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**Presentation Transcript**  
**Practical Parenting – Teen Years**  
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A family of four had been to see me for some time. There were two children – a fifteen-year-old boy, who wore ragged T-shirts, cut-offs and no shoes or socks, even in the winter, and their eleven-year-old over-achieving daughter, who clothes made her look like a private school preppie. The boy was skipping classes, getting F's and cursing at his mother, while his younger sister was perfectly cooperative and had perfect grades. All the focus was on the boy as he acted out his frustration with his parents. One day, on short notice, everyone had something come up, except for dad, so he took the opportunity to come to see me by himself. During that session, this loving father reminisced about how close he used to be with his son and how difficult it was now. And with an anxious look, he asked me if his daughter was going to go crazy like her older brother when she got older. "Will her hormones go off the chart," he asked. That's when I had an opportunity to deliver some vital information that transformed his thinking about his son's misbehavior and relieved some trepidation about his daughter, yet to enter the teen years.

Let's look at some of the things that could help him help his son and his daughter pass through those years. It's really about brain change. If we think about it, believing that hormones are the cause of teen misbehavior leaves us with no solutions and no hope. "They just have to outgrow it," we say. "Who can battle hormones?" But, if there were another explanation – one that's true, that is – then there might be some hope of parents being able to help their kids deal with the destructive self-behaviors that come along, sometimes, with teenage. Actually, there *is* such an explanation – one that's been firmly substantiated by brain science.

Between the ages of 12 and 24, the human brain undergoes incredible change. All humans must undergo these changes to become fully functional adults. The changes occur so rapidly during the teen years that integrating them is, sometimes, a less than smooth road. It helps me to realize, also, that younger children make great changes at every developmental milestone as well. And it can, sometimes, be difficult for them, as well as teenagers. They often refer people to a book – *Child Development* from the Giselle Institute. This book points out that, as children develop new capabilities, learning to use them often causes problem, until they have their new capabilities in hand. Let's put it up on the screen so you can see what I'm talking about.

They have a graphic that looks like an upward spiral. Movement is always upward, but there is a difficult side with an easier side opposite. The younger we are, the faster it goes around the spiral. But, as we grow into teenage, the periods of adjustment get longer. It would somewhat like learning to play a new sport with a racket, or a bat, or a club. How is that? When we first pick up that new implement, it feels okay, but then when we try to hit a ball with it, it feels unnatural and clumsy. We have to learn how to use it. And by using it, we practice, and when we practice, we get better at it.

If we think about a newly developed capability in our brain that develops, we can think about a teen having to learn how to use that new capability. I often have teens come to me because they're depressed or acting out or both. Sometimes, all they can think about is what's going on at school – mostly about their relationships with their friends. They might be having problems with a sibling or their parents, but their focus is on their relationships with peers. This is because they're learning how to use the new capability they have to relate to peers. It consumes all their time and all their attention. Usually this talk is about all the problems they have learning how to do it successfully. And, if we call this type focus on peer interaction hormonal, it causes us to miss all the learning and guiding that needs to go on during this period.

Let's get a bit more specific. What are the new capabilities the brain develops and what are the ups and downs of each one? Well, the first one we're going to talk about today is *novelty seeking*. I've talked about the girl with the blue hair before. She was a novelty seeker, wasn't she? Teens experiment with different looks and different ways of talking.

I had a teenager who came to see me for several years. One day she took God's name in vain. It was the first time I ever heard her do that. I heard it every session for quite a few months, and then, it just went away. She was trying on profanity to see if it fit. If could have told her she would soon tire of it, but this is something we need to figure out for ourselves, and I never mentioned it to her.

I remember when I was a teen, a friend of mine and I made some sandals with soles made out of tire tread. We were proud of them. They looked unique – novel even. Even if they made our feet sore, we wore them to school every day. Other people thought they were novel, too, and we started making them to sell. And that whole episode lasted as long as it took purchasers to realize those sandals hurt their feet, too.

Novelty seeking is something that becomes a part of a teen brain. With this new capability to seek out novel and interesting new ways of doing things and being in the world, comes risk. While teens are developing this ability, they sometimes don't consider the risks involved in their efforts. And this can be dangerous for the teen, terrifying for parents, and cause a lot of conflict between them.

An extreme example of this lack of consideration for risk at the expense of novelty was set out for me by one of my former clients. He was 17. He had a full scholarship to a major university to play baseball. And, in the course of three months, he wrecked two cars, due to drunkenness, ran from the police after one of them, and insurance fraud was part of it as well. When I asked him if he knew what would happen if he got caught on any of those

charges, he said, “I know, I know. I could have lost my scholarship and, maybe, even my life.” Two weeks later he told me he did so many different drugs at a party one night that, later that night, he woke up with extreme chest pain. This boy did not have any abuse or trauma in his background. He was just trying on these behaviors as new ways of being in the world. He was really quite bright and he came from a good family, so I suspect that will carry him through, if he can avoid death until he figures it out – terrifying for his parents, however.

