

# Youth Connections

parenting adolescents in the faith community



**Black Mountain Presbyterian Church**  
**Black Mountain, North Carolina**

*Hear, O Israel:*

*The Lord our God, the Lord is One.*

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and  
with all your soul and with all your strength.*

*These commandments that I give you today  
are to be upon your hearts.*

*Impress them on your children.*

*Talk about them when you sit at home  
and when you walk along the road,  
when you lie down, and when you get up.*

*Tie them as symbols on your hands  
and bind them on your foreheads.*

*Write them on the door frames of your houses  
and on your gates.*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

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# ***Welcome to Adolescence!***

Simply put, it is faith in Jesus Christ that makes the Christian community unique. The identities we build through community, service, ritual and tradition are valuable, but not unique. We find community in our neighborhoods, our schools, our bridge and book clubs. Service is rendered through school, or scouts... or even most workplaces. Even ritual and traditions can be found elsewhere: The Masons, the Elks, or your favorite sorority or fraternity.

What is unique to the Christian identity is our understanding that Jesus shows us in a definitive way who God is and who we are intended to be. That understanding establishes our faith communities, motivates our attempt to right wrongs in the world, and gives meaning to our rituals and traditions. In a culture that separates people into smaller and smaller groups, nurturing faith and Christian identity works best when people are connected – each generation has a vital role nurturing faith in this unique community we call Christ’s Church.

This booklet specifically addresses nurturing the faith of our teens. Unfortunately, parents cannot make their children have faith. We wish we could. Imagine, perhaps, a faith pill – a little cross or dove resting next to the Flintstone vitamin. But while parents cannot dose God’s gift of faith, we can nurture it.

So do not imagine the “church” part of the parenting job is over with the thirteenth birthday. It has just begun... and will be intense in the next few years. Our goal is not to force our children to have faith, but to nurture our children in a faith community that provides the practices and experiences to make it more likely that the faith of our teens will grow and mature as they move toward adulthood.

*Faith is taking the first step...even when  
you don't see the whole staircase...*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Conventional cultural wisdom holds that as soon as youth graduate from high school and “run their own lives,” they also graduate from having to go to church ever again. But it is not our job to worry about whether they attend church after graduation; our job is to do everything we can to

nurture their faith before they graduate, and then trust our kids and our God to take the next step in their faith development.

Not every college freshman will seek a church home and family. But the ones who do are most likely to have been immersed in the practices that connected them to their church as teens. When they find their adult role in a community of faith, they seek that place as they travel through life.

The ideas that follow are a collection of what we have seen work with youth. It doesn't work at the same rate for every youth. It works easily with some, and it is like pulling teeth with others. It is based on research and stories and experience, and it will be "reformed" as we continue to learn and grow together as the Body of Christ in the world.

## ***Bet You Didn't Know...***

- Religion is a significant presence in the lives of many US teens today. The majority are affiliated with a religious community and state that faith is important in their lives and influences their moral views and choices.
- The vast majority of teens are content to follow in their parents' footsteps; they are not alienated or rebellious about their faith tradition.
- Evidence clearly shows that the single most important influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parent. The best predictor of what a teen's religious life will look like is what their parents' religious lives look like.
- The greater the supply of religiously grounded relationships, activities, programs, opportunities and challenges available to teens, other things being equal, the more likely that teens will be religiously engaged and invested. Religious communities that invest heavily in staffing, supporting, teaching, building relationships with, and mentoring teens are more likely to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their teens.

From *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith. The book is a summary of the results of an extensive survey of American teens about their religious and spiritual lives.

# Mapping the Territory

Understanding the physical, mental and spiritual development of your adolescent

## ***What to Expect Physically***

Your teen will grow big feet, big hands, long legs and arms and a big nose... but not at the same time. While you lament purchasing that nice pair of pants that got too short over the summer break, your teen is trying to walk with three or four extra inches. The face they have known for years betrays them by turning pimply and getting out of proportion. The hands and feet that have served them well bump into things, trip over things or get in other people's way.

Legs are hairy; chins are not. Suddenly, they stink and have to be told to wear deodorant. Instead of being seen as "cute" by the outside world, they are seen as awkward and geeky and "teenager." The world (including, unfortunately, the church) goes from thinking they are delightful to ignoring them completely as soon as they enroll in middle school.

It's easy to tease them about how they look or how clumsy they are, but it's definitely not helpful. The best way for parents to cope and help their kids cope is threefold.

1. Talk about what is happening. (Not a "sit-down" lecture, but a brief reassurance that this kind of growth happens to everyone.) Teens grow in a scattered way, not a logical, even way. Put that on your list of things to ask God about someday.
2. Find ways to affirm who they are and who they will be that are positive and encouraging. Especially in middle school, encourage and insist on maintaining activities that develop their unique gifts and talents. It is typical that a middler will want to quit activities they have loved for years. (The rule at our house was: No one quits anything in middle school.)
3. Get them involved in helping/serving others. When they are focused on other people and not themselves, it helps them forget what is not working or not right about themselves.

Hang in there with them. It is an uncomfortable time for kids. But the one thing we know for sure is they *will* grow out of it.

