

HOW SPRING-CLEANING CAN DO YOU GOOD // TV, MOVIE, MUSIC, AND GAME REVIEWS

Parenting Teens[®]

KNOW / GROW / BECOME

SPECIAL DIGITAL ISSUE

IN THE SILENCE, HE

Speaks

COVID-19 has upended daily life—making it
the perfect moment to hear from God.

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

9 ways to get your teen talking

How to find community (even now!)

Why disappointment can be a gift

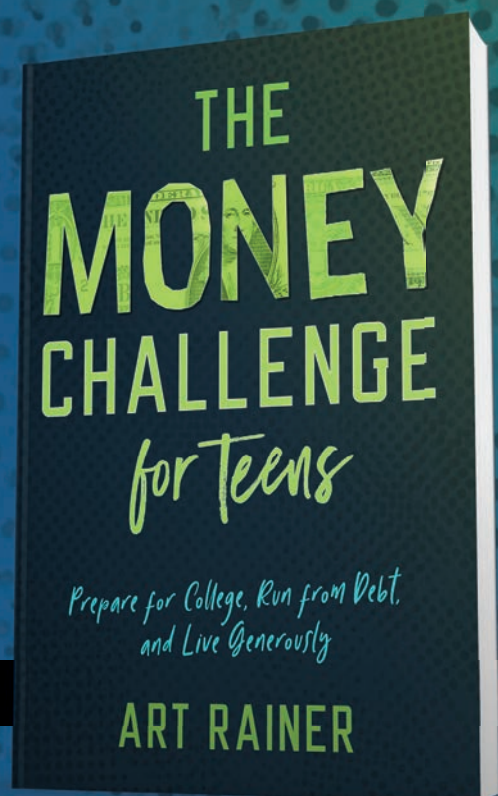
The benefit of boredom

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THE LAST WORD

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SPECIAL DIGITAL ISSUE

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LEAN INTO GOD'S PROMISES

It's late April, and I'm writing this letter to you from my makeshift home office. Life as we know it has been completely upended by COVID-19, and many of us have been thrown into unknown territory.

I have found that in a season of unknowns, we tend to respond in a few different ways. Some of us feel the effects of anxiety and fear and become paralyzed by it. Others allow that anxiety to drive us to seek control, while some of our more laid-back friends choose to just "wait and see."

As believers, we have a deep well of grace and mercy to draw from, and to neglect it in our time of need is to turn our backs on Jesus. So instead, let me encourage you to two ends.

First, lean into what you know God has promised you. Spend time exploring the Word to know His promises. Second, remember who God has called us to be as a result of those promises.

I would also challenge you to write down the opportunities this season has offered you. I have been able to cut out two hours of driving each day, which has allowed me to sleep in a little more, do breakfast with the kids, and spend quality time with my family in the evenings. Our young family has grown so much closer over the last few weeks, which has offered incredible windows for spiritual conversation and discipleship that our busy schedules just didn't leave room for before.

These are just a few of the things that I am thankful for in this season. May we all take full advantage of a time where God so kindly stripped away the rush of life to help us make room for His ministry in our lives.

On the journey with you,



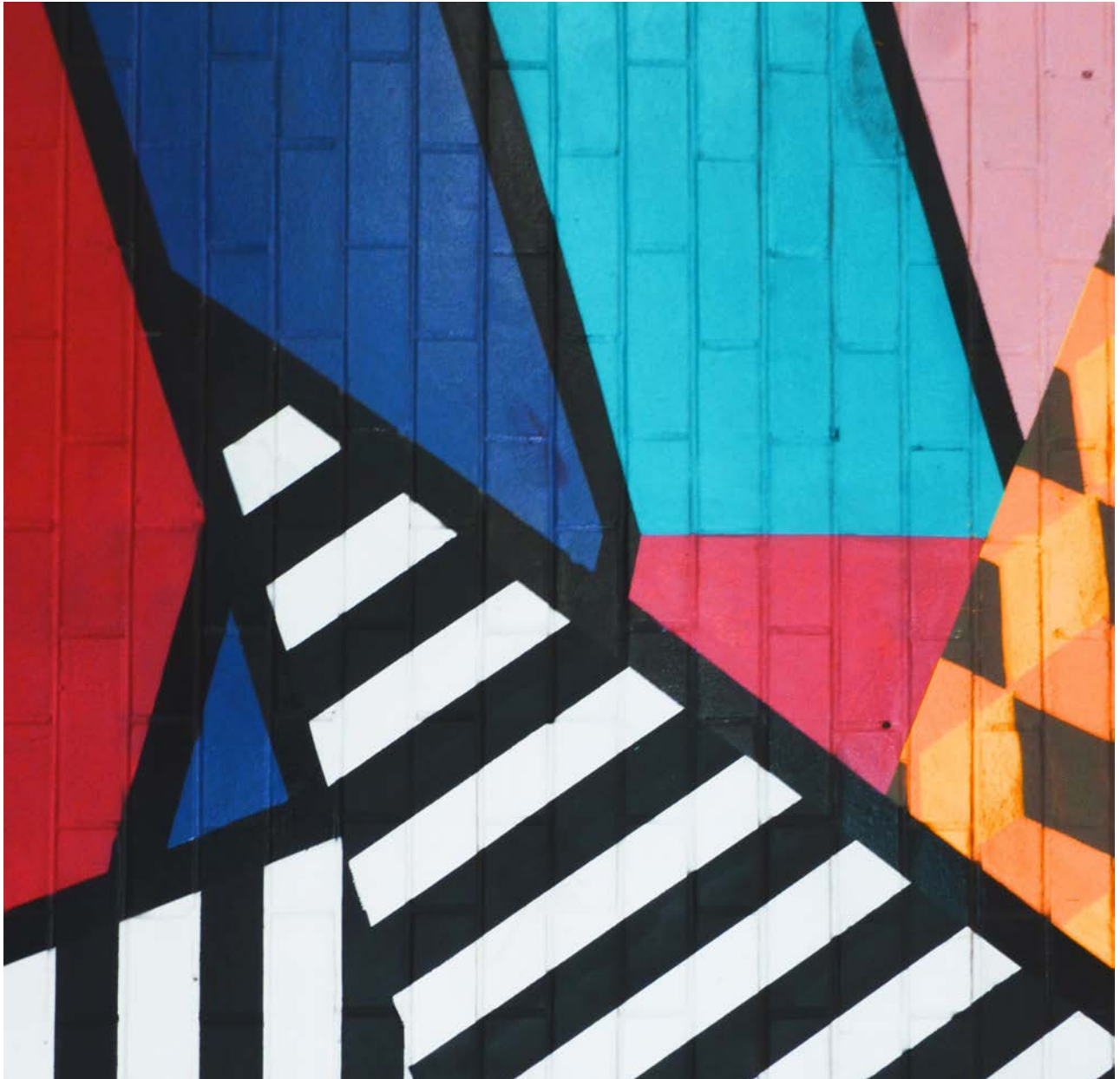
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KNOW

YOUR TEEN'S WORLD

01



Even a young man is known by his actions—
by whether his behavior is pure and upright.

PROVERBS 20:11

Nearly half of teens say they feel “more lonely than usual” while distancing at home. Girls are more likely than boys to say they are lonelier.

**MORE
THAN HALF**
of teens are spending
at least an hour a day
consuming COVID-19
content.

61% of teens say they are worried someone in their family will be exposed to the virus, and

63% say they are worried about the effect it will have on their family’s finances.

**65%
OF TEENS**
say they talk to
family or friends
over texting or social
media more than
usual.

Teenagers of color are more likely to say they are worried they or someone in their family will be exposed to the virus and about the potential economic effect on their family—including 90% of Hispanic teens.

SPRING, UPENDED

COVID-19 has meant an abrupt end to spring for teenagers across the country, with major milestones like prom and graduation over long before they began. How are teens coping with the changes? Here's what researchers have found.

When asked, "What is one thing technology cannot replace?" teens place a big emphasis on what is *"real," "genuine,"* and *"human."*

The most common emotions teens say they are feeling are:

1. Frustrated (63%)
2. Sad
3. Nervous
4. Disconnected
5. Hopeful
6. Angry

Of those who say they are sad, **61% express heartbreak and disappointment** for events and opportunities they were looking forward to.

