact, about values, about reactions. And about what it means to follow Christ.

Wrestling with "What do I believe?" becomes a wonderful question for young teens to ask. That doesn't mean we ignore those doubts as a phase that will pass. It means we come alongside them in their doubts, rather than interpreting those questions (that data collection) as a real rejection of faith.

The Best Response

There are a few key strategies for helping your young teen work through her doubts:

Don't freak out. When you hear doubts squeaking out, take a deep breath. Thank God that your budding teenager is still willing to verbalize this kind of thing with you. A strong negative reaction will teach your child that she shouldn't share in the future.

Encourage verbalization. In other words, talk about it! Healthy dialogue is often all that's needed to guide your child through this transition. Ask questions, rather than preaching.

Share your story. Your preteen or young teen will learn more from your life than from your words. When you do choose to share words, try not to be too prescriptive ("Johnny, what you need to do is this..."). Instead, respond to doubts with stories of your own doubts (past or present) and the ways you've dealt with them.

Pray. Your child is going through the most formative and tender years in faith development. Talk to God constantly!

Mark Oestreicher is the president of Youth Specialties (www.YouthSpecialties.com), the leading provider of resources and training for Christian youth workers.

Copyright © 2002 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian Parenting Today magazine. This article first appeared in Fall 2002, Vol. 15, No. 1, Page 25 issue of Christian Parenting Today. Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL 60188.