

The Center of the Universe

Breaking through your preteen's selfishness

By Mark Oestreicher

Q: Our 11-year-old seems to think the whole world revolves around her. Why is she suddenly so self-centered?

A. This is an almost universal issue with preteens. Kids who were, just months ago, generous and outward-focused turn in on themselves and become seemingly obsessed with their own lives and incapable of noticing the needs of others.

Think of it this way: self-centeredness is a natural fungus on the tree of development. The crazy amount of change going on in the lives of preteens and young teens (ages 10-14) makes it incredibly difficult for them to pay attention to much of anything else. They are developing so much that sometimes it's all a kid can do to keep up with her own body and emotions, much less those of someone else.

Where this turns on its head is in the extreme self-consciousness most preteens exhibit. Their bodies are changing rapidly, causing them to be deeply concerned with how other people will perceive these changes. They are testing the waters of forming opinions and developing a worldview and are terrified of being perceived as stupid or weird.

For example, if you were to walk across the back of a crowded lecture room (say, church), you would try to be quiet so as not to distract anyone. At the same time, you assume the people paying attention and facing the opposite direction will not really notice you.

Not so with young teens. In the same situation, they'll assume that everyone in the room is paying attention to them (apparently through the back of their heads!) and evaluating their every move.

This combination of self-centeredness and self-consciousness is natural, but that doesn't mean parents should just ignore it. I've found that the absolute best antidote is experience—experience that forces their attention on other people.

Make an effort to involve your daughter in activities that allow her to serve others in need. Consider a regular gig serving at a soup kitchen, taking a family missions trip, or working with a Habitat for Humanity team to build a house for a poor family. This establishes a pattern of noticing the needs of others. It can create a small opportunity for noticing that the world is more than just them. These experiences work like yeast in expanding their worldview.

Still, it's normal for preteens to have a hard time thinking beyond the here and now; if you ask their favorite movie of all time, they'll say the one they saw last week. Preteens don't have a sense of their own past and often don't have a sense of the future either. They live in the moment, which makes it hard for them to project the consequences of their often-selfish actions.

As an adult, you make decisions on the road of life. You can look in the rear-view mirror and see the long path behind you, including the choices you've made along the way. You can look at the long stretch ahead of you and get a sense of what's to come. But preteens are on a sharp curve in the road—the curve of transition and developmental change. The rearview mirror doesn't show much; and the front view is a blind curve.

To help your daughter move beyond today, ask speculation questions about the future to help her begin to see more of the road (she won't naturally do this on her own). Ask where she'd like her life to go, what she hopes the next three, five, ten years are like. Go ahead and encourage some fantasy—there's no need for an 11-year-old to start making concrete career plans.

And remember, this section of the road with its self-centeredness and "all is now" perspective will pass. This is the road God sends all of us down during the preteen years. You can trust that God can bring good things out of even this trying time.

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