Sources: 1. "Common Sense Media | SurveyMonkey poll: Coronavirus and teenagers," Common Sense Media, March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/common-sense-media-coronavirus/>
2. "The Pulse of Gen Z in the Time of COVID-19," DoSomething Strategic, April 2020. Available online at: <https://medium.com/dosomethingstrategic/gen-zs-thoughts-on-covid-19-2067b0f36af1>

MOVIES



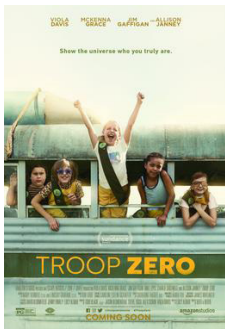
Little Women

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SAOIRSE RONAN

Based on the classic novel about the lives of four sisters growing up in New England during the Civil War, *Little Women* does an excellent job highlighting the character

flaws and maturation of the girls you likely know so well. The girls learn lessons in kindness, selflessness, forgiveness and generosity as they try to emulate their mother who loves them dearly while sacrificially giving herself to serve others. This adaptation presents the story in a way that is entertaining for audiences familiar and unfamiliar with the book. In the end, each girl proves to be a great role model for teens.



Troop Zero

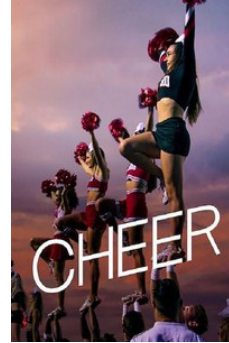
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MCKENNA GRACE

Christmas Flint is a young girl who is into all things outer space. When Flint finds out that the winner of the regional Girl Scouts' Jamboree gets to record their voice

for a message that will be sent into space, she is determined to be in the winning Girl Scout troop. She is rejected by the local troop, however, so she gathers a group of misfit girls to form her own troop to compete in the Jamboree. This Amazon Original is a movie about friendship, believing in oneself when the odds are stacked against you, and facing trials together.

SHOWS



Cheer

NETFLIX

This documentary series follows the Navarro College cheerleading team leading up to the National Cheerleading Championship in Daytona, Florida. It shows the great lengths this team will go to

excel at their sport while diving into the lives of five of the members on the team—their families, how they got into cheerleading, and how cheerleading has been a positive influence in their lives. The show also highlights their coach, Monica, who works hard not only to build an excellent team, but also to shape these adolescents into responsible adults. While the cheerleaders don't always exemplify healthy choices, they do exhibit commitment to their team.



The Expanse

AMAZON

Based on the novel series of the same name by James S.A. Corey, *The Expanse* is set hundreds of years in the future when humans have colonized the solar system and Mars has become an

independent military power. While the show's conflict is rooted in political conspiracies hatched by self-serving politicians, the heroes of the show are committed to fighting for truth and justice. After being dropped by SyFy while in its third season, *The Expanse* was recently picked up by Amazon and is now much less censored. Parents should know that it is rated TV-14 for violence, language, and some sexual content.

MUSIC



Citizen of Heaven

TAUREN WELLS

Citizen of Heaven has a mixture of upbeat pop songs and ballads that sound fresh, modern, and fun. The song "Miracle"

is reminiscent of a Michael Jackson pop sound, while "Close" has an electronic dance feel. There are several great songs on the album, but one standout, "Millionaire," features Kirk Franklin and is about God coming through for us in hard times. The whole album is enjoyable to listen to when you're looking for some inspirational pep in your day, with an overall message about the goodness of God to those who trust in Him.



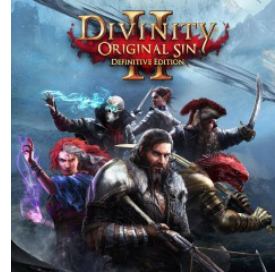
The Worship Initiative Vol. 18

THE WORSHIP INITIATIVE

Well-known Christian artists Shane Barnard and Shane Everett (Shane & Shane) are leading

The Worship Initiative, an online training site for worship leaders. *The Worship Initiative Vol. 18* is a compilation of songs that highlights the type of worship they are producing—a lot of which you may have heard before from other artists, but are all compiled here in a way that carries a simple, pure, worshipful experience. My two favorites from the album are "All Hail King Jesus" and "Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me." They are two songs that build beautifully to a worshipful climax and sing of the prominence of Christ.

GAMING

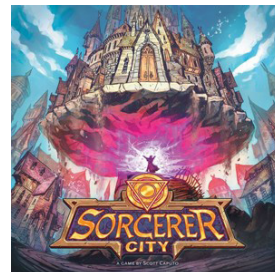


Divinity: Original Sin 2

PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE, PC

In *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, living beings in the fantasy world of Rivellon have a form of energy known

as Source, and individuals called Sourcerers can manipulate Source to cast spells or enhance combat. Problems arise when Source is tied to the rise of monsters terrorizing Rivellon known as Voidwoken. In response, the government begins severely persecuting and even killing Sourcerers. Players must navigate the game's complex political and religious world while completing complex tactical battles in order find true roots of the Voidwoken and save Rivellon. The game recently released on Nintendo Switch and is rated M for sexual themes, violence, language, and blood and gore.



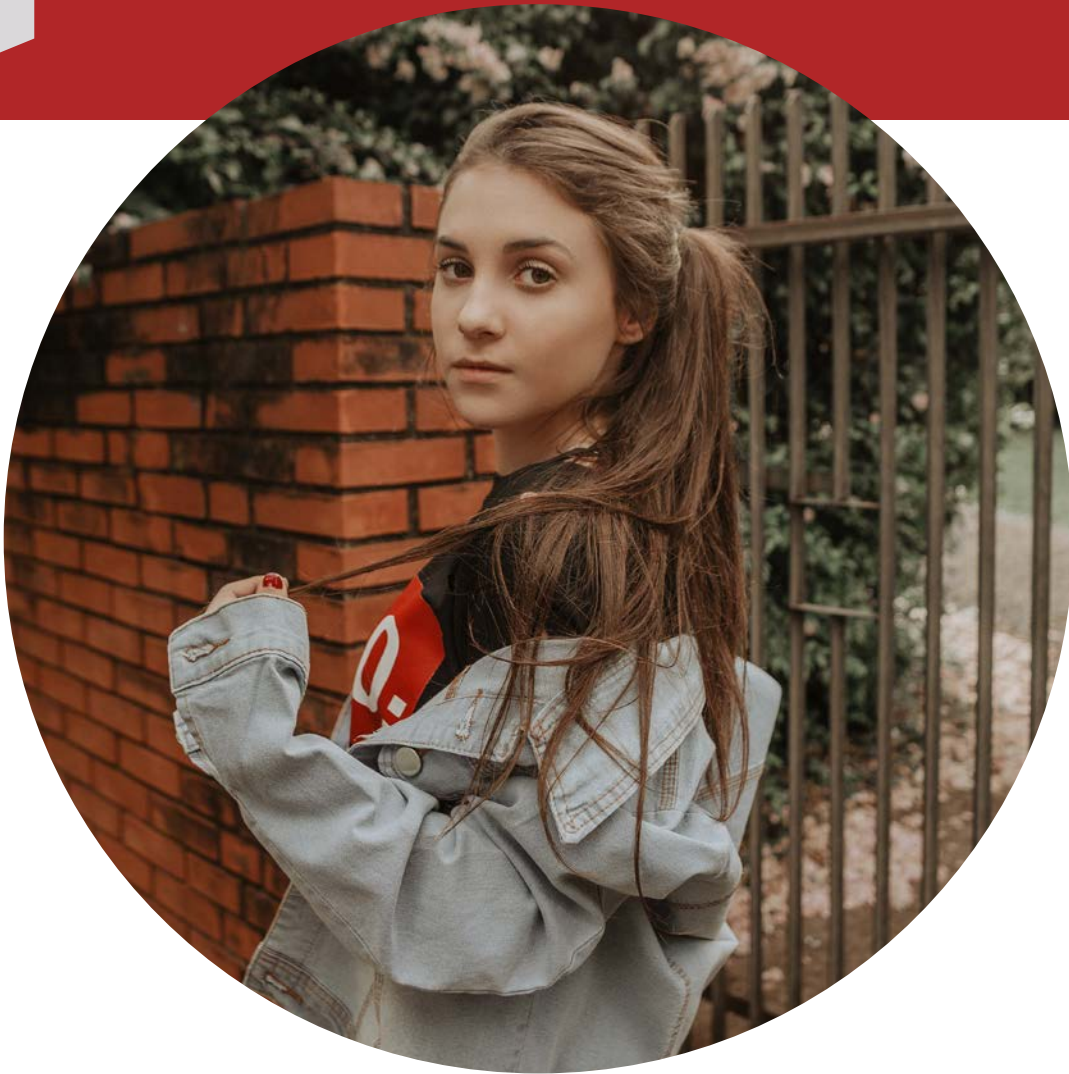
Sorcerer City

BOARD GAME

In *Sorcerer City*, players are rival wizard architects building the same city district over five years. Unfortunately, Sorcerer

City has a monster problem, so you must mitigate the effects of marauding creatures who attack your city district over the course of five rounds. How well players build their section of the city earns them money to use to improve their chances of improving their city in subsequent rounds. The game also introduces new monsters for new rounds to make things more difficult. Each round is two minutes, so the game teaches players to think quick and solve problems creatively.