# ***What to Expect Mentally***

## PART ONE:

*Intellectual thought processes change dramatically, and emotions are strong*

The biggest, fundamental mental change beginning in late fifth or early sixth grades for most (a little later for others) is the development of abstract thought processes. The “up side” of abstract thinking is your teen’s ability to have great conversations and dream about how the world would or could be. The “down side” is they can’t always control the process and they slide into “catastrophic” thinking. Strong emotions complicate the situation, and the result goes something like this:

I have a ball game tonight and a test tomorrow.

I need to play ball well and study for my test.

If the game goes long, I won’t be able to study.

If I can’t study enough, I’ll fail the test.

If I fail the test, I won’t pass the class!

If I fail the class, I won’t get into college!!

If I don’t get into college, I can’t get a good job!!!

**BY THE END OF THE DAY I WILL BE A POOR, STUPID BUM WHO WILL FAIL AT LIFE!!!! AND IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

Caution! Do not engage! Reason doesn’t work. Logic doesn’t work. The best response is a quiet, non-reactive one – because – teens become, shall we say, “less open” to parental opinion. The child who thought you could do no wrong now believes you can do no right! So, what do we do to help, or at least keep them from yelling at us and everyone else in the world?

We’ve been encouraging you to use words up to now, but during teen years, shape your words as questions. They will be your most valuable tool. Lectures don’t work, won’t work, and you might as well save your breath. When your teen is *not* in a volatile, emotional state, explore how they were feeling by asking *neutral* questions about what they might have done differently in a situation.

For example, don’t ask “Why did you fly totally off the handle when you could have been more patient with your brother/sister/teacher/friend/ME?” Instead, try “That situation with your brother/sister/teacher/friend/me seemed really out of control. How did it feel to you? Do you think

there might have been another way to respond?” Neutral questions are a parent’s best friend. Remember, a teen’s developmental task is to learn how to manage their own life and decisions. *Effective parents of teens help them practice management, they don’t manage for them.*

Car rides are also great tools. Teens don’t have to make eye contact, and, if you don’t always listen to the radio, you will get some good conversation. Remember, you don’t have to get answers to your questions. Pose the questions; I guarantee that kids will think about them, even if they don’t answer them. Compliment their good ideas. Stay quiet about their bad ideas, or pose another neutral question that helps them think about why the idea might not be good. Less is more. Make these conversations short and sweet. Don’t start asking questions the minute you get in the car. (Kids will catch on... and shut down.) Let the conversation start and take your best opening.

Know that hormones create emotional havoc. Teens have great surges of hormonal activity that flood their systems with chemicals which activate strong emotions. They can’t help it. They can learn how to control or deal with it, but not in the middle of the event. We also know their brains are not completely mature until their mid-twenties. Their frontal cortex, the center of rational thinking and impulse control, is not fully functional. (There *IS* a reason they make stupid decisions, even when you think they should know better!) Girls cry a lot (and so do middle school boys!). Teens get really angry, really fast. Put your parent problem-solving response in neutral. You will figure out if a problem grows or continues to a point that needs intervention. If parents respond to every crisis that arises in their teens’ lives, they will need to give up their day jobs!

However, not solving their problem doesn’t mean not responding. The best response is to reflect back what you hear. “Wow, that really hurt your feelings.” “I can hear how angry you are.” Acknowledge the emotions and opinions without judgment or the need to solve the problem in the middle of the emotional event. When the crisis is over, go back to the question technique, but don’t be surprised if the teen doesn’t remember the problem that a day before was going to bring his or her life to an end!

Finally, know that no matter what teens think or feel, some behaviors are acceptable and some are not. Having a teen who is angry enough to punch someone out does not mean we allow punching, because we think when his hormones settle, he will not punch anymore. Adolescence is a time to learn to manage the outrageous. If teens live through their adolescent craziness and learn constructive ways to deal with it, they become adults who can manage

their own lives – and probably their own teenagers. Remember, too, that middle school is a great time to let kids learn through failure. (Middle school grades don't follow them or affect their college prospects.)

Know your child is not crazy and will not be crying hysterically when they are in college. Know that not much can be gained by matching their emotional intensity. Know that the time to help them solve problems is when emotions are calm. Know that they cannot “help it” or “stop it.” And know that, this too, shall pass...

## ***What to Expect Mentally***

### PART TWO:

#### *Identity formation is the main goal of adolescence*

Identity formation is defined in different ways by different experts, but what you can expect is an exploration of what kind of person they want to be, what it means to be “in charge” of their own lives, and on the back end, how they re-connect or re-engage in an adult way in their communities, including their faith community.

The most critical truth here is that teens separate from their childhood ROLE, not their childhood relationships. Our culture insists that teens want nothing to do with either adults or their families during this time. They may not act like they need or want adult relationships – culture is telling them they do not need adults – but adult relationships are critical to successfully nurturing adolescents – especially their faith. Adult opinions will not be wanted, adult advice will be rejected, adult dress and habits will be soundly criticized, but adult presence is required for teens to successfully navigate these difficult years.

Teens “try on” different identities. One day they are the child you have always known. The next day they are snippy and rude. The next day, funny. The next, mopey. And actually, a whole day of consistency is unusual. More likely, the changes will come within an hour.

