

INTRODUCTION

Who Threw the Switch?

I had known Trevor since he was six or seven, because our families ran in the same circles. As a preteen, he was a normal kid, not perfect, but not out of control either. He was respectful of adults and fun to be around.

Then, when he was thirteen or fourteen, my wife, Barbi, our kids, and I ran into him and his mom, Beth, at a movie theater one night, and we adults started talking. It wasn't long before all of the kids started getting restless, particularly Trevor. He and his mom had a conversation that went something like this:

“Mom, I wanna go.”

“Just a minute, honey.”

“I said I wanna go!”

Beth looked a little embarrassed and said, “Trevor, we're almost done talking, okay?”

“HEY! I—SAID—I—WANT—TO—GO!”

His mom looked mortified. Trevor's face was a little flushed, but he didn't look at all self-conscious. He had only one thing on his mind—getting his mom moving.

She quickly said her good-byes, and the two of them left.

This encounter sticks in my mind because of the huge contrast between the Trevor who used to be and the Trevor who now was. It was as if a switch had been thrown. Whatever respect he'd once had for his mom, and likely others, had been greatly diminished.

Perhaps you can relate to Beth's experience as a parent. You may have an adolescent who, as a preteen, was more compliant and easier to connect with. Or perhaps you saw seeds of trouble in your child's preteen years, only to watch those seeds sprout when adolescence hit. Or maybe your child doesn't seem that much different, just bigger and stronger. In any case, it all points to the reality that *parenting teens is not like parenting at any other age, because children change dramatically during their teenage years.*

The Challenges Parents of Teens Face

Parents face many different issues and struggles in their efforts to parent their teens effectively, as demonstrated in this list of typical adolescent behaviors:

- has a disrespectful attitude toward parents, family, and others
- challenges requests or rules
- is self-absorbed and unable to see things from anyone else's perspective
- is lazy and careless about responsibilities
- has a negative attitude toward life, school, or people
- is emotionally withdrawn and distant from you
- has a tendency to pick friends of whom you disapprove
- erupts in anger that sometimes seems to come out of nowhere
- lacks motivation for school and fails to maintain grades
- neglects home chores and responsibilities
- has mood shifts that seem to have neither rhyme nor reason
- is mean to siblings or friends
- lacks interest in spiritual matters
- detaches from family events and wants to be with friends only
- lies and is deceptive about activities
- is physically aggressive and violent
- is truant from school or runs away

- abuses substances—alcohol, drugs, food, pornography, and so on
- engages in sexual activity

This list could go on, of course. It's no wonder that when faced with one or several of these problems, many parents become discouraged, overwhelmed, or confused about what to do. You don't have to be one of them. If you are reading this book because your teen exhibits any of the above behaviors, be encouraged. These problems have solutions. You don't have to resign yourself to simply coping and surviving for the next few years. Life with your teen can be much better than that. You can take some steps that can make major differences in the troublesome attitudes and behavior of your adolescent.

I have seen many teens become more responsible, happier, and better prepared for adult life after their parents began to apply the principles and techniques discussed in this book. Many of these teens not only made positive changes in their lives, but they also reconnected with their parents at levels that the parents had thought they would never experience again. These principles work—if you work them.

Teens Need Boundaries

The problems listed earlier all have a common foundation: *the battle between the teen's desire for total freedom and the parents' desire for total control*. All teens want the freedom to do what they want when they want. They need to learn that freedom is earned and that they can gain freedom by demonstrating responsibility. Adolescence is the time in life when kids are supposed to learn this lesson.

By the same token, parents need to be able to recognize when they are being overcontrolling and when they are being healthy and appropriate about saying “no.” They need to be able to make this distinction in order to do their job: helping teens learn responsibility and self-control so that they use freedom appropriately and live well in the real world. To do this, parents must help teens learn boundaries.

I cannot overstate the importance of your role here. In the midst of your teen's demands, tantrums, threats, and acting out, your task is to sift through the craziness and lovingly set firm, appropriate limits.

When your teen behaves responsibly, you can loosen the reins a little and grant more freedom. You are the clear voice of sanity in your child's world. Your teen needs your voice and your help in learning how to set boundaries.

What are boundaries? Simply put, boundaries are one's personal property line. They are how you define yourself, say who you are and who you are not, set limits, and establish consequences if people are attempting to control you. When you say "no" to someone's bad behavior, you are setting a boundary. Boundaries are good for you and good for the other person, for boundaries help people clarify what they are and are not responsible for in life. (For a fuller treatment of what boundaries are, please refer to the book Dr. Henry Cloud and I wrote: *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, When to Say No, to Take Control of Your Life*.)¹

Because of all the developmental changes teens are going through, they often don't have good control over their behavior, a clear sense of responsibility for their actions, or much self-discipline and structure. Instead, they often show disrespect of authority (as in Trevor's case), impulsiveness, irresponsibility, misbehavior, and erratic behavior. They are, as the Bible describes it, "like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind."²

Teens need to develop good boundaries in order to make it successfully through this season of life. Healthy boundaries give them the structure, self-control, and sense of ownership they need to figure out all their "who am I?" questions and to deal with the physiological and developmental changes they are experiencing.

