

The changing scenes of life

The early teenage years

Adolescence, puberty and the early teenage years are widely regarded as one of the most challenging periods of parenting. Lindsay and Kathy Yuile (Glasgow South, UK) take us through some of the issues.

IN DEALING WITH this period, it is important to remember that, as with all other parenting issues, experience teaches that each child is different. If we are privileged to have more than one child we will probably have to explore different ways of coping with each child's needs. However, our goal for every child will surely be the same, that they seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Although much has been written in the world about this stage of life from a physical and psychological perspective, our consideration will extend beyond this to focus on spiritual issues. Of course, teaching our children about God's ways will have started long before teenage years, and so our own battle against worldly ways should already have influenced our children's upbringing. But the world specifically targets teenagers, and so their battle between serving God and serving mammon becomes more intense at this time.

There is no formula to follow that will guarantee success. Despite us having more than twelve years of advance notice, each of our children entered the teenage years almost without us realising it! In our community we have no ceremony to mark the change from child to adult, such as the Jewish Bar Mitzvah. Children do not change all of a sudden at a predetermined age; they will develop into adults at their own pace. This article aims briefly to consider a child's changing needs during this time of change and turmoil.

Preparing for independence

The oft-quoted Genesis 2:24 tells us that parents can expect that children will leave home and become parents themselves. Although this will not always happen, ultimately a parent's duty is to prepare their child for independent life. Success in this respect could be said to have been achieved when a child has left home and become

'successful' in their everyday life. In our situation we would want this to be an independent life which trusts in our heavenly Father's care.

But as parents it can be hard to let our child become more independent.

Sometimes we will want our child to depend on us less. On other occasions they will demand more freedom than we think advisable. Therefore, whilst teenage years are undoubtedly difficult for children, this period also challenges parents and their feelings. It is important to recognise that *our* feelings and reactions are being challenged as well as theirs.

Our concern for our children in adolescence is that they should be influenced more by God than by the world. What an enormous challenge this is! Of course the challenge is one we ourselves are also trying to meet. Immediately, therefore, we have a further difficulty; we may be asking a higher standard of our children than we ourselves are demonstrating. All too often we find ourselves trying to correct the very flaws that we unconsciously exhibit ourselves. 'Actions speak louder than words' may not be a Scriptural saying, but our behaviour is liable to be thrown back in our face when we miss the mark, particularly during this period. Children will question parental authority when they perceive double standards. At such times we must have the humility to acknowledge to them that we ourselves are failures, compared to God's standards. It should be God's teaching, with His authority, that we should use to guide our children.

Educational issues

Education systems also put pressure on our children at this stage of their lives. There is the constant preaching of the false doctrine that a good education is a prerequisite for a successful life. Whilst few of us would wholeheartedly subscribe to such a view, there is perhaps a danger that it will influence us more than we would hope.

We are expected to support the schooling of our children, to the extent perhaps of becoming members of School Boards, etc., which may

compromise our stance on conscientious objection. At the very least we are asked to make sure that our child's homework is done. Then, when there are exams, we are encouraged to make sure our children revise diligently. Unless we are careful, the 'importance' of homework and study may be given a higher priority than it deserves. For example, should we allow our children to miss ecclesial or youth activities in order that they become more proficient in the wisdom of this world? It's worth remembering that the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

It is important, therefore, constantly to reinforce in our own mind God's wisdom and the reality of the future that our heavenly Father has decreed. Our goal for our children is that they should serve and please our Creator. Having this foremost in our minds should help to keep our children's education—in the widest sense—in a proper perspective.

One simple rule that we might consider is to make sure that the attendance of our child at meetings, youth groups, etc., always has priority over anything else. Such rules, of course, will present a challenge, not only to children, but also to parents. With the spotlight on us, our teenage child may not be impressed with the excuses we use to justify our non-attendance at Bible Class, etc. Even in the home, there is the challenge to give the daily reading of the Word of God as high a priority as it deserves.

Difficulties

Parenting can be a lonely job. We will experience difficulties. Children will play on the weaknesses and strengths of each parent, and there is no doubt that this can add to family turmoil. However, we should always endeavour to present a united front. For example, disagreeing about discipline in front of children is at best counterproductive.

It is all too easy to feel a sense of failure when faced with the problems of guiding teenage children. Whether as husband and wife or as a single parent, we cannot hope to guide our children through adolescence without asking for help through prayer. It may seem that we face unique and insurmountable problems. However, experience teaches that there are other parents who have already had to deal with huge problems. We should never, therefore, be too proud (or ashamed) to ask for help from our brethren and sisters. Neither should we be afraid to admit to making mistakes. Admitting to our parenting mistakes is not a weakness, and we should have

the courage to say 'sorry' to our children when things go wrong.