JENNIFER DIXON is a freelance writer with a master's degree in biblical counseling from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. She lives outside Nashville, Tennessee with her husband, two girls, and son.



ATTUNEMENT:

How communication goes beyond words

by Gretchen Raley, LMHC

If your conversations with your teenager seem to consist only of requests for car keys or being barked at to be left alone, you're in good company. Effective communication is the most universally challenging issue for parents of teenagers.

What to say, what not to say, and how to get your teen to open up are a daily struggle. But when you do meet your teen's need to be understood, you are forging a connection with him that strengthens your relationship and enhances his emotional health.

Attunement means being aware and responsive to another person's (and your own) emotional state. It is attunement that establishes the basis of bonding and secure attachment between an infant and a parent early in life, and it provides the means of connection throughout adolescence into adulthood.

It can also make all the difference in the quality of communication between parents and their children. Here are some tips for increasing attunement with your teen.

1. SPEAK WITHOUT WORDS

You can attune to your teen simply by offering your full presence to her. Using simple nonverbal signals such as tone of voice, eye contact, and facial expressions, try to connect and really listen.

Get on the same level, look her in the eye, put down your phone or the vacuum, nod, and offer a gentle touch on the arm if it seems appropriate. Relax the muscles in your face and your shoulders. You want your teen to feel like you're in this with her, not that you are offering all the answers. This can have a disarming and calming effect on your teen, opening the door to real communication.

2. REFLECT HER FEELINGS

"It sounds like you are really frustrated with biology." "It must have really hurt when she said that about you." These are comments made by an attuned parent. Often, teens are highly emotional about things but don't know how to label the true feelings underneath it all. By identifying your teen's pain, disappointment, or embarrassment, you are saying, "I want to understand. I care."

Sometimes you may be off base, so let your teen correct you. It can help to say things like, "So what I hear you saying is..." or "Let me see if I understand..." When you respond in this way, you can de-escalate a volatile conversation quickly. And more importantly, your teen will know that his feelings matter—and that therefore, he matters.

3. DEAL WITH YOUR OWN STUFF

If you notice your body tensing every time your teen is about to walk in the door, pay attention to that. What are you dreading? What issues from your own adolescence might be coming up? What can you do to attend to your own emotions, and prepare for your encounters?

In their book, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, Dr. Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell suggest that when parents fail to make sense of their own childhood experience and inner emotional world, they risk being intolerant of their children's negative emotional state. But, they say, "by understanding ourselves we give our children the chance to develop their own sense of vitality and the freedom to experience their own emotional worlds without restrictions and fear."¹

When parents face their own doubts, insecurities, and fears, they can be free to be fully present to their kids. This may not necessarily mean going to therapy, but it does mean developing awareness, cultivating healthy habits, and participating in self-reflection and prayer.

Emotional attunement is not just a skill to practice when things are hard. Being fully in the present moment with your teen in silliness and play is just as important. Joy is multiplied. And that connection will make all the difference when words are required.

1. Siegel, Daniel, M.D., Mary Hartzell. *Parenting From The Inside Out: How A Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive*. New York: Penguin Group, Inc., 2003. p. 21

GRETCHEN RALEY, LMHC is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor who comes alongside adolescents and their families as they work toward emotional and relational healing. Gretchen has worked with youth for 20 years in various capacities, including school counseling, community mental health, church and parachurch ministry, and LifeWay's FUGE camps. She lives with her husband, Nathan, and young son in Orlando, Florida. Read more at thecounselingstudio.org.

IN THE SILENCE, HE

Speaks

SITTING ALONE CAN BE AWKWARD. BEING SILENT CAN BE ISOLATING. BUT IN A WORLD OF DISTRACTIONS, BEING STILL AND LISTENING TO GOD HAS NEVER BEEN MORE VITAL.

By Dan Darling

H

ey Dad, can we listen to music?"

This is inevitably the question one of my kids asks me when we get in the car. They ask me because they know it's really an unnecessary question. They know when we are in the car, we will listen to music, usually from our favorite bands on our favorite playlists on our favorite streaming services. It's in the car where I learn all kinds of new music as my kids help me keep up with the latest stars and where I teach them a thing or two about real music, the classics that make them roll their eyes.

I've always had something going on in my car. From the time I began to drive by myself in my teens, I've either had sports radio, music, or sermons from my favorite preachers. Today I mostly listen to podcasts or audiobooks. But lately God has been working in my heart to turn off the noise and experience something that is kind of awkward for me.

Silence.

I don't know about you, but stillness and quiet make me a bit nervous. Extroverted, I like to have conversations with friends. Curious, I like to listen to content. Hurried, I don't like to slow down.

But the more I study Scripture,

the more I realize how important silence is to our walk with Jesus. Perhaps we can't hear Jesus because we are too busy listening to ourselves or filling the quiet with noise. Perhaps we are restless because we never let our hearts rest.

Consider three instances where God moved in the heart of His people:

1 / THE POWER OF QUIET: 1 KINGS 19

He was constantly on the go. He burst on the scene in Israel out of nowhere, a ragged, bold, wild-eyed prophet who was unafraid to confront the corruption, injustice, and idolatry among God's people. Elijah pointed his finger at King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and delivered God's truth to the powerful elite. He confronted the false gods and their feckless prophets on Mt. Carmel. He saw a mighty turning in repentance toward God and away from paganism.

But after this epic confrontation, Elijah slunk back to the wilderness, discouraged and defeated. He was worn out spiritually, physically, and emotionally. God restored his man through physical rest and food. But then a powerful thing happened. God spoke to Elijah, not with a whirlwind or fire or some dramatic demonstration of power but ... in a still small voice. God was teaching His prophet that in the quiet, in the listening, in the abandoning of our ideas and energy and will, our hearts are ready to listen to God.

2 / THE POINT OF THE QUIET: PSALM 46

They were mighty warriors, known for their cunning and brave military exploits. The Sons of Korah were valuable defenders of God's people in battle and yet they were also worship leaders, writing music for celebrations of God's glory and provision. Perhaps their most well-known lyric is written in Psalm 46: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10, ESV).

Think about this: they were known for military might, courage in battle, intelligence and wisdom in conflict, and yet they urge God's people to ... "be still." What a powerful image it must have been to see military heroes lay down their swords and raise their voices and arms toward God, to bow and be quiet in utter dependence and trust.

To be quiet and seek solitude seems pointless. There are hundreds of other things we could be doing. There are thousands of worries that cascade down from our brain to our souls in prayer. There are things our hands could be doing. Yet, Israel's mightiest warriors say that the most important way we fight is not to scheme, but to be quiet and listen to the voice of God. Why? Because when we are silent, we are vulnerable, we are dependent. And in this, we know and trust that God does our fighting for us.

Do you take time to be quiet? Do you take time to set aside your plans and dreams and just listen to the Father's voice in prayer, to allow the Scriptures to wash over your soul and to trust your soul to the living God?

3 / THE PERSON IN THE QUIET: MARK 1:35-39

One of the regular habits in the life of Jesus was to get away and seek the solace of time with the Father. Imagine this: Jesus, the creator of the universe, the one who was present at the dawn of creation, who is Lord over the land and the sea, still made it a priority to get alone, to get quiet.

Imagine, then, how much we, as flawed sinners, need to prioritize our time with the Father. Jesus, who had much kingdom work to do, nevertheless prioritized His prayer life and found it necessary to get away from the noise and get alone with God. And so should we.

And we can get alone with God because Jesus was willing to be alone, on the cross, bearing the sin and punishment we should have born for our sins against the Father. We who were once alienated from God by sin now can enter boldly into God's throne room. We who were once powerless against sin, flesh, and the devil

are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to step into the mission of God.