Today's teens spend 7% of their waking hours with adults and 50% with their peers. However, studies show the adult community is critical to the healthy development of our teens. Insist on it in the faith community. Develop it in social circles. Provide it for teens who don't otherwise have adult interaction. Relationships with adults best nurture the development of healthy identities and teach teens that their most important identity is *child of God*.



Identity formation means teens work to be “in charge” of their own lives. If parents don’t provide opportunities for that, adolescent rebellion will. Allow as many opportunities for them to be in charge as possible – the earlier the better. Late elementary children easily begin to take responsibility for homework schedules before it becomes critical to fight all advice/guidance coming out of a parent’s mouth. And remember, the younger the teen is, the less likely failure will have long term consequences.

Helping teens be “in charge” means guiding them on “how to” run their lives effectively. (Remember those neutral questions?) Help them think through actions and consequences. Help them deal with failures by problem-solving for next time. And show them the reality of God’s unconditional love by loving them, no matter what.

Middle school will likely be the most oppositional and difficult. By the time teens are sophomores in high school, many are ready to “re-engage” at an adult level. While all our children should be active in the ministry of their congregations, confirmation in the Presbyterian church is the formal recognition that teens are ready to commit to active adult service in their churches. Find places for them to engage. Solicit adults to mentor them. Let them begin to figure out how they become contributing adults in the church and the world. (And, get your church to help. For example: At the end of confirmation, teens should know where they might want to serve, and session members or committee chairs should be involved in getting them involved.)

And, knowing it “takes a village to raise a child,” be the village for other people’s teens, and let them village yours. There is no question that mentoring another person’s child is easier than mentoring your own during the adolescent years. Encourage a teen to serve on the committee on which you serve. Invite a teen to help with a project you are doing. Specific, personal invitations will typically yield a “yes” from a teen...and you will impact their lives and nurture their faith. (BTW, works with adults as well!)

One of the biggest mistakes parents can make is allowing teens to remove themselves from the faith community during adolescence. Faith participation is the highest priority in the Christian community – higher than school, sports or play. We know that faith is the foundation for everything else we do. But know, teens will complain.

## **About complaining...**

A reality of life with adolescents, especially middle schoolers, is that they find it impossible to speak positively about anything. Their ability to complain is simply exquisite. However, they cannot imagine any way to change or articulate what they might like instead. So, take all complaining with a grain of salt – don't feel like you have to "fix" it. And when you get a "it was OK," hear it as the highest praise possible.

Finally, remind them that active participants are the people most likely to be able to change the system. The best way to insure something will never change is not to participate in it. (Changing through participation is an "adult" role.) The great reward for sticking it out and listening to their complaining is watching youth enter their late teens having found where their particular gifts and talents can be used to do God's work in the world – and seeing in their lives the assurance that they belong to God and to the faith community.

## ***What to Expect Mentally***

### **PART THREE:**

#### ***Relationships are primary***

The impact of relationships in the lives of our adolescents cannot be overstated. Everything they do and are revolves around relationship. The mistake commonly made by parents and adults nurturing teens is the assumption that "relationships" means only "peer relationships."

To be healthy, our teens need relationship with every age, every gender, every kind of personality. Relationship will define who our teens turn out to be. Ending relationships with adults and/or faith communities create a young adult who has been shaped exclusively by the young, secular world – a scary thought!

This does *not* mean teens will be best friends with adults in their lives. They persist in exhausting the limits of conversation with one word, "Dude..." They ignore or label as stupid all parental opinions and most adult opinions. Reality is, however, that with persistent adult relationships, teens absorb both the relationship and the wisdom shared, and those relationships shape who they grow up to be – physically, mentally and spiritually.

Faith and identity both develop through relationship. Parents know the importance of keeping up with whom their kids hang out with. Know that faith development is the same way. Kids who participate consistently in activities that nurture relationships in a faith-based community develop a more mature faith than kids who avoid or do not participate in those relationships. (Studies also show these kids are more successful in all aspects of their lives.)

Insistence on creating and maintaining faith relationships is one of the greatest challenges of parenting the adolescent. Because these relationships most likely developed during childhood, teens may resist as a way to “separate” from their childhood roles. Adolescent activities add to the difficulty of maintaining faith-based relationships, with sports or work often being scheduled at the same time as church events. Faith community relationships are unique in that teens are asked to be in relationship with people who are not “like” them – who have different interests or personality types or ways of life. Teens usually gravitate to only those “like” them, (even if they are choosing to be off-the-wall different). Christian community means learning to be with all kinds of people who are called into the same community of faith. That practice enacts the body of Christ and teaches teens that all people have gifts that contribute to the body.

“Mirroring” is a concept that helps us understand a teen’s search for identity, cope with it, and maybe even guide it effectively. Teens try to figure out who they are by looking at themselves through the eyes of other people. They become who they think other people think they are (one reason middle school years are so difficult). Mirror back to them their highest potential. The reflection needs to be realistic; no teen is going to believe congratulations for doing a job well when they have just blown off a major assignment. But if adults are tuned in, they will be able to find positive behaviors to reinforce. Don’t assume that a teen will “see it in your eyes” however – they don’t read minds well at all. Speak your view of what a teen is and can be. (But if they argue the point, don’t argue back.)

