

Making Mentors

The right adults can make all the difference in your teen's life

By Jim Burns

Q. Our 16-year-old daughter is a great kid, but she doesn't always listen to our guidance and advice. It seems like she's tired of our input and frankly, we're tired of nagging her. What can we do?

A. For many teenagers, the mere fact that their parents are the ones doing the talking is enough reason to tune them out. But I've found that these same kids will happily listen to the wisdom of other adults.

Studies show that parents have the biggest influence in their children's lives. But other adults can also play a significant role in their development, especially as your children reach their teens. Proverbs 11:14 says, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisors make victory sure." Indeed, perhaps the best way we can help our children mature is to provide them with "many advisors."

Even though our church tradition doesn't place a huge emphasis on godparents, my wife, Cathy, and I asked two wonderful Christians to play this role for one of our daughters. Along with this couple, our daughter's youth pastor, her camp counselor, and even another family member have come alongside her during her teenage years to offer guidance, support, and friendship.

One youth leader told me, "The most valuable gift my parents gave me in the area of spiritual formation was their commitment to a small group of believers for over 20 years. I grew up in a true extended family and the effect on my faith was profound. These adults asked me difficult questions about the friends I spent my time with, the boyfriends I dated, and the choices I made. They called me to see how I was doing and why I didn't join my family for church on a given Sunday. Their children were my friends and their marriages my model."

If your teen already has these kinds of mentors in her life, wonderful. But if not, it's not too late to help her develop such friendships. In youth and family ministry we talk about a 6-to-1 ratio, six students for every leader. I suggest flipping that ratio and help your child develop healthy relationships with six other adults. Here's how:

Pick the best of the bunch. Write down the names of at least three Christian adults who you see as having a positive relationship with your teenager. Then ask your teen to write down three Christian adults she respects and would like to have play a bigger role in her life. If your teenager balks at the idea of being "set up" with mentors, let her suggest other adults with the agreement that you have the right to veto anyone who doesn't seem up to the job.

Encourage the bond between your teenager and these adults. Include your teen's mentors in family meals, outings, devotions, and celebrations on a regular basis. Keep the relationship casual and natural so trust and respect form in their own time.

Stay in touch with your teen's mentors. Cathy and I try to meet periodically with the adults in our daughter's life to keep them informed on what we see happening in her life, celebrate her victories, and let them share any insight they might have on how she's doing. These people are a permanent part of birthdays, major events (such as graduations, recitals, or big games), and holidays.

Pray for your teenager and her mentors often. Write these adults periodic notes thanking them for the crucial role they play in your child's life.

Developing these relationships in your teen's life might seem like an odd step to take, but the guidance that healthy Christian adults can provide in the life of your child is worth every minute of effort.

*Jim Burns is an author, speaker, and the president of YouthBuilders
(youthbuilders.com).*

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