Getting alone and hearing God speak to us through His Word are not duties, but the source of our power and joy. What was essential to Jesus' earthly ministry is essential for our life in this world. And the good news is that in our solitude and silence before God we may be isolated but not alone, for Jesus goes with us in our time with God, interceding for us while the Spirit helps us to pray words that reach the heart of the Father.

So, let's live like Jesus and make time to turn down the radio, turn off our digital notifications, and turn our hearts toward God in prayer.

DANIEL DARLING is a pastor, author, and blogger. His latest book is *Activist Faith, From Him, For Him*. He's active on Twitter at @dandarling and blogs at danieldarling.com.

The more I study Scripture, the more I realize how important silence is to our walk with Jesus.





3 things to know about ONLINE COMMUNITIES

By Julie Masson

It may be hard to grasp that your teen is making real connections with someone they only know as a username on social media. But it's true. At the same time, teenagers are also interacting with their IRL (in-real-life) community through social media. So, what are some things you should be aware of as your teen navigates online community?

1. Know where the community is happening.

Instagram is more than just a place to share pictures these days. Entire communities are being built through Instagram hashtags. Teens who follow a certain hashtag can find new friends and develop an online connection, either through comments or private messages.

On Snapchat and TikTok, meanwhile, teens are connecting with friends from school and people from all over the world. YouTube is another place where vloggers can connect with other users in their space, and usually these people are complete online strangers who meet solely because they have a shared interest and are using the YouTube platform in a similar way.

2. Know who they are talking to. Knowing that these connections can happen on these social media platforms can help you protect your teenager. Make sure their message settings don't allow just anyone to send a private message. Every single social media platform allows the user to decide who can and cannot message them. I highly suggest that you talk with your teen about their own privacy settings on messages.

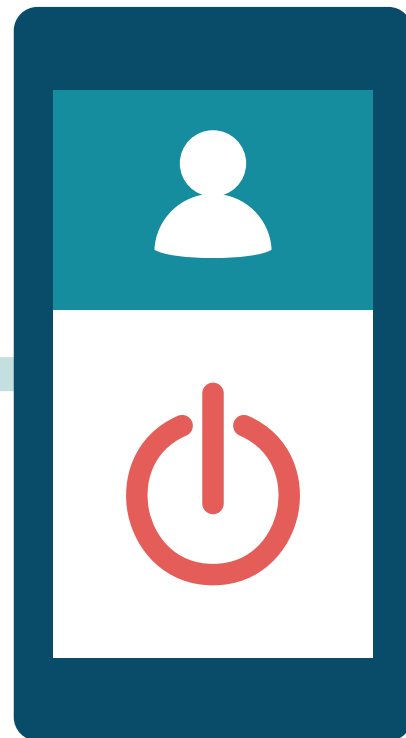
While many online connections that are made on social media are harmless, online predators do exist and teens are easy targets. Teens today are much more comfortable with

meeting strangers online than our generation was, because it's all they've ever known. Help your teen know how to discern who can and cannot talk to them on social media platforms. This includes people they know from school who may be messaging them inappropriately. Be aware of who they are communicating with.

3. Know what they are talking about. Is your teenage vlogger really into online gaming? If so, the community they are involved with online is likely mostly talking about the newest release of a game, what competitions are coming up, and so on. But online communities often have one thing in common—there can be someone involved who wants to exploit it.

Sometimes these people want to exploit a community for monetary reasons. They are only involved so that they can get people in the community to purchase a product or service. Sometimes, people want to exploit an online community for more devious reasons. A sexual predator may get involved in an online community to meet vulnerable teens. Knowing what your teen is talking about in his or her community should give you a good picture of the potential threats they may encounter.

JULIE MASSON serves as the Marketing Director for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. She is responsible for strategizing, managing and executing the organization's marketing initiatives across all departments by using various forms of digital media, which includes social media. Julie and her husband live in Kansas City with their three children. Send her your tech questions to juliermasson@gmail.com.



The benefit OF BOREDOM

By Sissy Goff

Each week, I lead two group counseling sessions for high school girls. Several years ago, for Lent, I gave them a challenge: to download an app called Moment.

Moment was the precursor to Apple's Screen Time. Basically, it tracks the time you spend on technology, gives gentle nudges about when you're overusing technology, and has various challenges within the app to take breaks. In other words, it disconnects you—just a little.

It was fascinating to hear the girls talk about it both before and after our Lenten challenge. In the beginning, they panicked—as you can imagine. *“Wait, I’m not sure I can do this!” “If we’re going to limit our screen time each day, I’d suggest a limit of...four hours per day!” “But what will I do when I’m bored?”*

Boredom is actually the goal—or at least boredom that drives us toward more dependence on Christ. Boredom that drives connection in real life, rather than virtual. Boredom that drives toward creativity and thought. All are things that today's kids are in shorter supply of than ever. They need to disconnect.

After we participated in the challenge (even me, too), they had a completely different outlook. *“I had no idea how much time I was spending on Instagram.” “I want to keep doing this.” “I had so much more time to actually think.”*

How can you encourage the kids you love to disconnect? As you know with teenagers, direct statements can shut them down. “You can no longer use your phone during the school week” might not go over so well. Instead, try a challenge you can do together as a family. “Let’s all shave our technology use by an hour.” “I heard about an app that helps us all disconnect from technology. Let’s look at it together and you all make some suggestions on how we can use it.” (Any time they lead the charge, they’re much more bought in.)

Here are some questions to further the conversation:

- *How many hours a day would you guess kids are using technology today?*
- *How do you think it’s impacting them?*
- *How many hours do you think you’re using technology? (Report back after a week of monitoring via Screen Time.)*

- *How many hours do you want to use it?*
- *What would you do differently if you had an extra ____ hours per week?*
- *What would you want to do together as a family? On your own?*
- *How can I support you?*

We’re all in this together in terms of our need to disconnect. And kids always learn more through observation than information. So, let’s lead the charge in disconnecting, and then connecting with our kids in real time, supporting them as they discover even more in the boredom.

SISSY GOFF M.ED., LPC-MHSP

has been counseling girls and their families since 1993, with the help of her counseling assistant, Lucy the Havanese. She’s the Director of Child and Adolescent Counseling at Daystar Counseling Ministries in Nashville, Tennessee. A sought-after speaker for parenting events, she is also the author of eight books, including her newest, *Are My Kids on Track?*, as well as *Raising Girls*. Follow her blog at raisingboysandgirls.com.

GROW

YOUR PARENTING SKILLS

02

●●



Start a youth out on his way; even when
he grows old he will not depart from it.

PROVERBS 22:6



9 WAYS TO GET YOUR TEEN TALKING

Does science have an answer for why your teen doesn't want to talk? Maybe. How to get them to talk is a little harder. The good news is it can be done—if you're open and intentional.

BY DR. ABBY HILL

Most teens seem to have no trouble at all talking to their friends, a conclusion clearly supported by your monthly cell phone bill. Yet, many don't as readily open up to adults, and especially not to their parents.

There is a biological reason that can, at least in part, explain this. Brain maturation during adolescence leads teens to realize their thoughts and feelings are their own, and it is important for them to control what they share with others. This realization is key for them in becoming a responsible and independent adult.

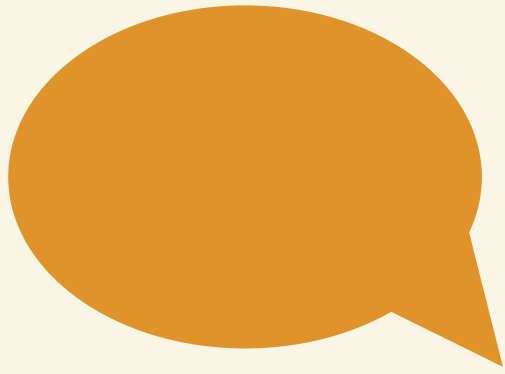
But, even with the challenges this brings to parent-teen communication, there are some ways parents can build the communication connection and increase the minutes spent talking with their teen. Here are a few.

1. Ask open-ended questions to kick start meaningful conversation with your teen.

Instead of "How was your day?" (which will likely receive an answer limited to one word), ask about something in particular you know they were handling today, like taking a big test or settling a conflict with a friend. Or, there's always "What is the best thing that happened today?" and "Tell me something funny that happened today," as go-to conversation-starters.

2. Unplug at every opportunity. No phones, yours or theirs, during real conversation time. Turn off the TV. Turn off the music. Take out the earbuds.

BRAIN
MATURATION
DURING
ADOLESCENCE
LEADS
TEENS TO
REALIZE THEIR
THOUGHTS
AND FEELINGS
ARE THEIR
OWN.