## ***What to Expect Spiritually***

Given the right circumstances, adolescence can be a time of powerful spiritual growth. The same combination of emotion and thought that produces sullen, obstinate, argumentative, critical teens, also produces passionate, emotional, exciting, spiritual experiences. Teens bring energy, passion, excitement and idealism to whatever they do, and given the chance, they will bring those gifts to God's church. The developmental milestones that can make them difficult, also connect them passionately to God's work in the world. The incomplete development of rational thinking in their frontal cortex makes it easier for them to "experience" God and not just "think about" God.

But...sometimes it won't be easy. Teens will test the waters. They may explore other traditions as well as the idea of not practicing anything. They may criticize at every turn. Often, nothing will please them. It's a good thing – annoying, but good. Their journey through criticism enables them to own what they come out with on the other side...and move to value what is good and recognize what needs changing, so the church can better minister to future generations. As reflected in their mental journey, their spiritual journey can also exhibit complaining, criticism, apathy and separation. Insist on participation, relationship and service regardless of the feedback given by a teen. Listen and reflect their opinions, but teach that active participation, not withdrawal, enables the change a teen would like to see (as well as the recognition of that teen as an adult member of their congregation – which is what they want).

Teen faith grows and matures through relationship. Teen faith grows and matures through relationship. TEEN FAITH GROWS AND MATURES THROUGH RELATIONSHIP. The more relationships a teen builds in the Christian community, across generations, the more their faith is nurtured. The more relationships they build, the more easily they are able to define and articulate their "adult" faith as they arrive at the end of adolescence.

Though the relationship and faith aspects are critical, they are also the most frightening for an early teen whose self-esteem is being tested at every level. Early teens literally feel like everyone is watching them all the time and judging them all the time. Their default reaction is to avoid all people they don't know, all activities they haven't done before, and many they have done all their lives. Their second default reaction is to project their self-criticism onto all others, so it feels like everyone else is judging them.

The same "mirroring" concept that impacts their mental development is also a great tool for their spiritual development. One of the great joys

recognizing we are God's people is our understanding that God sees the "Christ" in us instead of the "us" in us. Mirroring provides an environment in which faith is effectively nurtured when we work at seeing the best in each other like God sees the best in us. Faith is least effectively nurtured when the church acts like teens don't exist during their adolescent years, a practice many churches fall into because they don't know what to do with the changes they see in the children who have become challenging teens. Don't assume that ignored adolescents will return to the church as active adults. If relationships are not established when they are young and tenaciously nurtured while they are teens, the church will not enjoy their gifts as adult members of our congregations.

Active participation in all aspects of the mission and ministry of a church nurtures spiritual growth, although, the specific way a teen chooses to do that might vary. Teens need regular "study" of scripture and worship with the community, service in and through the faith community, and fellowship with both peers and adults in the faith community. The more "Christian practices" they are involved in, the greater their faith maturity on the other end. How that happens is a mystery. That it happens is a fact.

Spiritual retreats and mission trips are a perfect time for adolescents to build relationships. They separate from parents and lose the need to complain consistently. They make new friends. They strengthen friendships with their faith community because it is their only option (especially if they travel *without* their cell phone). They spend long periods of time focused on faith and faith practices without distraction. And, in all these places, they encounter older adolescents and young adults who have matured in the faith, who can articulate their journey and their commitment. That is exactly the message we, as parents, cannot always communicate effectively – just because we are the parents.

The final relationship picture is good news...*we* hope! The single most important influence on a child's spirituality is their parents. Influence number one and two on the list according to spiritual teens are "mom and dad." To quote Christian Smith (*Soul Searching*), "You get what you are." Live an active, practicing faith and your adolescents are likely to do the same.

Never expect that nurturing adolescent faith will be easy. It might be, but at least on some days it is like inviting a bunch of porcupines into the life of the church, then putting them in a small room with a large crowd. You will get stuck. Others will get stuck. We might never know if we are communicating effectively. But the emerging adult Christian on the back side of the journey who speaks of their faith will know that the tenacity of their faith community laid the foundation for their transformation!

# ***“WHATs”... “HOW TOs”... and “WHY?”***

## ***“WHATs”***

### Ideas for mission and ministry with a congregation

Youth need to be involved in the entire mission and ministry of a congregation. Help them find their interests and talents and see where they might use them to benefit God’s church. This may be an experimental time, but don’t let frustration or failure run the show. If something is not perfect the first time, it needs repeating. If, after a couple of times, the interest is simply not there, or an activity doesn’t match their gifts, make a change and try something new. Do NOT make a change to do nothing.

You may need to advocate for your youth and others in your community to be involved across the board. Some churches simply haven’t thought about it; some are just stuck in old traditions that worked in another time, but don’t work today. Most churches offer some version of the following, but be creative and try and match your child’s gifts with the mission of the church.