So, that’s the down side of novelty seeking. What’s the upside to it? Well, there *is* a lot of up to it, actually. Without this novelty seeking in our lives, we would not be able to fully experience life – to take risks and move forward and do new things that help us grow and gain experience. As people move through their teen years, they have a chance to learn how to live a full life in a rich way.

I recall going to Washington state with a friend, after my sophomore year of college, to be a logger for the summer. It was my second big adventure in life after going off to college. The idea was to make triple minimum wage for the summer. And I recall that I arrived back on campus in the fall with exactly the same amount of money in my pocket as when I left. While my plan to make money flopped, I certainly learned why I was going to college. While I enjoyed the summer, I knew I didn’t want to be a logger the rest of my life. I also learned how to get along in a world of tough men.

I think many adults lose the ability to seek interesting and exciting changes, and when they do, life becomes routine – a rut. Life isn’t what it could be if we’re stuck in that rut either. I remember being impressed by an instructor in my masters’ program, who told our class that she tried to change her focus every ten years so she would get in a rut and get stale. Many people are too fearful to try something like that, but when they were teens, they probably were not. Also, I’ve noticed that some parents, in their anxious efforts to keep their teens on the right track, inadvertently stifle the urge in their teens for the novel, the new and the different. And when they do that, conflict usually ensues. It’s always a balancing act for both parents and teens. At one extreme is less of a life, and at the other, injury, death or incarceration. It’s always a tightrope we have to walk, isn’t it?

The second area of brain development that occurs during teen years is *social engagement*.

I remember, when I was 14, our family went on a camping vacation to the beach. The year before we went camping in the mountains and my brother and I enjoyed it to the max. But this year, I found myself wishing I could be at home having a good time with my friends. I recall noticing the difference and puzzling about it – so much so that I remember it to this day. “I should be enjoying the beach,” I thought, “but it just wasn’t fun like last year” – because I wasn’t with my friends. I had people to see and places to go and I couldn’t wait to get home. For the longest time I was preoccupied with what my peers thought of me and wanted me to do, but then, when I was 18, it was like a switch flipped and, suddenly, what I wanted to do and thought of myself became a lot more important to me than what my peers thought. I was ready to chart my own course rather than following the crowd anymore – done with one phase and on to the next.

Are there risks to social engagement? A teen's strong drive to be with other teens can limit relationships with parents, mentors, and the world of adult ideas and behavior. A child can't learn how to become an adult from other teens. They need connection with those who are older and successfully older. In years gone by – and in many cultures today – teens have been connected to adults until they *were* adults. This exclusively peer-connected life for teens that we have is not only because they want to be with each other, but also because, in Western culture, our idea of how to provide for teens is to isolate them from adults. Instead of whole church activities, for example, we have church activities divided up by age a good bit. We divide them up and send them off to be educated by grade. We have social activities for them that are separate. I think some of those things are good, but a lot needs to be done with the whole group. Who ever thought it was a good idea to put thirty kids in a room all day with one adult anyway? It never used to happen that way in the old days. No wonder they have their own clothing styles, language, music, movies, etcetera. In some cases, they also teach each other about values, sex, drugs, crime, technology and religion – or lack thereof. I'm haunted by Bruce Perry's assertion: Western culture is the first culture in the world that has lost the ability to transmit its values to the next generation.

We've talked in earlier pieces of this series on how to talk in a non-judgmental way with teens. We really need *a lot* of that. If parents would do more of that, my income would drop drastically. If you want to know more about how to do that, I will refer you back to the second part in the series – *How To Communicate Love to Children*. You can find it on our Website on the *Series* page, where it's on the left side menu option.

Let's think now about benefits of social engagement. When children enter teenage with strong values and solid family support, they tend to gravitate toward peers who enhance their own values. Birds of a feather flock together.

I have a sixth grader who comes to see me who told me it was discouraging to her to hear so much bad language at her middle school. She told me a story about one of her friends who apologizes for swearing in front of her. And I said, "Well, you can never change them all, but you're having a good influence on one of them by your good example. So that's really a good thing – to help people one at a time." And I said, "That's kind of what I do all day long." And she smiled at me and thanked me for listening to her.

A strong predictor of longevity, mental well-being, physical health, and happiness in adult life is strong peer relationships. Another strong predictor is relationships with mentors who are older. So, there's that balance issue once again – that tightrope teens and parents walk to achieve full development. On one side, Christian parents need to prepare their children for teen peer pressure with strong values instilled in a loving home and stay connected with them during the teen years by not driving them away with a lot strong judgment and anger. And on the other side, they also need to prepare their children to be social with others their age.

