

Bored with God

If your young teen is tired of church, here's how to spark her interest again.
by Mark Oestreicher

Prior to the teen years, children naturally find church and Christianity engaging. A few fun moments in Sunday school or a cozy prayer time with Mom and Dad can be enough to keep them interested.

But young teens often start to perceive a disconnect between the "real world" and their "church world," especially if what goes on in church seems to have no bearing on the way they experience life. When that disconnect sets in, boredom with church is usually close behind.

While this stage is common in young teens, the reasons behind the boredom aren't the same for every child. Here are a few possible explanations:

They feel disconnected. Young teens have a passionate need to be valued and noticed. Any place that doesn't validate who they are as individuals, any place where they don't feel known, can quickly feel awkward or boring to them.

Young teens are also hyper-relational. If they don't sense a connection with several people in the church (youth group leaders, other kids, adults in the church), it's easy for them to make the small leap to boredom.

They don't get "Churchianity." The forms of worship used in most churches are pretty foreign to the world of a teenager. The sermons don't typically relate to their daily experiences, the language can be over their heads, the music can feel stodgy and stilted. When there's little that seems relevant to her life, church can begin to feel like a monumental waste of time to your child, even if she still has an active faith in God.

They're experiencing growing pains. Probably the most common, and most healthy, reason for young teens to feel bored is their developmental need to grow up in faith. An adolescent's developing ability to grasp (or at least entertain) abstract ideas throws all their concrete spiritual conclusions and understandings into question.

This shift in thinking ability has enormous spiritual implications for young teens. Young children think in concrete terms, but pretty much everything we talk about at church or in relation to faith in God is abstract. That means a young teen has to adjust to this new way of understanding his faith experiences.

Think of it like this: Kids have a backpack filled with "bits" of a faith system. During their young teens, situations arise that call these bits to the forefront. Maybe a loved one dies, or they become friends with someone of a different faith. When it becomes obvious to a teen that his childhood answer to a given situation does not offer a strong enough solution anymore, he can either throw out that bit and ignore the issue, or struggle to find a bit that helps him by asking questions that cause his beliefs to evolve into a more adult form.

Choosing to wrestle with these questions means your child takes his faith seriously enough to care whether or not it can stand up to the challenges of real life.

Beating Boredom

Here are some ideas for helping your young teen deal with spiritual boredom:

Talk about it. Our natural tendency is to lecture our kids about why they're bored and tell them how to solve the problem ("You need to do this"). Instead, work to create open lines of communication about faith and church. Work to really listen to your child's questions and reservations and resist offering quick answers.

Build relationships. Strengthen your young teen's connection to the people of the church, not just the programs. Look for creative ways to foster relationships with their peers and with other adults who will care about them.

Live it out. If your teen sees a vibrant and real faith being lived out and verbally expressed in your daily life, it will go a long way toward helping him consider what an adult faith system can look like.

Debrief. After a church service or youth group meeting, ask open-ended questions about what went on. Be careful that this doesn't come across as a test. Helping your teen see the connections between what's talked about at church and what happens in her world is a wonderful way to encourage her faith to grow.