

How to Raise Godly Teenagers in an Immoral Culture

Want your children to make righteous choices in life? Because of the heavy influence of our culture, you'll have to put extra effort into raising them.

Not long ago I sat with my son, Tate, and five other class council members and their moms at a crowded restaurant eating taco salads and burgers as we finalized our plans for the junior-senior prom. I (Cyndi) knew I had to address the dancing problem before we left the meeting.

In my son's high school there are two dances a year, the Christmas dance and the junior-senior prom. Parents sponsor both events. Since Tate was junior class president, I was the unofficial chairperson for the dances.

Though the Christmas party had gone flawlessly, several parents had been alarmed by the suggestive way some of the couples had danced. I was determined not to allow the dirty dancing at the prom.

"Before we go," I said, "I need to say something. I felt like the Christmas dance went great, except for one thing. Several of us were really disturbed by how a few of the kids were dancing, and we need to talk about it before prom."

My son spoke up, "Well, none of us were doing that."

"Oh, I know. But I am responsible for what went on there. I can't let it happen again."

Blank stares met mine. No one seemed to understand, let alone agree with me. As I looked back at Hailey, Jessica and the others, I knew I was looking at the best kids in the school—leaders, honor students and all but one from a

Christian home.

Yet there was no alarm over the indecent and vulgar behavior I had referred to. The teens expressed alarm only when they realized I intended to take some action about it.

"I've been thinking of what to do. We could attach a note with the tickets, explaining our expectations, or I could make an announcement at the dance."

"No, Mom!" Tate said with panic flooding his face and terror in his voice. "Don't do that. You can't do that."

After an emotional discussion, we finally agreed that if there was a problem we would have the DJ stop the music and make an announcement.

I walked to the car alone, barely able to hold back the tears. Five years earlier my oldest son and his date had left their prom early because they had been disgusted by some of the dancing. I was expecting these kids to feel the same way. None of them did.

What a difference five years had made. Where was their moral outrage? And what could I do as a parent to stem this tide? I still have a child in middle school. What will she face in a few more years?

Josh McDowell, author of *Beyond Belief*, explains it this way: "We have recently noticed a radical change in our youth. I'm talking born-again Christian kids in our pews. In the last 15 years the culture's had a greater impact on our Christian young people than the church or their parents."

We see this influence in their behavior: what they wear, how they talk, what music they listen to. But the critical impact has come in how they think.

Most parents of these young people believe in absolute truth (truth that is the same for all people, in all places and at

all times). But a survey taken in 2001 found that 91 percent of Christian teens do not believe in absolute truth.

So what do we do about it? As parents, there are four steps we can take to help our children withstand the pressures of our day.

BUILD A RELATIONSHIP Teaching the truth is vital, of course. But truth cannot be given in a vacuum. It is best received in the context of a relationship, primarily with families and especially with fathers. A trusting, loving relationship with our kids paves the way for our teaching to be heard and accepted.

“The more we can help families, especially dads, to build that loving, intimate relationship with their child, the easier it will be for that child to believe,” McDowell says.

Kids see God through the filter of their parents. If those parents are absent, abusive, critical, passive or performance oriented, the children will believe God is the same way. There is no getting around it. Despite the many demands for our time, we must make time to build relationships with our children.

The best way to connect with your child is to do what I (Cheri) call “get on his turf.” In other words, find out what your child enjoys and do it with him.

When my sports-oriented son hit pre-adolescence I realized he wasn’t going to sit down on my terms and chat. So I started asking him when he came in the door from school, “You want to shoot some hoops?” or “Chris, want to play pingpong?”

Out in the yard, he’d slowly begin to open up and tell me what was going on at school or on the basketball team, or he’d talk about a friend or test. I’d get to hear what he was thinking.

For your child it might be golfing, cooking, kicking a soccer

ball or doing crafts. It doesn't have to take long or cost much. Just find out what his "turf" is and get on it with him. Then watch the relationship grow.

Often our children need something as simple as someone to listen to them. Leslie, a high-school senior, said: "My parents are great in lots of ways. I wish sometimes they would just listen to me without freaking out or bombarding me with questions.

"I just want them to hear me, not criticize or judge me. It keeps me from talking to them as much as I would like to."

"My parents never talk to me unless it's about my grades or how I did on a test," one college-age girl recently said. "I wish they would just ask me about me, how I'm doing. What I'm feeling or thinking."

When we take time to build relationships with our children, we open the door for them to receive our teaching.

TEACH KIDS THE TRUTH Along with maintaining a close relationship to their children, parents must be intentional about teaching God's truth. In the past, what children learned at home and at church was reinforced in the community and even in the media, but not any longer.

