
LAKE SIDE CHURCH of Chicago

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The **LAMPLIGHTER**



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RELEVANT PARENTING

Reminiscing with my adult children often results in accounts that differ so much that I wonder if I was even there. Maybe they are recalling an event from a movie they saw. Or perhaps I am confusing my own childhood experience with theirs.

Our memories particularly diverge during their adolescent years. This does not surprise me. The hormonal upheaval in children's lives must surely make dramatic alterations to brain chemistry. Adolescents sometimes act as if their rationality went into hibernate mode.

On the other hand, parenting adolescents may cause permanent brain damage. Why haven't the experts labeled it yet – PAPD, Post Adolescent Parenting Disorder? Marine boot camp cannot possibly require more stamina, courage and determination than trying to train teenagers. After surviving twenty years of seven children passing through this diabolical phase of life, I sometimes question my sanity, not to mention my memory.

But my wife and I stuck it out. We did not check out. Some parents throw up their hands in exasperation and allow their adolescents to secede from a reasonably ordered family structure. They buy into the conventional wisdom that says the identity crisis of teenagers demands the dissolution of the parent-teen relationship.

A recent extensive sociological study by Christian Smith refutes that adage. Smith studied the religious lives of teenagers, ages 13-17, in the National Study of Youth and Religion in 2003-2005. The landmark research resulted in a book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

Smith and his research team continued to follow many of the original respondents in his first study until they had collected data on them as 18-23 year-olds. He wanted to learn how the religious lives of teens are shaped and change during the next phase of their lives, known as emerging adulthood. The new research yielded the book, *Souls In Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Smith explodes the myth, "Parents of teenagers are irrelevant." For decades, pundits have told parents that during adolescence, peers usurp parents in influence and importance. Teenagers often appear to be alienated and incorrigible. They resist authority on many levels, contentious for their autonomy. Concluding that their teenager "will not listen" to them any longer, many parents forfeit their role.

The most blatant area of parental abandonment occurs in religious matters. Smith says, "But when it comes to religion, many parents seem keen not to 'impose' anything or to 'shove religion down their throats.' Very often, as a result, many adolescents are thrown back on themselves and left floating in a directionless murk to figure out completely on their own some of life's most basic questions concerning reality, truth, goodness, value, morality, and identity."

From interviews and surveys, Smith contends, "Most adolescents in fact still very badly want the loving input and engagement of their parents – more, in fact, than most parents ever realize. They simply want that input and engagement on renegotiated grounds that take seriously their growing maturity and desired independence."

Many parents make the mistake of granting independence abruptly when the teenager leaves for college. Others confusedly decide to concede that independence when the teenager begins demanding it and throwing adolescent temper tantrums. The wise parents recognize the gradual process of maturity and learn to reward their teenagers with independence over an extended period, counseling and training them for the adult responsibilities that lie ahead.

Interviewers asked teenage participants in the study, "If there was one thing you could change about your family, what would it be?" Perhaps the most common answer was that teens wished they could have a closer relationship with their parents. When asked why they were not closer, the teens pleaded ignorance. Their parents were busy and they did not know how to reach out to them to get to know them better.

Of course they don't know. They are still growing emotionally and psychologically. They are still children in many ways, trying to figure out how to inhabit bodies that are rapidly morphing into adulthood. They very much need their parents to be parents, to guide them through this tumultuous transition as their primary source of mature love and support.

Smith emphasizes the imperative nature of this responsibility with respect to religion. "So just at the time when teenagers most need engaged parents to help them work out a whole series of big questions about what they believe, think, value, feel, are committed, to and want to be and become, in many cases, their parents are withdrawing from them." Don't do it! Stay engaged. Enter into the recurring negotiation process, respecting the teen's blossoming maturity.

Here's the kicker. Smith also discovered in the next phase of life (18-23), emerging adults still strongly desire the input of their parents, especially with respect to religious issues. In fact, research demonstrates that the most powerful influence on the religious beliefs and habits of emerging adults continued to be the religious lives of their parents.

Although their roles change, parents are never irrelevant to their children, in every phase of life.

Pastor Stan