

Effective Strategies for Strengthening Your Teen's Shaky Faith

I'm spending a lot of time and energy investing in teens and families at my church in Robbinsville, New Jersey. It's very exciting, as much of what we're doing is likely to form the foundation for a new book that will come out later this year. (I'm going to keep you all in suspense on this one.) Young people are the leaders of the future, and we need to prepare them to serve the Lord in changing and difficult times.

Do you have teens in your home? Do you feel like you're in a long dark tunnel with no end in sight? I know that feeling, because I experienced it too. The teenage years can be a challenge for both parents and teens. In order to successfully navigate this season, parents need to make some significant shifts in the way they parent.

This isn't easy. Teens need to find their identity separate from their parents, but they still need guidance and wisdom as they find their way. They're dealing with peer pressure, self-esteem, questions about faith and other issues in the ever-growing complexity that is our modern world. And this is all happening in a sex-crazed and materialistic culture. Teens are struggling today to find their identity and a purpose for their lives. At the same time, they often give off messages to adults that they don't want anything to do with us. Wow!

Research shows us that teens are very open to having adults involved in their lives. We're working on an inter-generational approach that gets teens and adults interacting in a healthy manner. It provides teens the space they need to try things and interact with their friends and helps parents learn how to adjust their approach to work more effectively with their teens. Research has also shown us that when parents remain engaged with their teens through the tough years, those teens are more likely to continue with a vibrant faith as

adults. Sadly, this is only happening in roughly 10 percent of Christian homes today.

Another key factor that helps young people carry faith over into their adult lives is having mentors. Kara Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute says that every teenager needs five mentors in their lives other than their parents. Yes, you heard me correctly. These are folks who go to their sporting events or their school plays and engage them in discussion about life issues. They model genuine biblical faith for these young people and a safe place to ask questions. These can be informal relationships.

Kara Powell tells the story of a growing church in Pennsylvania that has a vibrant ministry to young people and young adults. As they interviewed people, they kept hearing about this man "Bill." Everyone was talking about Bill, and they assumed he must be a hip youth leader. In fact, Bill is a 72-year-old man who has recruited a team of his peers to mentor young people. They value them, and as Young Life demonstrates so well, they do "contact work" with teens on their turf. It's awesome. I hope to raise up an army of older adults to mentor the next generation. I'm already well on my way here in Mercer County, New Jersey.

I also love the opportunities I now have with parents who are still in that dark tunnel as well as those who are very engaged and effective. Careful and honest communication is critical. Parents have to know the plan and be on board. For example, I'm heavily invested with one particular family at Calvary Chapel Living Hope. I coached them in their parenting last year and continue to mentor them along with their children. I've jumped in with both feet, but I have to make sure to maintain a healthy balance. I'm not the parent here, but rather working with the parents in support of their efforts as the primary disciplers of their children. We have some excellent interactions, and the communication is very honest and open.

For parents of teens who are reading this article, start to think about mentors for your children. If you're a leader in

your church, start to think about your older members and grandparents who may be excited to serve as the “Bills” for your congregation. These folks are generally under-utilized in the church, but they have much time, energy and resources to give. I’ll be sharing more about this ministry in future posts. Be watching for our new book, coming this fall. {eoa}

Ed Miller *is with the National Center for Biblical Parenting.*