

4 Tips for Understanding the Hurts of Adolescence

By Jim Burns, Ph.D.

If you are like me, you couldn't be paid enough to agree to turn back the clock and live through your adolescent years again! Adolescence, even for the most fortunate young person, is still a difficult season of life. Kids are dealing with a lot of pain, stress and change in their lives. It is our responsibility as parents to acknowledge this reality. We must not ignore what our kids are experiencing. Rather, we must be proactive in helping them deal with it. Still, we can't be helpful if we are not able to "read the signs" that indicate our kids are struggling. We need to strive to understand the hurts of adolescence.

I've written this tip sheet for that express purpose: to help you understand the hurts of adolescence. Following, you will find my top four tips to help learn to discern what is going on in the life of your teen.

1. Become a Student of the Culture.

It's up to you, as a parent, to know who and what is influencing your kids. It's going to take your time, energy and money to do so. But if we want to help our kids move through the adolescent years into adulthood successfully, we have to understand how our current culture is shaping our children's morals and values. Let me give you just one example to drive home the point that we need to be students of the culture. Robert Pittman was one of the founders of MTV. His desire in creating MTV was not only to reflect culture, but also to shape it. He said, "Early on, we made a key decision that we would be the voice of young America. We were building more than just a channel; we were building a culture." Regretfully, I must say that MTV has been successful in its mission. As parents, we have the power to be the most influential source for the development of our kids' morals and values. Being students of the culture helps our ability to target the specific values our kids most need us to address.

2. One of the Greatest Influences in Your Teen's Life is Their "Friendship Cluster."

This doesn't mean that you, as a parent, aren't a significant influence in your child's life. Believe me, you are. But, the fact is, as your teen moves through adolescence, the amount of influence you have will fluctuate. And there will come a point in the life of your son or daughter when his or her friends will become the most influential voice they hear. If you haven't experienced this yet, get ready, because it's only a matter of time.

Most likely, your kids will tend to hang out with a cluster of two or three of their best friends. In our online article "[Keeping Up With Today's Youth Culture](#)," the author, Jim Liebelt, makes a key observation on how adolescent friendships work:

"The rule of friendship among adolescents operates in such a way that your kids will conform to the interests, behaviors and values of their closest friends. Friendship groups are formed on a voluntary basis, so understand that your child will either contribute to setting the group standards, conform to them, or move away from the group. The one thing they won't do is stay in a friendship group long term while bucking the group's values. What this friendship rule means to parents is that you should be aware that your kids will be involved in the interests, behaviors and values of their friends – or they'll change friendship groups. Parents who, for

example, know their child hangs out with friends who use drugs, but believe their child doesn't use drugs, are most likely parents in denial. Learning about a kid's closest friends means learning much about the kid himself."

Knowing your teen's friends will help you understand what types of experiences your teen might be struggling with – and will definitely provide insight into the morals and values that are influencing your son or daughter.

3. Your Kids Still Want a Relationship with You During Adolescence.

Where else will they go when they need money?! Seriously, the older your kids get, the more they will move from dependence on you to a state of independence. Deep down, this is what we want for our kids. After all, who would look forward to having the responsibility of parenting a thirty-five-year-old adolescent? Not me! Still, the road to independence can be tough on parents, especially when it appears as rejection. Such experiences come as anywhere from a mild surprise to a major shock to parents who are watching their fun-loving 12-year-old become a sullen, more serious 13-year-old seemingly overnight. Try to keep in mind, however, that it's only a normal part of adolescence.

Kids still want your presence in their lives, Moms and Dads. They want a relationship with you. Remember that just because they may not say "I love you" as much as they used to, doesn't mean they don't love you anymore. And don't expect to get away with giving them a hug and a kiss in the parking lot at school!

4. God is Still Important to Your Kids' Lives, Even When They Express Doubts.

Just because a teen struggles with faith, expresses questions and doubts, or seems bored with church doesn't mean that they hate God. As kids progress through adolescence, they begin to think critically. A byproduct of this new way of thinking is that they begin to examine their faith from an adult-like perspective – which gives rise to doubting and questioning. Let me say it as clearly as I can: this is a healthy, important part of becoming an adult, and of developing a mature faith that will carry them through their adult lives! As parents, we need to create the atmosphere in our homes where our kids can struggle with faith issues safely and with lots of love, acceptance and guidance.

Too often, parents try to clamp down, to control or minimize these faith struggles in their kids, because they fear their kids may walk away from faith. But in the end, these tactics actually stunt the spiritual development process at work in their kids' lives. Instead, parents who understand this key phase of spiritual development in the lives of their teens, and come alongside with support and encouragement, will actually help them develop an enduring faith.