- Any church committee or activity sponsored by a church committee (like property clean up days or mission service projects)
- Worship liturgist
- Crop Walk, soup kitchens, other service opportunities
- Meals on Wheels delivery
- Christmas Caroling
- Sunday school teaching/attending
- Choir, handbell choir, musical ensembles, drama group, etc.
- Ushering, technology assistant
- Instrumentalist
- Reader for special services
- Liturgical dance or art (like banners)
- Photography at events or for special services (like a power point confession or presentation)
- Computer expertise for services or members

- Mission trip participation
- Website maintenance or production

If your teen has a gift that doesn't fit into one of these categories, talk to your pastor or session. (This is a time that you can do it with/for/or in spite of them...enlisting the village to ask and involve.)

## **“HOW TO’S”**

### Practical tips for parents of MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

- Require regular church and fellowship attendance. It is difficult for middlers to develop relationships with “new people” (even though they may have known them their entire lives), but what they need is time. Regular attendance, whether they want to or not, will enable them to make new friends (or be comfortable with old friends in new situations).
- Take all complaining with a grain of salt the size of Mt. Everest. Middlers can tell you with great passion everything they hate, but they cannot articulate why they like. Don't believe it? Go on a wonderful vacation – say Disneyworld – with your middler. They will have an incredible time, be delighted and delightful, then return and when asked about the trip – they will shrug, frown, and say – “It was OK.”
- Never punish a youth by eliminating church. If you “ground” your youth from the faith community, you take them out of an environment of people who will support your decisions and who will provide healthy interactions and relationships. Some youth in social circles who disdain church will actually try and get grounded so they don't have to explain to their “friends” why they had to go to church.
- Never allow school work or the excuse, “I'm tired,” to pre-empt participation. They can stretch a project that would take 30 minutes if they were going to a movie to a hundred hours to keep from going to church.
- Do not let middlers stop activities they have always loved (i.e., piano, soccer, dance). They are easily frustrated and tend to see everything in the worst possible light. Let them know that when they get into high school, at the end of the first semester or year, if they want to refocus their time or energy, the conversation will be open. Most teens won't quit at that point.

- Use senior highs to help be your “village.” Middlers really look up to and admire senior highs. Asking older kids to help gives them an adult role they value. If your middler doesn’t want to go somewhere, let one of the older kids know they need some encouragement. Insist, however, on attendance. If a youth drops out of relationship during middle school, it grows increasingly hard to reconnect them.
- Use sponsors and other parents as a “village” as well. If you have challenges or frustrations with your youth, know that the parents of senior highs have been through it. Kids that appear happy and well adjusted at church have given their parents heck right up to the front door. Everyone has been through it. Ask youth sponsors, DCEs, or other parents about particular challenges that you deal with. They’ll be happy to share what they know and brainstorm ways to get through it.
- Insist your middler serve the church with his or her gifts and talents. Do not accept the tendency to completely withdraw from participating in the public life of the church. Middlers struggle with self image, but allowing non-participation will actually reinforce the negative selfimage. The more they participate, the more they will be able to find a good fit for their adult service to the church.
- ASK FOR HELP. You are not the only one. Everyone goes through this insanity. Talk to other parents. You may not get the perfect answer, but you’ll feel better knowing you are not alone!

## **“HOW TO’S”**

### Practical tips for parents of HIGH SCHOOLERS

- Model, model, model. What you do tells your teen what you value. Remember, you don’t have to model perfection. Modeling our real life journey of faith, with its good days and its struggles, is what our teens need to see.
- Insist on regular participation. You might consider letting older teens begin to choose what they enjoy most, but insist on the basics: Bible study, weekly worship, service, fellowship, prayer, giving. If your high schooler “hates” youth Sunday school, bring them to an adult class or encourage them to teach. They get to “run their lives” by choosing *which* class to attend, not by not attending.



- Continue to explore where God is calling them to use their gifts. If one doesn't fit, try another.
- If your teen consistently insists you give them a compelling reason to attend, try responding with "we attend unless we have a compelling reason not to go." Parents will be surprised at how few "compelling reasons" a teen can find. The great follow-up question: "How is that compelling?"
- Never punish your teen by eliminating church. (See the middler's list for details.)
- The primary life-changing events for high schoolers are retreats and mission trips. Make them a high priority. If you have a kid who is highly uncomfortable or unsuccessful at youth retreats, find an intergenerational trip to take with them, or that they can take with another adult.
- Every retreat experience is different. Occasionally a youth simply hates the environment, but they should attend at least two before deciding it's not for them. Mission trips are a must. A mission trip is not about them or whether they are comfortable, it is about service to others.
- Kids want independence above all else. Use that to your advantage. If they have trouble getting up on Sundays, let them know that you will not give them a Saturday curfew or bedtime as long as they are on time Sunday morning. Or, they may choose their wake-up time if they are ready to go on time. If they do not comply, their curfew is earlier the next week, or you wake them up earlier... and then the next... until they are ready to reclaim their lives.
- Work on helping them understand how blessed they are to be nurtured and cared for by their church – but develop the expectation and the tools for them to move out of the "being taken care of childhood mode" into a "find your own way and take care of others adult mode" they will need as they move into college. Simply having the conversation about the skills they will use to find a church in college, or to make the transition into a new faith community, or to deal with the pressure they will feel to be "non-religious," will help prepare them for their transition.
- ASK FOR HELP. GIVE HELP. PRAY WITHOUT CEASING!