SIT DOWN
BESIDE YOUR
TEEN DURING
CONVERSATION,
RATHER THAN
STANDING
OVER THEM,
IN ORDER TO
CONVEY A
CARING AND
CALM PRESENCE.

If your phone does ping or ring while you're talking with your teen, overtly ignore it, sending an unspoken message to them that they are your only focus right now.

3. If you sincerely desire for your teen to respond with transparency and truth, take care to keep your own emotions in check during a difficult conversation. Teens often report that they tend to withhold negative information from their parents, not so much out of fear of punishment, but because they absolutely dread the "yelling" scene that will follow. ("Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won't become discouraged" –Colossians 3:21)

Sit down beside your teen during conversation, rather than standing over them, in order to convey a caring and calm presence. Listen. Breathe.

4. Respect your teen's privacy during conversations of substance. Find a time and a spot away from siblings, friends, and other family members, so that your teen will feel comfortable to talk freely.

5. Stay on point. Resist the urge to bring up past problems or conflicts during the current conversation. Avoid declarations or accusations, as these all but ensure your teen's defensiveness and "shutdown."

6. If not now, when? Don't let your teen off the hook completely when it comes to setting aside some time to talk. If they are genuinely busy, put your heads together and schedule a mutually doable future time to talk. Regular and real communication with your teen is more than a parenting "bonus." It is critical to the parent-teen bond and prepares your teen for successful and fulfilling relationships in adulthood.

7. Be real. Don't expect (or attempt) to completely address or resolve a complex issue or problem in one "meeting." Intense conversations lasting longer than 10 or 15 minutes tend to become

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counterproductive and just plain exhausting for everyone. Consider the initial conversation one of "fact-finding" and planning for the next steps.

Solving problems through talk is an active and ongoing process. Acknowledge you may not have all the answers. It's OK to respond sometimes with only "I don't know," or "I'm sorry that happened."

8. Ask your teen if they want your suggestion (advice) before you offer it. This relates back to an understanding of adolescent development and teens' increasing need for autonomy and independence.

9. End every conversation on an encouraging note, even if there are issues or problems still to be resolved. Acknowledge to your teen that you understand it's difficult sometimes to talk openly with a parent. Tell them you appreciate their willingness to participate. Remind your teen that they are constantly in your prayers. Offer to pray with them right there, on the spot.

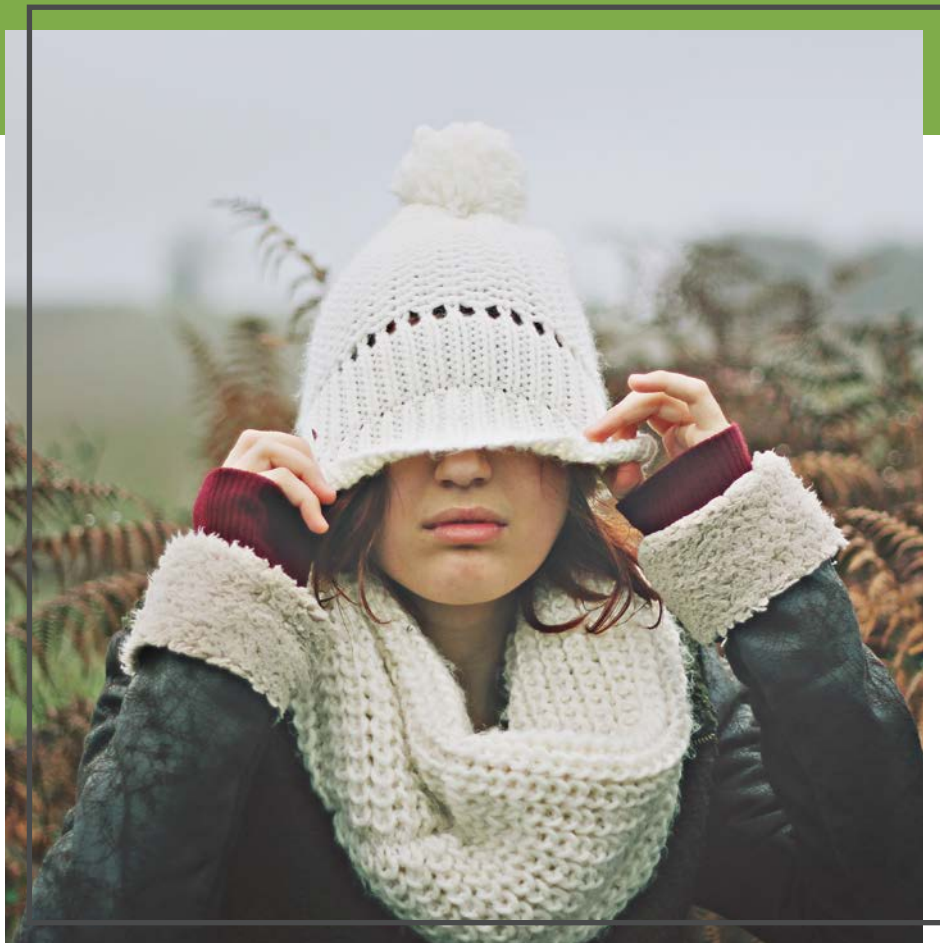
Communication is cumulative. Having an established and ongoing relationship with your teen for all of the daily "little" things in life will help make those "big" and difficult conversations much more likely to happen and more comfortable for you and for them.

DR. ABBY HILL is a school psychologist working in schools and private practice, specializing in adolescent and college-age students. She is a state certified teacher and is on faculty at a major Christian university. Dr. Hill is an author, trainer, and presenter on parenting, education, and child mental health at schools, churches, and in the community.



SINGLE & BLENDED

SINGLE PARENT &
BLENDED FAMILY
REFLECTIONS



Overcoming ISOLATION

by Gayla Grace

“Why didn’t someone tell me how lonely and isolated I would feel as a stepmom?” said Jeannie with tears streaming down her face. “You’ve walked this road. How did you get through it?”

I reached over and wrapped my arms around my friend. I paused before responding, carefully selecting my words, to prevent painting a picture that might not come true.

“It usually gets easier with time,” I said. “There are some things that really helped me in the beginning, though. The first was finding other stepmoms on a similar journey. Reach out to coworkers or friends at church in blended families. Find a small group or even start one yourself that has a stepfamily focus. Share your experiences and ask for prayer.”

Blended families and single parents often walk through unique and challenging circumstances. Without a community of friends to hold you up on hard days, the road can feel lonely and discouraging. God created us to live in community with one another. But it requires courage and vulnerability to open up about our struggles. When we put our insecurities aside and let others minister to our fragile hearts, we find peace and encouragement to continue on days we want to quit.

Single parents

If you've walked the road of divorce, it's likely you've also walked through the hurt of broken relationships with friends who chose to take sides. Or acquaintances who offered more judgment than love to a shattered ego. It's likely your kids have experienced rejection or hurt by other people, as well.

As single parents, we need the support of a loving community. But our kids need it too, particularly when they've been through divorce or the loss of a parent. Evan McFarland, youth minister at West Monroe Baptist Church in Louisiana, says teenagers need three or four healthy role models pouring into them, in addition to their parents. An effective youth ministry can help with that.

"Every student is looking for community—people who understand their struggles," McFarland says. "No place gets that better than youth ministry. Teenagers can come and find good friends and loving adults who aren't going to judge them but will love them through their struggles. That level of help can't be replicated anywhere else."

If you don't find it inside the walls of your own church, I'd encourage you to look for another one. I wish it weren't true, but some churches are simply more accepting and willing to offer grace and kindness to those outside the traditional circles of marriage.

The impact of youth ministry at your local church not only helps move your teenager toward spiritual maturity, but can also guide them toward healthy relationships and responsible decisions throughout their teenage years. "One person can't effectively raise a teenager," McFarland says. It takes a community.

Blended families

In the first book of the Bible, God created all the living creatures. After creating man, He recognized something was missing. God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18, NIV).

From the beginning, God created us with a need to belong and to feel loved by our family. In the early years of remarriage, however, when relationship tensions are at their peak, those needs might go unmet within our stepfamily relationships. The marriage relationship suffers under the weight of blended family adjustments. We feel isolated when the new people in our home don't invest in everyday communication with us like we want. Loneliness creeps in.