The third area of brain growth in teenage is *increased emotional intensity*. I see teens express strong feelings, both positive and negative.

A fifteen-year-old was in my office some time back, crying and shaking with rage over her father's discipline. After learning what she did and how he responded, I have a feeling that in five years, she may not even remember it, but, in the moment, it was very real to her because of her increased emotional intensity.

Nearly everyone remembers their first failed love relationship – often in teenage – how intense that was. We recall it as excruciating. By comparison, we also recall, with great pride and satisfaction, successes in academics, athletics or relationship – very important to us and we got very excited about those things.

So, what are the risks that go along with that – with increased emotional sensitivity? Well, the down side here is the *reactivity* that comes from increased emotions.

The girl I was telling you about got grounded for swearing at her father during what started out as an insignificant occurrence. Even she could see she was way too upset for what happened and had gone way over the line in her behavior.

Many of the teens I know struggle with moodiness, impulsivity and recklessness. Remember the seventeen-year-old who did so many drugs he had heart pain? He did it on a whim. Emotions, however, are what motivate us to action – good or bad. So, very important.

What are the benefits of increased emotional sensitivity? There's an upside there, too. Intensity of emotion moves us to take action to do what's good, as well as bad.

I had a fourteen-year-old client once, who had been adopted because his mother was a prostitute who was often homeless and had three children. On his way to therapy one day, he saw a homeless man walking the street. He insisted his adoptive mother stop the car. He got out and gave the homeless man the five dollars he had in his pocket. When he got back in the car, he was crying, and his mother asked him, "Why the tears?" And he said, "That could be me." His teenage empathy moved him to action in a good way.

I sometimes meet men, especially, who have buried their feelings to the point they are so depressed they can barely get out of bed in the morning. Teens, who learn how to manage their feelings, rather than stuff them, are learning how to live a vibrant life.

When teens come into my office – because I'm a trauma counselor – they often have some strong negative emotions that they've been trying to get away from. I tell them it's a good thing that they came, because all the rest of their lives will be a series of ups and downs, with good feelings and bad, and to learn how to handle the bad feelings, instead of stuffing them, is a *very* healthy thing, because the mechanism in the brain that turns off the bad feelings also turns off the good ones. Too much stuffing, and we get depressed, or we get anxious, or we become an addict, or we develop only the most shallow relationships. Together we will learn how to go through a feeling so that it doesn't hurt any longer. That way, there's not going to be any need to repress it. Most people – most teenagers – when I tell them this, respond well to it.

So parents, we don't want to stifle our teens' feelings, but help them learn how to manage them and express them appropriately. If they can learn that, life can be more fully lived.

The final major area of brain growth during the teen years is *creative exploration*. The teen brain develops a more perceptive view of self and the world around during this time. Abstract reasoning and conceptual thinking increase dramatically. During this time of life, most teens begin to think about the meaning of life, their identity, and thoughts about God and religion and eternity occur.

When I was a senior in high school, I recall a conversation with a boy and girl my own age after English class one day. We were talking about plans for the future. And I recall thinking that I was starting to sound like an adult. I was becoming more self-aware and better able to conceptualize my future – so much so that I was becoming aware of the changes going on within myself.

What are the risks to this creative exploration? Well, the downside of increased ability for it is all this this new capability can leave teens vulnerable to peer pressure and identity crisis. Teens, sometimes, flounder for years before they identify a direction.

One of my peers complains to me periodically about how long it took him to find his way, his career, his wife, his own family.

The other, then – the upside to it – is the ability to explore possibilities and options before deciding – impulsiveness can be reduced, risks and rewards identified, courses charted.

When I was sixteen, I mostly just wanted to fit in. But when I was eighteen, I wanted more. I applied to a religious school. I studied theology, developed a two-way relationship with God, and I'm still on that course today, though there have been many roadblocks. And I used to say, *setbacks* as well, but the longer I stay on the road, the more I notice that what I used to call a *setback* was really God's way of moving me forward when I was stuck. That often doesn't feel good, but the results are.

I was listening to Steve Jobs give a commencement address at Stanford on YouTube. And he told a story about getting fired from Apple, the company he founded. He said it was humbling and hurtful at the time, but it turned to be the best thing that ever happened to him. His advice, when hit by a brick in the head, was to keep going toward what's important. Find out what you love, explore, innovate. I know many adults who have not had an innovative thought in years. Being like a teen would be a good thing for them.

So, how do we work with the developmental changes going on in our children? Well, to summarize, the teen brain grows into new capabilities. And teens, sometimes, have to learn how to use those things before they can use them well. Sometimes those changes cause them to get themselves in trouble until they learn how to use the new abilities. What can parents do to help?