Because our kids are bombarded with messages that are in conflict with our Christian faith, we must shore up our efforts to ground them in the truth. There is great value in church and Bible class attendance, but we cannot rely on those alone to make sure our children are being taught all they need.

As Christians, our ultimate standard is God and His Word. We must be students of the Bible, allowing it to permeate every area of our lives. Then out of our own spiritual resources, we will have a platform to teach our kids.

In addition to knowing God's Word, we must be able to give our children credible evidence for believing it. One survey revealed that 58 percent of Christian teens believe all religious faiths teach equally valid truth. Because our children are immersed in a society where truth is relative, they question how they can know our faith is valid and why they should believe it over another.

We can answer that. For example, the Old Testament contains 60 major (333 total) prophecies predicting the life and death of Jesus. All of these were written at least 250 years before Christ's birth.

The crucifixion of Jesus was prophesied 800 years before crucifixion was even practiced. Today resources are plentiful for parents to "be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pet. 3:15, NIV).

But don't stop at just teaching God's truth to your children. Go further and explain why God requires standards. Tell them that because God loves us, He asks us to give up the things that can do us harm.

In years past, parents have tried to instill truth through daily devotions. At the pace most families live today, "daily" may be too much, so start small. Begin with a weekly family night.

Heritage Builders, a ministry of Focus on the Family, is a resource for just such evenings. Each Family Nights Tool Chest book helps parents teach a Biblical truth in a creative way while making the event a fun time for kids of all ages.

In addition to planned family times, look for life's teachable moments. Use the times when you are with your children—riding in the car, cooking or throwing a ball in the yard—to talk to them about what's happening in their lives. Listen with spiritual ears and ask God to help you be alert to any truth

you can share.

There is also an increasing number of parent-child conferences available to equip parents and youth to maintain high moral standards. Yada-Yada-Yada is one such conference that encourages moms and daughters to attend together. Promise Keepers promotes father-son attendance. The National Center for Fathering now hosts Father/Daughter Summits in many cities.

These ministries and others like them are coming alongside parents to give them nuts-and-bolts ideas on how to help children live righteously in an unrighteous world.

BE A ROLE MODEL If we want our children to accept our faith and live by a different standard from the world, we must model that standard. Paul Baker, who has been in youth ministry since 1986 says: "Parents tell their kids to be honest, but then they go and fudge on their income taxes or call in sick to an employer when they are not. Kids will reject a parent's teaching when it doesn't measure up to their living."

Here's a good example. Most parents know that movie theaters require you to purchase the drinks and snacks you consume in the theater from them. Yet, how many parents sneak in pop or candy in order to avoid the high theater prices?

I (Cyndi) was guilty of this sin, justifying it by saying that I was not cheating the theater out of any money because I was not going to pay \$2 for a candy bar. But when I found myself asking my kids to hide candy in their pockets while I hid canned pop in my purse, something seemed amiss.

Our family discussed the practice of sneaking candy and sodas into the movies and decided it was wrong. We believed we were better off to err on the side of being too principled than not principled enough.

One of the most powerful tools of influence we have as parents is our example. And one area in which adults desperately need to set an example for their children is in the area of taking responsibility for our actions rather than blaming or rationalizing. Baker says he sees this as a glaring weakness in many kids today.

“When I talk with kids, it’s never their fault. If they receive too much change from a cashier then they say it’s the clerk’s fault—not theirs, and they feel no responsibility to return it. When they get caught for some misdeed, they excuse themselves by saying, ‘Everyone does it.’”

As parents we have to evaluate our own behavior. Do we blame police for setting traps when we’re caught speeding? Do we let our “over age” children pass for “under age” to pay a lower price at restaurants? God can help us see our own failure in these areas and turn to Him to cleanse and transform us when we ask Him to shine the light of His truth in our lives. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to be godly parents.

PRAY FOR YOUR KIDS Finally, we must pray. If we think that just reading another book or attending another seminar is going to prevent our children from succumbing to the downward moral slide, we are fooling ourselves. We are in spiritual warfare against an enemy that wants to devour our children. Our greatest influence is on our knees.

We can teach and train our children, but we cannot change their hearts. Only God can transform a young life and make a child willing to stand for righteousness in the midst of the darkness of the youth culture.

Develop a habit of praying for your children daily—for the pressures they are facing, for their protection, for God to draw them to Himself. Begin praying the Scriptures over your child. Take time in the evening or before they walk out the door in the morning to pray over them.

Join with other parents and pray corporately and strategically for your children through a ministry such as Moms in Touch (mothers who pray once a week for their children and their schools). Now more than ever we need to be diligent in our prayer efforts, crying out to God for our kids to “become blameless and a crooked and depraved generation” (Phil. 2:15). The stakes are too high not to.

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