Boundaries function somewhat like the trunk of a tree. The trunk holds the leaves, fruit, and roots together. However, all trees with strong trunks started out as weak saplings. They needed to be tied to a stake because they couldn't yet handle their own weight. They needed to lean on and be supported by something outside themselves. Then, in time, the trees matured and took over that job for themselves.

The process of developing boundaries is similar. Teens can't create their own "trunks." They don't have the necessary tools to become responsible, thoughtful, and empathetic with others. Like a tree sapling, they need help from outside themselves. Parents are the stake for

their teens. They are the temporary external structure teens need in their last launch into real life. When parents tell teens the truth, set limits, establish curfews, confront misbehavior, and do a host of other things, they are providing a structure and helping teens to develop a structure. If all goes well, teens will ultimately and safely discard their parents' structure and, using their own structure, be able to meet the demands of adult life and responsibility.

And that is the purpose of this book, to show you how to help your adolescent shoulder responsibility for her actions, attitudes, and speech so that she learns the gift of self-control and ownership over her life. The whole process starts with you, the parent.

After reading this you may think, *I don't really have good boundaries either. How can I dispense what I don't possess?* That is a common and important concern. A teen without boundaries needs a parent with boundaries. You'll find help for how to do this in the first part of this book, which teaches and equips you to develop your own personal limits so that you can transmit what you know and who you are to your teen.

Get the Big Picture

What are your goals and desires for your teen? Do you want some peace and quiet around the house? Less disrespect? No involvement with alcohol or drugs? Better school performance? More consideration for the needs and feelings of others?

It is easy for parents of teens to lose perspective and a sense of what is really important. They get no help from teens, who live in the present; it's all about what they are doing this second. Teenagers have little interest in, awareness of, or concern about the future. They live their lives pushing the *Urgent* button. That's why parents need to create an *Important* button for themselves and their teen. They need to guide their children in the right direction.

You will probably have to work a bit on this double perspective, because it doesn't come naturally. I can remember when one of my kids and I were discussing how late he should be able to go out with his friends one night. My son said, "You don't see it the right way."

I had no problem with his words, but I found his tone disrespectful and sarcastic. So I said, "That sounds disrespectful."

“I don’t think I was disrespectful,” he responded.

We went round and round about that, and I found myself getting focused on winning this battle. It became for me less about whether he had been disrespectful and more about winning the argument (not a helpful goal with teens, by the way). But at some point, I noticed both of us getting angrier and more entrenched in our positions. I thought to myself, *You’re forgetting the big picture—the “future” orientation. How is this interaction with my son helping to prepare him for adulthood?* So I said, “Okay. We see your attitude differently. I’d like your tone to be warmer and less sarcastic and to sound more like this,” at which point I used the tone I thought was respectful. Then I said, “What I heard was this,” and I used the tone I had heard from him. “So from now on, that’s how I’d like to be talked to when we disagree.” My son agreed to that. And to this point, he has tried to keep a civil tone with me and other adults.

I wanted my son to see that in the adult world, it is important to clarify matters before you make a decision, just to make sure that everyone involved is aware of what is expected. This is a skill needed in board meetings, in marriages, and in financial dealings. So keep in mind that the future preparation is, in the final analysis, ultimately more important than the present difficulty.

Armed with this double perspective on both today and tomorrow, you can establish appropriate, consistent, and lovingly established boundaries that can make a great difference in your adolescent’s present and future life.

Is It Too Late?

Many parents of teens, aware that they are in the last stage of parenting, wonder if there is still time to help their kid learn responsibility and self-control. “Maybe I should just hang on and try to get through,” they say. That is often a sign of weariness and giving up prematurely. In most cases, however, I would say that *healthy boundaries can make a significant difference.*

Remember the story of Beth and Trevor? Beth refused to give up, and because of this the story has a good ending. Beth called me a few days later, saying, “I’m sure you hate to have people ask you for advice

about this sort of thing, but I would like some about Trevor, if you have any.”

“Well,” I said, “I would probably begin by realizing that whatever you’re doing now to deal with Trevor’s attitude isn’t working.”

“That’s no problem for me,” said Beth. “I’ve tried everything anyway.”

“Are you sure?” I queried. “My hunch is that the ‘everything’ you have tried either isn’t everything, or it hasn’t been done the right way, or you haven’t tried long enough. Trevor doesn’t seem to experience any concern about taking responsibility for his actions. In fact, you are the one talking to me about Trevor, not Trevor. So you are more concerned than he is.”

Beth replied, “I don’t think Trevor even remembers what he did.”

“In that case,” I said, “I recommend that you start doing some things that will help Trevor be more concerned about his attitudes and actions.” Then I explained to her the key principles that are in this book. And over time, as Beth began to apply them, Trevor’s behaviors and speech began to change for the better. He still isn’t a perfect teen, whatever that is! but his manner and actions are much healthier and more responsible.

So don’t give up. At this stage in life, your teen needs an involved parent who has good boundaries.