Friendships

Children require friends, and these friends will influence our children. If our children have grown up with friends from God-fearing families through contact at meetings, youth groups and fraternals, etc., then these friendships can make a positive difference during their teenage years. Often such friendships are retained into adulthood. Our parenting of adolescents, therefore, starts in the early years, with opportunities to help them build productive friendships.

As our children become older we may need to become taxi drivers to enable them to retain these friendships. It is tempting for us to think that we have more important things to do with our time than ferry them around, but this may be one of the most important things we can do for their spiritual health; just don't expect to be thanked for it!

Inevitably, as they advance through teenage years, children can find it hard to confide in their parents. However, they may find it easier to turn to 'aunties' and 'uncles' that they have grown up with in the meeting. Again, the benefits of taking our children to the meeting throughout childhood can pay dividends, as the relationships forged with others can provide additional sympathetic ears. This takes careful handling and a mature approach from us, the parents. It is too easy for us to feel hurt that our children seem to distance themselves from the home. But many parents, including ourselves, have cause to be thankful for supportive brethren and sisters in our community.

Youth weekends and study days start to accommodate children around the start of teenage years. They are an excellent source of spiritual development, and allow continued opportunity for friendships to be cemented. However, there is perhaps a danger of only attending youth activities. Teenagers can surely contribute to, and benefit from, activities where there are brethren and sisters of all ages.

In the process of nurturing our child through puberty, we can be faced with boyfriend/girlfriend situations. It is all too easy for parents to try to influence this stage of life with their own preferences. Caution should be exercised; forbidding our child to be friendly with someone is perhaps more dangerous than making sure our home is open to all our children's friends, even

if we do not approve. We will have a greater opportunity to influence behaviour in our own home than if we 'chase' our child away to somebody else's house.

Good advice

Drawing the line between what behaviour we will and will not tolerate in our children is very hard. A good piece of advice which we gratefully received a long time ago is to choose a few important things over which there is no negotiation, and accept some things that we would prefer not to. Whilst we may dislike our offspring's 'wild' hair cut (what would those at the meeting say?), it is surely better to allow this than, say, to capitulate on attendance at the meeting. Inevitably there are

likely to be brethren and sisters who will make known their disapproval of our child's appearance at the meeting, but the fact that they are at the meeting at this stage of life is much more important than how they look.

Lastly, we must try to afford our children the forbearance that our heavenly Father shows to us. It has to be a matter of prayer that our children will learn from their own mistakes. We cannot expect to be able to save them from making the same mistakes that we made in our youth. It is by God's mercy that we have been preserved from our own youthful foolishness. Our daily prayer should be that God will give us the wisdom and strength to care for our children, and will be there for them when we fail.

The perils of the world

It's not easy being young these days. The world is very persuasive, and has some wonderful things on offer. David Simpson (Kings Norton, Birmingham, UK) has written an article designed to assist parents, and concerned brothers and sisters, who want to help.

IT IS A GOOD idea to start by finding out what the world is really like. Any newsagent will direct you to a few magazines targeted at young teenagers or young men and women. They come in both his and hers guises. Have a good look through them, and put yourself in the young person's position. The world has changed so much since many of us were young. Even ten years can make a huge difference. For example:

- Did you know that the youngsters at some of our residential youth weekends now use their mobile phones to warn each other when the warden is approaching?
- Are you aware that there are drugs introduced at some of our teenage parties?
- Do you realise that pornographic films are now available not only through videos and DVDs, but also via mobile phones and the internet?

Whilst there is no harm in the first of these three, there is a real problem with the other two. How can we help our families, and our ecclesial young people, to cope?

Be aware

May I suggest that we all find out just what the modern world is offering? It must be twenty-five

years since I walked across the yard of the school where I taught, and two thirteen-year-olds were nattering on to me about a particular pop idol who was gay, and showed me pictures of men who were going out with each other. I looked at the lads in amazement. They weren't being rude or unpleasant; it was apparently just their normal conversation. It wasn't mine, of course; I was horrified. But in the intervening twenty-five years, I doubt if schoolboy conversations have cleaned up in any way.

Unless we go for a total separation strategy for our children, and school them at home¹ (and even then can we stop them watching TV, going to friends' houses, or reading undesirable material in bed?), are we able to divorce them from twentieth-century life? We cannot, and in my humble opinion it is not a good idea to seek to do so. At some stage they will have to earn their living in the world, and that will be at just the stage when we pray they will be thinking about baptism. It might help if we think of learning about the world as a sort of vaccination. Provided they can see or hear what goes on, and always are encouraged to come to us and discuss things, then a little dose of understanding could well mean that they can resist the big dose of practice later.

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1. This matter of schooling our young people at home is dealt with elsewhere in this magazine, with alternative views being given. See pp. 263,267.