

Question: Young Teens are such an awkward age! What is something unique and positive about these kids?

Parents (Dads, more than Moms) ask me this question. They're so frustrated with not understanding their son or daughter – the child who seemed so perfect and understandable only a couple years ago! These parents want perspective. Here's a dose:

A Small Window of Opportunity

The reality is this: two significant life-phases overlap during the young-teen years: the openness and responsive characteristic of childhood; and the forward-looking attitudes of teenage years. This overlap creates a small window of opportunity for growth, commitment, and identity formation.

Here's an example of the openness of children: Barna Research claims that the overwhelming majority of Christ-followers date their "conversion" prior to 14 years old; after 14 years old the likelihood of conversion drops drastically.

This evangelistic openness is just one example of the responsiveness of children and young teens. Those of us who work with young teens in churches see an enormous difference from their older-teen brothers and sisters. Sure, as a parent, you might see less openness than you saw when they were 8 or 9 years-old. But, believe it or not, you're still in the responsive-zone!

The other half of this overlap has to do with where they're going, not where they've come from. The two years following the onset of puberty are when the second most significant set of changes occur in life (birth to two years sees the most). Young teens experience change in every aspect of development: physical, emotional, cognitive, relational, social, and – of course – spiritual. With their brand-new ability to think abstractly (a developmental "bonus" of puberty), Christian young teens, thanks to this God-ordained developmental phase, inevitably re-examine their childhood belief systems. This faith-evaluation is normal and good!

The overlap of childhood responsiveness and the future-thinking aspects of adolescence creates an extremely narrow opportunity for life-long impact. At an age when many parents are tempted to throw up their hands and raise the white-flag of surrender, young teens are at one of the most critical times for intentional parenting.

Return on Investment

It might sound strange to use the phrase "return on investment" when talking about parenting. But your parenting is an investment, of course. And there is a huge return on effective parenting during the young teen years. The "return" isn't often immediate – in fact, it's normally delayed by a few years or more. It is a "return" in many areas: spiritual understanding, faith commitment, vocational calling, maturity, and leadership. Noted leadership guru Peter Drucker has said: "I believe that the junior high years are the most important years to develop leadership skills in people."

So what is the “investment”? Well, isn’t that the million-dollar parenting question?! It’s time, unconditional love, acceptance, guidance, listening, modeling, and all that other stuff you already know to do. And, it’s patience – more patience than you have in you (hint: this is a pretty big bonus for Christian parents who have Someone to draw power from).