# **“HOW TO’S”**

## Practical tips for ADULTS who want to nurture faith

- Don't segregate youth. For example, if ushers are needed, pair a youth with an adult. Put youth on committees. Ask youth personally to participate in the life and ministry of the church. Give them specific jobs to do. Find adults who will mentor/nurture them in these tasks.
- Learn their names and use them. There is no better way to feel connected to an organization than if someone knows our name. There is no worse feeling than only to be lumped in a collective “the youth group.”
- Hold youth accountable. If they fail to fulfill a promise or a responsibility, or do a poor job, help them do it again, hold up their broken promise or shoddy work, let them know it needs to be better (and how specifically it needs to be better). Live into the practice of forgiveness. Ask yourself: 1) what did adults do that enabled the failure (lack of clear expectations, miscommunication, assumption of a skill the youth didn't actually have) and 2) how can we help the youth succeed next time. DO NOT give up on a youth, or all youth, after a failure or they will never try again. PRAISE their successes specifically and repeatedly.
- Verbally “mirror” what you want them to be.
- Ask them personally for involvement. Like adults, they are not likely to sign up for a mass appeal. They really want to be asked, especially by adults who are not their parents.
- Find their talents and use them! Parents should let their kids' gifts be known, but if they do not, ask parents about them.
- Work together. Have a problem? Find someone to ask. Answers are found in community. Frustration is found in isolation.
- Spend time with them. Find a weekend you can go on retreat with them. Sponsor a mission trip. Do a service project together. Work together at church. Talk to them and listen to them. Behind the prickly facade, they are amazing people!
- Speak of your faith struggles and joys. Let them know faith is a journey, not a destination.

## “HOW TO’S”

### Providing the circumstances to nurture adolescent faith

The time of life we call “adolescence” has only been around since the early part of the 20th century. As the country became more urban and more educated, children were able to stay children longer. Until the turn of the 21st century, adolescence ended with graduation from high school or college, and kids moved immediately into adult lives. Today, our youth move from adolescence into a time of “youth adulthood” where they may go to college, explore several careers, get several degrees. The average age to marry has moved in the last 25 years from 22 to 28. So, the pressure to finish the tasks of adolescence are not as clear or intense as they were. However, this is the church’s time to focus ministry on helping our children move from childhood to adulthood. Our ministry to young adults is usually with other people’s children.

Through research and experience, four circumstances seem to work well together to enable the Holy Spirit to do some major work. First, give teens plenty of freedom to dialogue and explore their Christian identity. Teens may wish to “become Buddhist... or agnostic.” They may be completely critical of everything in their faith community. Nothing may please them. They may become atheists. Mainline children may become evangelical and vice versa... determining that the faith choice of their parents is weak, nonexistent or worthless. Good parental or fellow church member responses include, “That’s interesting.” “Tell me more about that.” “How do you see living into or practicing that faith?” When challenged, explain why you have chosen the path you are on, but don’t bother trying to convince them it’s the best path for them. Refuse to argue. Explain your perspective and listen to theirs. That’s enough.

It is not necessary to act on a teen’s choices. If they insist being Jewish is the only way, encourage them to attend a Jewish service, but also insist they participate fully in their own faith community until they leave for college (or leave your home). Remember, this is a process of exploration. Encourage the exploration, but insist on the practices in which they were raised until they are on their own. God entrusted them to *you*.

That brings us to the second circumstance – stability of expectation and ritual. They are your children. You are their parents. Until they move out of your house and establish their own residence, they worship where you

worship. They practice the faith in which they were nurtured since they were born. Encourage exploration. Encourage discussion (not arguing). Encourage practices that are healthy. But insist that the expectation is the same as it has always been. Just because they are exploring doesn't mean they exit their faith community. Enlist the community to help them explore. Adding practices in other communities is fine, but maintain what you already have. Being mentored by their faith community is a must. The ritual practiced for all the years before "teenager" shouldn't change. Truth is, teens need stability to effectively challenge and explore their identity in a safe and healthy way.

The third circumstance is a repeat of the mantra already stated ad nauseam. Adolescents must have Christian role models with whom they can interact. All ages, all genders, all beliefs and perspectives. Enough said.

The fourth circumstance necessary for healthy spiritual development is active participation in Christian practices. The practices have developed over centuries and show themselves effective in allowing that Holy Spirit to work in our lives. How that happens is mystery. But know that the more practices we choose to do, the more likely our faith is to grow and mature. (See pg. 22 for more detail on practices.)

Give our teens these four circumstances and buckle up. It will be a rough ride. But they will have the tools to experience God and grow their faith. A parent's task is faithful living. A teen's task is turning our hair gray and getting us ready to let them fly out of the nest!

## **“HOW TO’S”**

### Christian Practices

“Actions speak louder than words.”

Didn't you just hate to hear your parents say that one? Our great-great-great grandparents may not have had the research to back it up, but they knew the truth of the statement. What we *do* shapes who we are and what we believe much more than what we say – or what other people say to us. For thousands of years, since humans came into existence, societies constructed *practices* to develop identity in their members.