I say this for several reasons. First, even though teens are systematically detaching from their parents and moving into the world, at some level, *they are still dependent on their parents*. They cannot function in the world on their own. Whether they recognize it, teens still need some important things from parents, such as:

- grace, unconditional love, and compassion when the teen is hurt, failing, or bewildered
- guidance concerning school, college, and career
- wisdom for how to navigate relationship problems
- help in romantic entanglements

Teens also need the safety, structure, and warmth of a loving home that offers them protection when needed.

I have talked to many young adults who have told me, “When I was a teenager, I acted like my parents had nothing to say to me. I

couldn't afford to act differently. But inside, it mattered a lot what they said."

Second, *teens do not have total freedom and permission*. Part of that freedom belongs to the parents. Teens are certainly in the last stage of childhood and should be becoming more and more autonomous. But they don't yet have the rights and privileges of an adult. For example, they still need parental permission to go to certain movies and to sign off on school outings. This is good news because *a teen's need for parental permission can be leveraged to motivate her to learn responsibility*. That is why withholding privileges can be very effective. Some parents need to take back some privileges. We will discuss this important aspect later.

Third, *the time it takes to fix matters isn't necessarily the same amount of time it took for things to go wrong*. Some parents think, *I had no boundaries for fifteen years, and now I have three years left. I don't have another fifteen to do it right, so why try?* This assumes a one-to-one correspondence of ineffective-to-effective parenting.

Actually, it's not like that at all, because it's not that simple. People can take less time to change than you might think. There are other factors involved, such as the appropriateness, consistency, and intensity of your actions; the involvement of others; and the readiness of the child's internal world.

People in their seventies and eighties sometimes wake up to how they are being selfish or irresponsible. You can't predict how telling the truth and establishing healthy boundaries will affect a teen, nor can you predict when the change will occur. I have seen parents with a seventeen-year-old who would be moving out in a few weeks still make significant inroads with a rebellious and destructive attitude. Don't let your fears and discouragement limit a process of growth that God designed for your child. Sometimes the right intervention, given at the right time, with the right people, can make all the difference in the world.

But What If My Teen Doesn't Change?

Even so, let's suppose you do have a teen who is not doing well and is almost out of the house. Consider the alternative. If you give up and go into survival mode, your teen has not experienced the benefit of being

around loving, truthful, and strict parents and will be that much less ready for successful adulthood. Even if your teen resisted every effort you attempted and you saw no change at all, something good has still happened. In those last months and weeks, she has experienced and internalized some events that cannot be easily shaken loose. For that brief time, love, responsibility, freedom, and consequences were applied to your teen's life in a way that was healthy and good.

As a psychologist, I have met many adults who blew off their parents' help when they were teenagers, only to remember years later what had been done. And they know at some level that that was a good way for them to live. So even if you don't see the fruit today or tomorrow, your teen will still have some memories of the way life should be lived. Take some encouragement from the words of the prodigal son who finally "got it":

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’”³

Don't count on getting an apology like that. Instead, *fight the good fight of setting boundaries—all the way to the last minute that your teen is in your charge*. Your investment of time and energy will not be in vain.

How to Use This Book

This book is structured in a meaningful order for parents of teens to be able to use it in the best way. As stated earlier, part 1 will help you to develop your own personal boundaries, so that you can create the best boundaries for your teen. Part 2 is a window into the mind and world of the adolescent, so that you can understand what your teen is thinking and feeling. Part 3 shows you how to set healthy boundaries with your teen. And part 4 explores some of the specific problems that adolescents struggle with and offers tips on what you, the parent, can do about them.

If you have a specific area you are concerned about, such as alcohol, disrespect, or sex, turn to the relevant chapter in part 4. Then, when you feel you have a grasp of what to do, start reading the book from the beginning, in order to learn how to use boundaries in the most helpful way possible. In the short term, this book will help you address problems of irresponsibility. Long term, it will help you think for yourself in ways that can mature your teen.

Sometimes the issue you are dealing with will not have boundaries at the center of its solution. For example, a depressed teen who is responsible but disconnected from others may need relationship and warmth instead of boundaries. And we will present these differences here. Boundaries are a large part of just about every problem's resolution. But bear in mind that setting boundaries alone isn't enough to make you a good parent: you also need love, reality, support, wisdom, patience, and your own growth as well. If you don't have these things in your life, this book can help you find people and ways to get them. You need them for your teen, and for you.

A Confession

Before we go too much further, however, I need to inform you that, while I believe this book can help you parent your teen, Barbi and I are still living those years as this book is being written. Our sons, Ricky and Benny, are now teens. So we are still definitely in the learning curve with you. The concepts and ideas in this book are based on my own clinical and counseling experience, my study of adolescent development, my understanding of the biblical principles of growth, and my personal experience. Still, only God knows what the future will be for our sons. We hope that the end of the teen story will turn out well for them. Until then, we are trying to live out the principles you will read about. I hope and pray for our own adolescents the same thing I hope for yours: that they will be fully prepared to take on the task of functioning as adults in the adult world.

So sit down, learn these principles and tips, and start being an active force in your adolescent's world. Be active, be loving, be present, be truthful, and be consistent; in other words, *be the parent*. If you need permission to be the parent, you have it. Reality, life, and God are all on your side. Get going.