When our love tank moves toward empty, it's a signal for help. In addition to friends outside our family, a devoted relationship with the Lord can satisfy our deep longing for acceptance as we experience His love and comfort. The apostle Paul tells us, "I pray that you ... may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge" (Eph. 3:17-19).

Loneliness subsides and often dissipates as stepfamily relationships integrate. But until that happens, we can find contentment as we nurture friendships outside our stepfamily and commit to a faithful walk with the Lord.

Celebrate the little things

When our spirits are deflated, it's easier to isolate ourselves rather than build community. I know. I've been there. But isolation breeds a discouraged and discontented heart. Take the risk. Expose your vulnerability and reach out to someone today. You'll be glad you did.

GAYLA GRACE trudged through her single parenting years with two young daughters. Now remarried for 23 years, she is a mom to three and stepmom to two, ages 17-33. She holds a master's degree in psychology and counseling and resides in Shreveport, Louisiana. Her new devotional book, *Stepparenting With Grace*, is out now.



Face to Face

IDEAS TO SPEND TIME
WITHOUT THE SCREENS

Spring clean your house— **AND HEART**

By Lacey Arocha



As the weather warms up and you and your teen emerge from sweaters and blankets, consider what a solid spring cleaning would do for both your home and your heart. Clutter has a way of piling up in the winter months—and the same could be true in the heart of your teen.

Complacency, or the feeling of just being in a rut, can be a natural occurrence both in personal relationships and in a relationship with God. So use this month to tackle both and re-energize your family for a spring where new possibilities actually seem like a reality. Put some time into letting go of the junk and breathing easy. Your home and heart will thank you!

YOUNG TEENS

Your younger teen may not feel the urge to spring clean their room this season. So, be creative and sweeten the deal by offering incentives as they complete tasks you've given. This also creates chances for one-on-one time and personal reflection.

- **Get competitive.** Set time limits or box requirements for things you're getting rid of, and see who can accomplish the most. Make the reward something your teen will love that will also allow you an opportunity to connect and intentionally engage.
- **Embrace the piles.** Donate-keep-maybe: Let your teen organize their stuff in whatever way suits them best. Don't place restrictions on what they can eliminate from their room. Then plop down on one of those heaps and have a heart-to-heart about the piles they need to make in their lives—friends to distance themselves from, priorities that need to be reorganized.
- **One-week challenge.** Challenge your teen to keep their dresser or bathroom sink completely clean and clutter-free for one week. When seven days is up, tell them the differences you noticed in their mental and spiritual attitudes during the week and ask them if they felt less stressed and jumbled with less clutter in their line of sight.

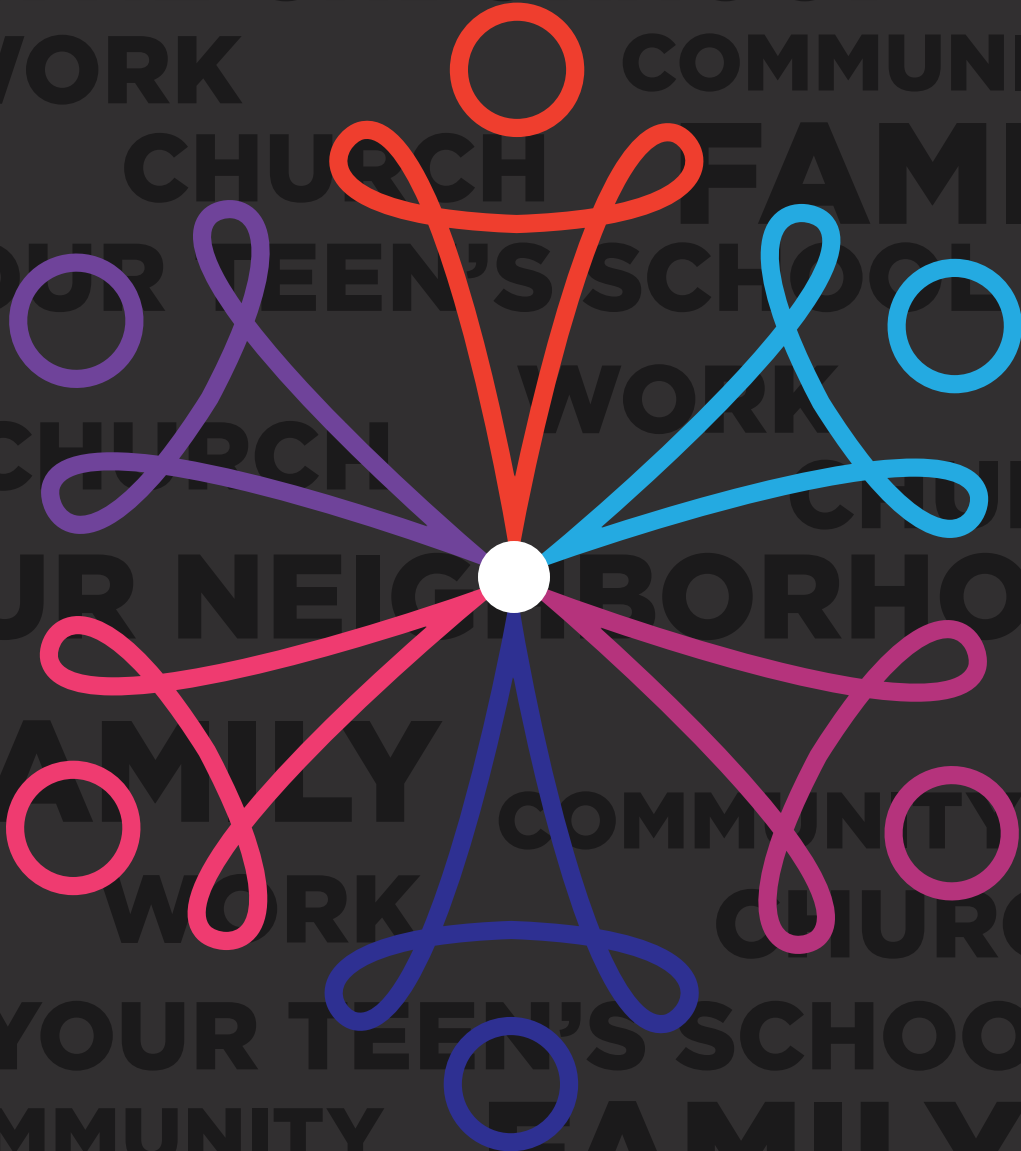
OLDER TEENS

Your older teen may require a bigger push to jump in and help organize, so sweeten the deal with some incentives they will really care about.

- **Look for cues.** If your teen is entering a particularly stressful time in their school year, look for clues they are mentally frazzled. When you see them, encourage your teen to spend some time organizing and cleaning their space. Sometimes the very act of organizing things can bring calm and clarity to an otherwise panicked mind. Join in and help.
- **Switch it up.** Remind your teen that one of the best things about cleaning is making room for something new they really care about. Their style and taste has probably changed since the last solid cleaning, so allow your teen to pick a few new things for their room as an appreciation of a job well done.
- **Upcycle competition.** While the idea is to purge your space, don't neglect giving your teen the opportunity to see something new in their old things. Designate a box of things worth transforming and see who can come up with the most creative ideas to repurpose otherwise useless and outdated items. Reward their ingenuity with a coffee or ice cream run that will lead to a great time to connect.

LACEY AROCHA lives in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, area where she considers her job as mom to three a wild adventure. She has a master's degree in pastoral counseling and serves alongside her husband at Dallas Bay Church. She loves helping teenagers make their faith their own—and drinking Cherry Coke.

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD
WORK TEEN'S SCHOOL
ONE STEP CHURCH
YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD



YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD
YOUR TEEN'S SCHOOL
COMMUNITY
AT A TIME

COVID-19 has upended everything about daily life—but especially our interactions. If you’ve felt your sense of community begin to erode, it’s not too late to get it back.

BY LESLIE HUDSON

You’ve heard the stats and you’ve felt it in your own life: even though communication is at our fingertips, we’re lonelier than ever. Why? It’s simple: because many people have replaced community—genuine, living relationships—with contacts. And “friends” and “likes” are not the same as friendships and time together.

Though community might seem like a lost art, there are small, practical ways you can connect with the people in your world, your family, and your tribe. Christ-honoring community is so rare in our world that even just taking baby steps will shine like a beacon on those around you—and have a huge impact on your family.

Here are a few ideas to get you started.

IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Just before teaching through the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus taught the expert in the law to love the Lord with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love his neighbor as himself (Luke 10:27). So, what might loving our neighbors look like in 2020?