Well, first of all, we can *accept our children with graciousness*. The new capabilities, that the brain develops in teenage, are the essentials of a good life as an adult. Help your teens

maintain all four them into adulthood. Don't judge them for the negatives, but help them navigate successfully until they find equilibrium. And we can't do that if they think we look down on them. We have to be accepting of them.

I know a man, who every time his teen daughter makes a mistake, grounds her for months. And, as a result, she's getting discouraged. It feels, to her, like he hates her. It feels like punishment. What he needs to do instead is to ground her until she evidences change in her behavior. That way she can have some hope of getting back her freedom, if she's willing to be humble enough to make the necessary changes. Then she won't have to sit around in her room, discouraged because she hates the one she loves. She can be exploring her world and learning to connect to peers, confident that her father loves her and that she loves him.

Another thing we can do is to *offer challenges*.

When I was in my formative English class my senior year of high school, my teacher, Mr. Tanner, caught the entire class off guard by giving us a quiz the second day of class about what he had taught us the first day. Of course, most of us failed it. We weren't ready for it. And he told us, after we all failed his test, that we were no longer in elementary school, and that anything he said in class we were responsible to know at any time. And I remember feeling very challenged by that and I remember internally determining to never be caught off guard by him again. And that class had some really motivated people in it. His opening challenge was partly the cause of it, I think, as well. We responded to the challenge that he laid out for us.

When I was a young teen, my father owned a one-man metal stamping business. In the summer I would work for him. The days were long and the place was dirty with steel dust. You know that is? That's some of the grimeiest dirt there is. We would come home filthy, but the money was steady. And I saved up the equivalent to \$20,000 by the time I left for college. And I was helping my father build up a family business. I knew that. It was never stated, but he knew that I would get it. I was challenged to stay on the job and work hard for the family. And that's where I learned responsibility and how to work in a safe environment. My father was a pretty smart guy. He got everything he hoped for, for me, in that one move – no grounding, no preaching, no nagging, no control. He challenged without speaking and I rose to it. In fact, looking back, every time I have been a success at *anything*, it was because of some sort of challenge.

So, use challenges with your kids. Get them involved in things that are important.

The third thing to do is to *ask questions*.

I also hear teens talking about the questions their teachers pose to them. And I use questions with the teens who come to see me. The point of one of my questions is to highlight natural consequences, like, "What might happen if you do that?" See, that's not preaching. And it's not giving advice. It's just challenging them to come up with an answer. "How's that working for you?" That's my dad's favorite. I learned that from him. "Have you tried this," or, "Have you tried that?" "Do you think X loves you, or do you

love X?” “How do people who *love* someone treat them?” Those are all questions that I’ve asked kids to explain to me. It’s a challenge for them.

The fourth thing is to *tell stories*. I tell lots of stories to the teens who come to see me. This is also to focus the laser of awareness on potential consequences or outcomes. I tell them about my life. I tell them about the lives of other clients, but always with a lesson attached to it that applies to them. And they always listen with rapt attention. They take in the story and they take in the lesson. And the next week, they come in and tell me they figured a solution to their problem, and then they tell me what they’re going to do – just exactly what the person in the story did. They made it their own solution, instead of mine.

So, you can use stories to move your own values into your children. But resist the attempt to preach. It will wipe away any hope of learning.

The fifth thing to think about is to *stay close*.

As teens grow into peer connection, as academics get more challenging, as athletics take up more time, let your teen know you still care about them by finding a way to spend some time with them one-on-one. It doesn’t have to be formal – just some face time.

I was talking to a woman who had seven children some time back. We’d been talking about how to spend some one-on-one time with so many children in her family. And she came in the next week and told me about sitting on her couch by the front door as her kids came in from school. And each one would sit down by her, without prompting, and lay their head on her shoulder for a few minutes, and then, go about their business, refueled after a hard day at school. The age range there, by the way, was from 5 to 16. Some children don’t know that they need that, or that they can have it, so we have to offer it to them.

Our strategy is to parent the way God parents us in this series. And, if you think about it, He uses all these approaches with us. He is gracious. He challenges. He questions. And He stays close. So, drop preaching, judging, nagging and punishing. Parent the way God does.

Okay, that’s a wrap for today. Before I go though, let me mention a book by Daniel Siegel, called *Brainstorm*. I took the four brain changes directly from his book. In it, he has a plethora of strategies for helping teens make it through the passage to adulthood and a lot more detailed information than we could give here about the brain changes and the meaning of them.

Finally, don’t miss the next and final part in this series on *Practical Christian Parenting*. Part 12 is called *Parenting Adult Children*.

Until next time, then, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.