“Devotional practices have historically been disciplined, patterned actions designed to create distinctive ways of seeing, understanding and being,” says Craig Dykstra (VP for Religion at the Lilly Endowment, Inc.) in his book, *Growing in the Life of Faith*. Basic Christian practices remain the same, even though the way we practice changes with time and culture. We sing with guitar, or organ, or with only voices, but the discipline of coming together to sing praises in worship is the practice shaping our identity. The patterning of our lives around practices that define our faith creates the reality of living as a faithful people of God.

Dykstra suggests 14 practices that are easy to do and remember. The experience of the Christian community shows us that the more of these we “practice,” the more our faith grows and matures. Adolescence is a time when the church provides access to many practices that have not been accessible before. The opportunity to go on retreats and mission trips, and the time to do so without cutting into the budget that feeds the family, is one unique aspect of the high school/college experience. Today, many college groups go on mission trips that expose kids to other cultures and nationalities. It’s all good – except perhaps, paying the bills.

Simply put, the more a teen is involved in Christian practices and the more practices a teen is involved in, the more their faith grows and matures. The same is true, by the way, for their parents! And if you really want a memorable experience, do a mission trip with your teen. But that’s probably another book. For now, have a cup of coffee and contemplate both the practices and Dykstra’s comments on how they are most effectively done.

Remember this: If you haven’t “practiced” often or extensively, you don’t need to do all fourteen at once. Grow into the practices with your youth. Aim to include more as time goes on. Know that some of the ways you have practiced before may change. And when your youth graduates from high school, keep practicing. The fastest way to negate all the work you did while your child was in high school is to stop participating in your faith community when they leave for college. Besides, your engagement with the Christian community will nurture other youth and your own faith journey. You deserve the same amazing faith you want to give your child!

Remember: Actions speak louder than words.

## ***Dykstra's Practices***

Practices that appear consistently throughout the tradition and that are particularly significant for Christians today:

- Worshiping God together – praising God, giving thanks for God’s creative and redemptive work in the world, hearing God’s word preached, and receiving the sacraments given to us in Christ. (Note, having our needs met or “being fed” is not part of the definition of worship.)
- Telling the Christian story to one another – reading and hearing the Scriptures and also the stories of the church’s experience throughout its history.
- Interpreting together the Scriptures and the history of the church’s experience, particularly in relation to their meaning for our own lives in the world.
- Praying – together and by ourselves, not only in formal services of worship but in all times and places;
- Confessing our sin to one another, and forgiving and becoming reconciled with one another.
- Tolerating one another’s failures and encouraging one another in the work each must do and the vocation each must live.
- Carrying out specific faithful acts of service and witness together.
- Giving generously of one’s means and receiving gratefully gifts others have to give.
- Suffering with and for one another and all whom Jesus showed us to be our neighbors.
- Providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but to strangers and even enemies.
- Listening and talking attentively to one another about our particular experiences in life.
- Struggling together to become conscious of and to understand the nature of the context in which we live.
- Criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) that destroy human beings, corrode human community, and injure God’s creation.
- Working together to maintain and create social structures and institutions that will sustain life in the world in ways that accord with God’s will.

# ***Learning the Practices***

Children, youth and adults best learn practices when conditions such as the following pertain:

- When we ourselves are active in them, actually doing what these practices involve, engaging in them personally in particular physical and material settings and in face-to-face interaction with other people.
- When we participate in them jointly with others, especially with others who are skilled in them and are able to teach them to us.
- When the people involved in them with us are, or are becoming, personally significant to us – and we to them.
- When we are involved in increasingly broader, more varied, and more complex dimensions of the practice, and when the activities we engage in become increasingly wide-ranging in their context and impact.
- When we come more and more to connect articulations of the significance and meaning of these practices (as well as the ways in which the various practices are connected and related to one another) with our own activities in them and with the reasons we ourselves have for engaging in them.
- When we come to take increasing personal responsibility for initiating, pursuing and sustaining these practices and for including and guiding others in them.

## ***“Why?”***

*Because they’re God’s... because they’re ours... because we promised...*

*Because the world and the church need “faith-full” youth...*

*Relying on God’s grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to your child?*

*Do you promise, through prayer and example, to support and encourage your child to be a faithful Christian?*

*Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, promise to guide and nurture your baptized children, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and to be faithful members of his church?*

*Words of the Service of Baptism PC(USA)*

## ***Finding a Faith Community***

Sometimes we find ourselves moving into a different community as we nurture our children's faith. Other times, we find our faith community is not providing what we need to nurture our children and we wonder how we could help make needed changes. Moving with youth adds an extra layer of stress because of their strong aversion to "new." When a move is necessary for whatever reason, ask your youth what they think they might gain from the move. When you choose a new way of being in the world, when no one knows you, you can adopt a new identity more easily. Perhaps they can use the experience to prepare them for adulthood, a time when they will be moving to college or to a different job/community after college. This is an opportunity to practice. Perhaps they can do some research about what opportunities they might find in the new community. Share the positives you are expecting. It won't stop the grouching, but it will give them tools they will use with other people while they grouse with you. Karen Marie Yust has excellent guidelines for what a faith community needs to offer to effectively support parents and nurture children. Use her guidelines to look for a community or to improve the nurture of children in your own faith community.