- Call your neighbors by their names. If you don’t know your neighbors’ names, introduce yourself and ask theirs!
- Make enough to share: cookies, burgers, water balloons, whatever you’re doing. The conversation starter is built right in: “Hey, I had extras; are you interested?”
- Offer to help. Washing your car? Offer to wash your neighbor’s as well.

AT WORK

Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hires workers for a vineyard (Matt. 20:1).

We, too, can draw people to Jesus in our workplace and our relationships there.

- Ask one question of your coworkers each day that is not “How are you?” Try, “What did you do this weekend?” “What are your kids interested in?” Build up your coworkers to your boss as often as possible. Don’t exaggerate, but notice the things they do well and make sure it’s expressed. Refuse to gossip or backbite. Walk away from those conversations. Stand up for the person who drives everybody crazy, even if they drive you crazy, too.

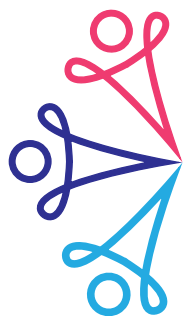
AT YOUR TEEN’S SCHOOL

Paul instructed a congregation to “encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thess. 5:11). Few environments need encouragement and compassion like a middle or high school.

- Acknowledge teachers, aides, and every person who works to educate children. Regularly say, “I know you do so much more than I realize,” “Thank you for all the time and effort you put into this,” and “You don’t know how much we appreciate you.”
- Do your best to get to know the parents of other students.
- When you find a child or teen in a trying family situation, go out of your way to connect with that child every time you see her.

IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS

Not sure what “community settings” means? Ask yourself, “What am I doing that simply strengthens my community and the people in it?” It may mean



“FRIENDS” AND “LIKES” ARE NOT THE SAME AS **FRIENDSHIPS AND TIME TOGETHER.**

volunteering for charities or taking a leadership role in community events.

- Go out of your way to smile and help with a great attitude.
- Help those whose job is helping others. Child care workers, health care workers, food pantry volunteers, and civil service workers give of themselves every day. Find a way to help them individually.
- What is the thing you do best? Is it gardening, working with your hands, creating, cooking, listening, encouraging, or something else? Look for a community organization that can put your skills to work immediately.

YOUR FAMILY

“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps. 103:13). Is your compassion showing through your relationship with your teen and other members of your family? Putting some of these into action might jumpstart your relationship.

- Do your very best to spend time in a one-on-one setting with each member of your immediate family every day.
- Pray specifically and verbally for each member of your family, in their presence if possible.
- Hug. Your kids are never too old for it. (It doesn’t need to be a full hug if that’s uncomfortable; side hugs work, too.)
- Let your family interrupt you. See it as a divinely appointed time of holy community.

- In extended family functions, do your best to have a personal conversation with each person, regardless of how well you know (or like!) them.

How would your life change if you picked just one thing a week? How would your job change? Your child’s school? Step out of isolation and into the community God designed just for you!

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LESLIE HUDSON lives in the tiny town of White Bluff, Tennessee with her family. She enjoys cool mornings, hot coffee, and homemade sourdough bread. She loves writing, teaching, speaking, and learning about God’s Word.

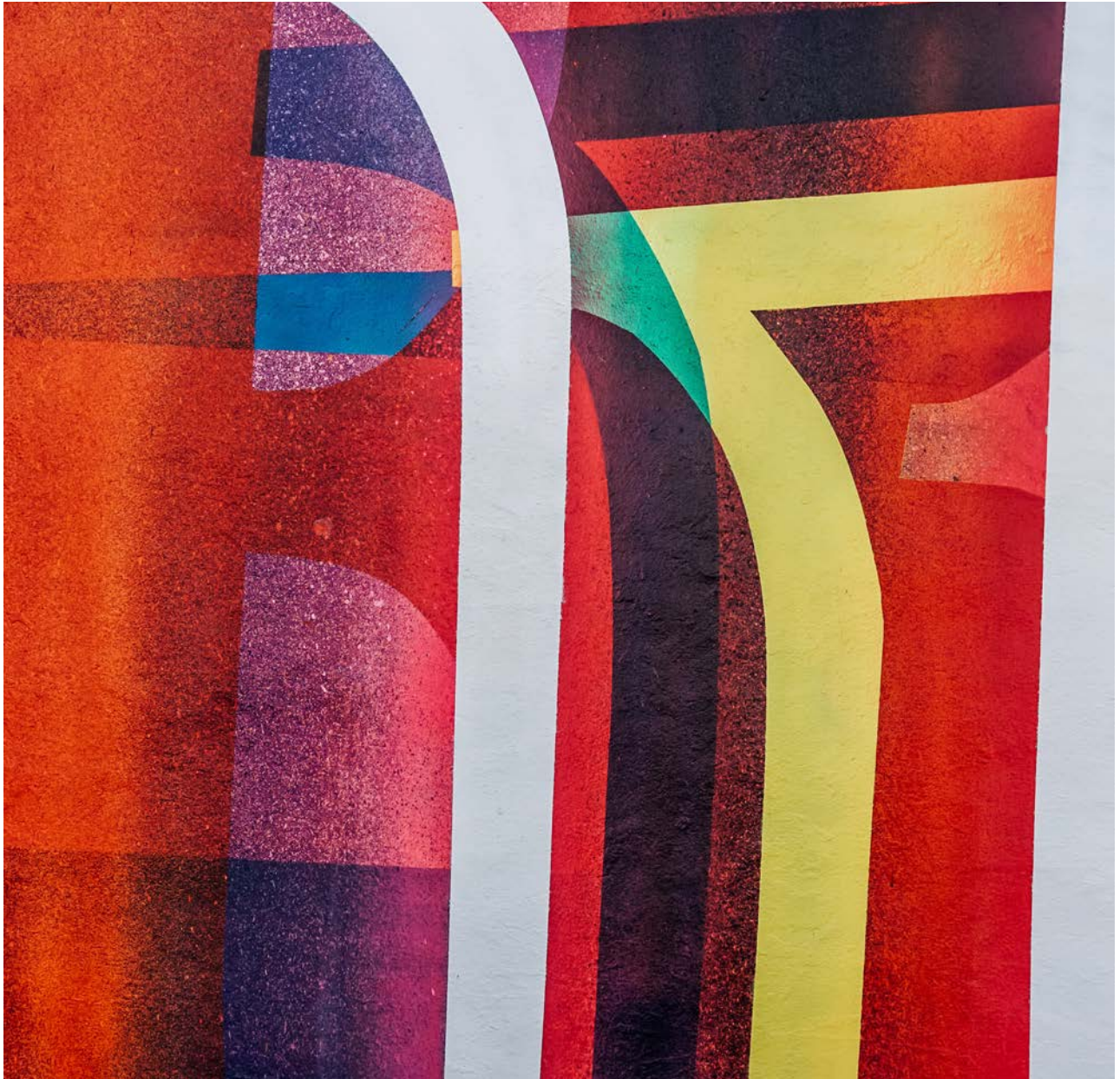


IS YOUR COMPASSION SHOWING THROUGH YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH **YOUR TEEN AND OTHER MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY?**