Our natural human tendency is to look for programming, convenience, or folks who "like us" when we arrive in a new community. However, that criteria alone does not nurture faith. Instead of starting there, think about these questions:

1. Is there an openness on the part of a congregation's leaders to ask questions about the community's understanding of spirit life and children's participation in it? If a leader is uncomfortable talking about how the congregation is seeking to form people in faith, he or she cannot support parents in nurturing their own faith or their children's faith.
2. Are children welcomed fully into all aspects of community life as participants, according to their abilities? Congregations who are committed to children's full belonging in the community of faith work conscientiously to create intergenerational worship and learning opportunities, reinforcing the idea that adults and children travel together in the spiritual life.



3. Is there a commitment to programming structures that give preference to long-term relationships between adults and children over convenience and minimal engagement on the part of adult leaders? In other words, are relationships between adults and children (who are not related) supported and encouraged?
4. Is the religious tradition nurtured through symbol, ritual, and rhythms of life and worship? Congregations who look like a coffee shop or theater have a much harder time providing the alternative reality to the culture that reflects God's Kingdom. Look for visible symbols of the tradition: Songs and hymns from various time periods in the tradition, preaching that mixes stories of the tradition with experiences of contemporary life, active use of the tradition's sacred texts, language that reflects the tradition, etc.
5. Are there opportunities for service outside the walls of the congregation?

Some questions that Yust uses to explore with congregational leaders include:

- How would you describe your congregation?
- What are the most important aspects of your congregation's life together?
- How does your congregation nurture children's spirituality?
- Who are the teachers in your children's programs?
- What resources do you have to support my spiritual formation as an adult and parent?
- How do children participate in worship?
- What kinds of commitments do you expect from families who are members of your congregation?

As surprising as it may seem, congregations that best nurture the faith of children and their parents may not be the largest, most programmatic churches. Look deep and look smart to be sure faith nurture is the primary focus of the congregation.

From, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*  
by Karen Marie Yust

## ***Further Reading for Parents***

Caldwell, Elizabeth F., *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children*, United Church Press, Cleveland, 2000

*Guide parents in nurturing the faith of their children at all ages. Could be used in church settings as parents seek to learn in community. Includes an extensive lists of further reading.*

Doherty, William J., *The Intentional Family: How to Build Family Ties in Our Modern World*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., Reading, MA, 1997

*A delightful read with great ideas on how to find and implement logical rituals for your family to strengthen family ties.*

Dykstra, Craig, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Geneva Press, Louisville, 1999

*An outstanding look at the “practice” of faith, how practice nurtures faith, how families and communities can provide practices.*

Foote, Ted and Thornburg, Alex, *Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*, Geneva Press, 2000  
*Great easy explanation of what Presbyterians believe and why.*

Fowler, James W., *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1981

*A definitive explanation of all the stages of faith, infant through adulthood. A detailed, academic read, but not terribly obtuse and thoroughly fascinating.*

Giannetti, Charlene, and Sagarese, Margaret, *The Roller Coaster Years: Raising Your Child Through the Maddening Yet Magical Middle School Years*, Broadway Books, 1997

*A great review of the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of early teens. Explains a lot!*

Gurian, Michael, *The Wonder of Boys*, Putnam's Sons, 1996

*A great read on the character and development of boys.*

Guthrie, Shirley C., *Christian Doctrine*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994

*A readable exploration of what we, as reformed Christians, believe. One of my favorite things about this book is his comparisons of our perspective with others and his willingness to leave questions that don't have answers unanswered.*

Hersch, Patricia, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Ballentine Books, 1998

*Hersch spent several years with teens at school. Her insights are invaluable.*

Pipher, Mary, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. Grosset/Putnam, 1996  
*A classic on understanding the cultural influences on our girls.*

Pipher, Mary, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families*. Grosset/Putnam, 1996

*Thus says God,...*

*Do not fear,*

*for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name,*

*you are mine.*

*When you pass through the waters,*

*I will be with you;...*

*When you walk through fire*

*you shall not be burned,*

*and the flame shall not*

*consume you.*

*For I am your God,*

*the Holy One of Israel,*

*your Savior.*

Isaiah 43:1-3



The author, Beth Utley, has been an educator for 30+ years, 15 years in the church. She is married to a Presbyterian pastor, has raised four children of her own and many, many more in the body of Christ. As Director of

Christian Education and Youth at Forest Hills Presbyterian Church in High Point, she has practiced, tested, and refined her skills and opinions on how to nurture faith from cradle to grave. While churches have differing styles of governing and different understandings of who God is and who we are in relationship to God, the practices of faith and parenting are universal. Beth lives in High Point with her husband, her mother, and a crazy dog. She enjoys time with her adult children. She attends Union Presbyterian Seminary at Charlotte and when she can find time she reads, blogs, gardens, and does home improvement projects. And she always has coffee on Fridays with her husband! She is available for classes and workshops on Parenting in Faith and Youth in the Church. You can follow her blog at [www.realifeandfaith.blogspot.com](http://www.realifeandfaith.blogspot.com).