BECOME

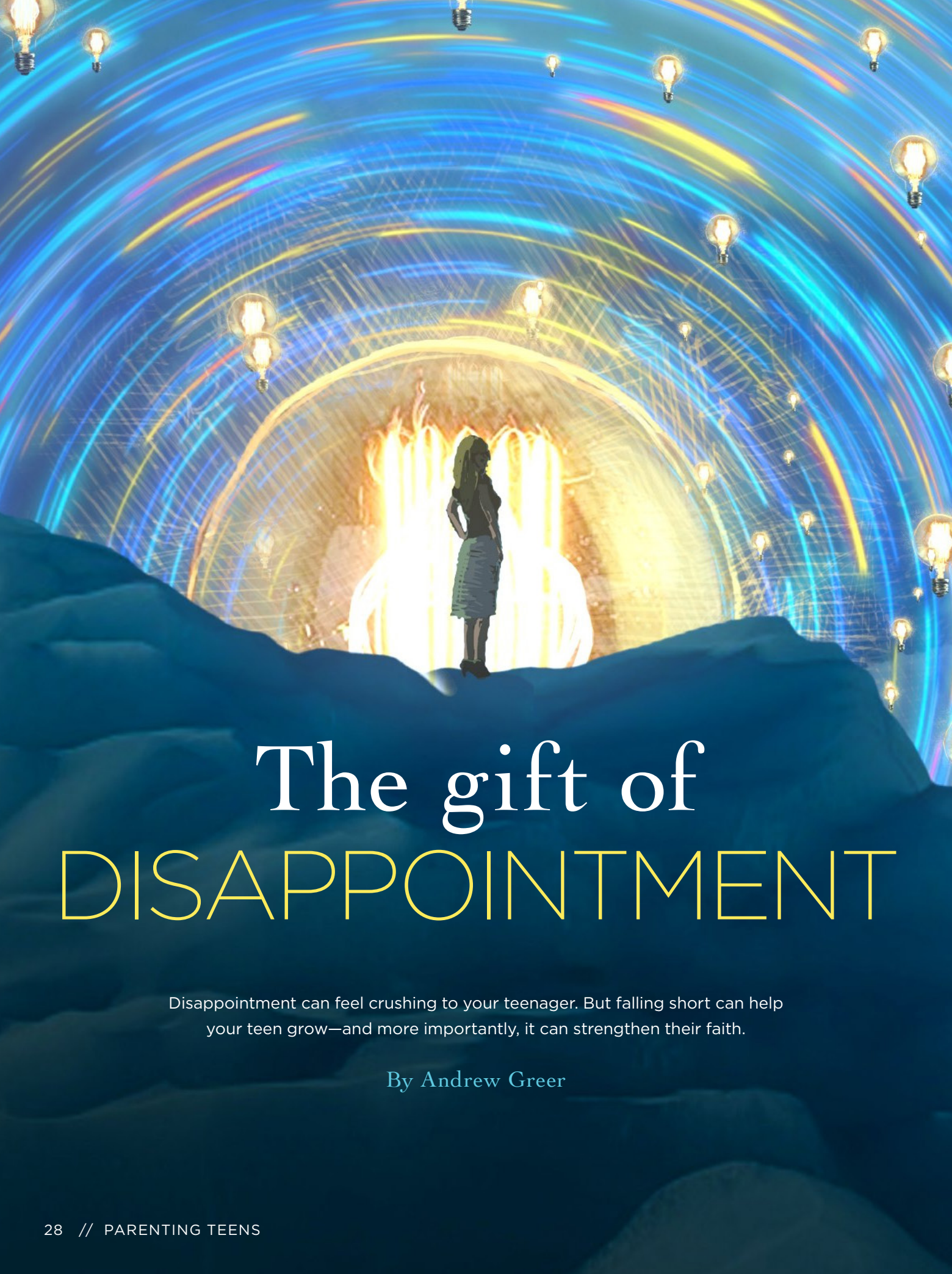
MORE LIKE CHRIST

03



In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence and his children have a refuge.

PROVERBS 14:26



The gift of DISAPPOINTMENT

Disappointment can feel crushing to your teenager. But falling short can help your teen grow—and more importantly, it can strengthen their faith.

By Andrew Greer



If ever idealists roamed the earth in packs, it would be as a tribe of teenagers. Ripe with wide-eyed hopefulness, even the most angst-ridden adolescent is brimming with dreamy aspirations.

Don't get me wrong; a healthy dose of half-glass-full is not in and of itself harmful. Even now, nearly two decades after bidding puberty farewell, when I question my profession, or I am confused about a relationship status, or worry about my financial security (or insecurity), I often channel my teenage enthusiasm to fuel my get-up-and-go.

But even the best-laid plans are subject to life's twist and turns. To quote a movie title from *my* tween years, "reality bites."

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

The older I get, the more acutely aware I am of life's many hairy challenges and the fortitude of heart, mind, and spirit it takes to stay the bewildering course. So how do we as parents—or as any adult in close community with adolescents—shoulder up with our teens in an effort to guide them through the heartache of failure, unmet expectations, and the discouragement that comes with life's inevitable disappointments?

First, avoid tritely quoting Scripture. The Lord God's famous Jeremiah 29:11 declarative, "For I know the plans I have for you," feels more like a hollow platitude than a comforting promise when recited in the immediate aftermath of your teenager's latest setback. When we use Scripture for a hackneyed "solution" rather than offer it as a spiritual support, we risk adding to the dismay and doubt pervading our teen's tentative spirit following a disappointing blow.



DOUBT DOES NOT DIMINISH OUR FAITH, BUT RATHER ESTABLISHES FAITH.

Second, provide a space of grace for your teenager to question.

Whether they share them with you or not, your teens are experiencing a tornado of insecurities and doubts—often spiritual doubts—and failure can exacerbate them. Questions about who God is. Who they are in relationship to Him. How He actually wants them to act. What He wants them to do. Who He wants them to be.

Fight the urge to control the conversation by providing all the answers. Doubt does not diminish our faith, but rather establishes faith. In fact, what we perceive as questions about God often are questions for God. Every person's spiritual inquiries, adolescent or not, are often born from an innate desire to converse with their Creator.

Sgo ahead; provide a safe, gracious space in which your child can present and process their petition out loud. Be eager to listen, and slow to suggest. Don't squelch your teenager's search for answers—their journey towards truth. Allow them to investigate their faith, "because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:3-4, NIV).

Lastly, your teenager's life is theirs to live, not yours to live through. Their achievements are their achievements. Their failures are their

failures. You are not Parent of the Year when they win big, nor are you a complete failure when they make a mistake.

When your teenager achieves a milestone, seat them atop your shoulders and celebrate! When your teenager makes a mistake, remind them your love does not hinge on their perfection. Set them a place at the dinner table. Isn't this the no-strings-attached invitation of love Jesus first extended to each one of us?

CARE, NOT CONTROL

God has entrusted you with the care, not control of your child. Step back. Take a deep breath. Cheer them on. Grieve with them. Resist the temptation to hover over, bulldoze, or pave their path for them. Just live alongside your teenager. There is much to learn through simply being present.

Perhaps by discovering how to better mentor, encourage, and inspire them through their bouts with disappointment, we will discover a thing or two about tugging on our own bootstraps to buoy us through our own valleys of unmet expectations.

ANDREW GREER is a multiple Dove Award-nominated singer/songwriter and author of *Transcending Mysteries* (Thomas Nelson, 2015) and *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth* (Worthy Publishing, 2017). He is the co-creator and co-host of the television show, *Dinner Conversations with Mark Lowry and Andrew Greer: Turning the Light on One Question at a Time*. Learn more at andrew-greer.com.

YOU ARE NOT PARENT OF THE YEAR WHEN THEY WIN BIG, NOR ARE YOU A COMPLETE FAILURE WHEN THEY MAKE A MISTAKE.



THE LAST WORD

GOD'S GUIDANCE
FOR YOUR FAMILY
THIS MONTH

HOW WORSHIP CAN DEFEAT WORRY

By Rick Ezell

"But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, and she came up and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? So tell her to give me a hand.'" **-Luke 10:40**

Martha was the quintessential multitasker: gifted, driven, demanding, and capable of accomplishing a great deal. When Jesus showed up at her home in Bethany, she focused on the duties of a hospitable host. On the other hand, Mary, the quieter, introverted, reflective personality, upon Jesus' arrival, sat with the men, listening to Jesus teach.

Luke characterized Martha as being distracted (v. 40), meaning heavily burdened; worried (v. 41), indicating a mind pulled in many different directions; and upset (v. 41), suggesting she would cause trouble. It appears she was about to throw the ultimate tantrum.

Jesus, sensing the tension, kindly spoke to Martha: It's not about the many distractions but the one devotion. He was forcing her to answer the question: *What is most important at this moment in time?* Mary chose the one thing over the many, the best over the better. She decided to give priority to spending time with Jesus.

Distractions cause us to lose sight of what is significant in life. The crucial matters are tossed on the altar of a busy and hurried life. Each day the race is not always won by the swift. There is more to life than increasing its speed.

Distractions zap the life out of a relationship. They distance us from those whom we care about the most. We need to remember that people are more important than projects, and our relationships are more important than routines.

Choosing the best is the key to eliminating distractions. Our challenge each day is not choosing between what is good and bad; instead, it's choosing between what is good and what is better, and between what is better and what is best.

We need Jesus' presence more than anything. Worship defeats worry and silences our distractions. It refreshes and revives us. It casts the distractions that seek to derail our relationship with Jesus to the side.

But we will never end up at Jesus' feet by accident. Like Mary, we must choose to go there, or it will never happen.

RICK EZELL is a father, pastor, and writer. He leads Employee Care of America, a corporate chaplaincy ministry. You can read more of his writings at www.rickezell.com.