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Taking Time to Save Our Teens

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Young people today face some daunting challenges. Here is how we can help them through. BY DENNIS LEAP

For decades, an increasing number of news reports has shown us that our teens are in serious trouble. We need to look squarely at some of the problems they face today.

One in 10 Americans ages 12 to 17 admit to using illicit drugs, according to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Marijuana is the main drug they use, although a rapidly growing number abuse prescription drugs, falsely believing them to be a safe way to get high. Among 18-to-25-year-olds, over 20 percent use illegal drugs. Realize that these percentages reflect numbers in the millions.

Yet, the news on drug use gets worse. The rate of illegal drug initiation for those 12 and over was an estimated 2.9 million people in 2005—amounting to nearly 8,000 new users every day. Over half were under age 18. Though it may be hard for adults to accept that baby-faced teens smoke, swallow and inhale various drugs, these well-documented facts cannot be denied.

Sexual promiscuity is also at an all-time high. Seven in 10 teens have sexual intercourse by age 19, a 2006 report from the Guttmacher Institute revealed. Even though teen pregnancy has declined since the 1990s, the rate in the U.S. is still far higher than in other developed countries. Just under 1 in 3 young women become pregnant during their teen years—around 750,000 a year. Approximately 95 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended; most are unmarried. Teen pregnancy costs the U.S. at least \$9 billion annually.

There is even more chilling news. In 2004, suicide ranked as the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24. Approximately 12 youth suicides occur every day. It is estimated that for every youth who commits suicide, as many as 200 more attempt it.

Directionless, explosive and spoiled, our youth are plagued by despair and discouragement. No longer able to cope with the problems our modern society throws at them, many teens are simply opting to destroy themselves. We are in grave danger of losing an entire generation.

Hearing disturbing facts about teens is never easy. These kinds of statistics are always gut wrenching. Yet we must not deny them or hide from the reality they lay before us. The truth is, many young people in the Western world are unprincipled, drug-addicted, promiscuous and violent. Whether we admit it openly or not, most adults know that things should be different with our youth.

From time to time even in our own families, we see teens get into serious trouble with illicit sex, drug use and other problems. Some of our own teens are chronically unhappy. Shouldn't our beloved and wonderful children be living happier, more productive lives? Isn't it time we ask why our teens are living in continuous crisis?

Cause for Troubled Youth

Mankind has a sad history of incompetence when dealing with its own problems. Herbert W. Armstrong

often reminded *Plain Truth* readers that there is a *cause* for every *effect*. Solving any problem requires first dealing with the cause. People have always treated the effects. As a result, our problems simply get worse and worse.

What is the cause of messed-up teens? We could point the finger at many things: our failing school systems, the entertainment industry, the music industry, drug pushers, pornography, violent video games or any other modern malady. But the stark truth is that the main cause for troubled teens is troubled parents.

Too many parents are so self-absorbed and caught up in their own personal crises that they can't focus on the right rearing of teens. To save our teens, parents must take on their God-given responsibility to nurture, love, lead, teach and discipline their children.

Let's face it: We have become the generation that has abandoned our teens.

Mr. Armstrong warned about the damaging effects of parental neglect. He wrote over 20 years ago, "Family life has undergone a RADICAL REVOLUTION! Teens have sex games at home in bed while Dad and Mom are at work. Children do not eat with parents. They seldom go to movies with parents. Parents have their lives, associates and friends apart from the children. Parents never think of teaching children, being with children, maintaining a FAMILY RELATIONSHIP! Parental responsibility is totally neglected. In due time parents are going to be brought to account for this neglect of basic responsibility" (*The Missing Dimension in Sex*). Admitting responsibility for teen neglect is difficult for any parent. Yet it is the only means to an effective solution for our teen crisis.

Solomon, one of the wisest men who ever lived, wrote, "[A] child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15). Is it too difficult for us to recognize that our children are growing up unsupervised? Meditate for a moment on the effects we see in the lives of our teens.

No matter the effect—illegal drug use, promiscuous sex, violence—any bad news report about teens tells us one thing: We have left our children too much to themselves. When we become honest with ourselves, it will be easier for us to admit that our teens are paying a heavy price for our neglect.

The Right Role

We can be certain of this one thing: God did not intend for teen life to be so tragically traumatic. The teen years should be productive years filled with mental and emotional growth and accomplishment. All teens should radiate joy and happiness.

We must also recognize that God never intended there be a generation gap between parents and teens. Yet we see that gap has become so wide and so deep that many parents and teens have become arch-enemies.

As Paul warned Timothy, our time is a perilous time in which people lack natural affection (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Clearly, there is a devil, and he has turned his wiles and vicious wrath against our families, successfully destroying the natural, loving bonds that should exist between parents and teens. Some extreme cases have ended in murder *inside families!*

Rearing teens should be a rewarding, satisfying experience that fills parents with joy. Yet so many people have come to dread the teenage years. If handled God's way, though, during the teen years parents and children can build truly wonderful bonds that will last a lifetime.

The Bible shows us clearly how to solve problems with our teens. Of course, to solve any teen problem, both parents and teens have a role to play. Both sides must come to know and fulfill their obligations to each other.

Instruction to Teens

Concerned about the welfare of families in his day, the Apostle Paul taught clearly what these roles must be.

Here is his instruction to our young people: "Children, *obey* your parents in the Lord: for this is right. *Honour* thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth" (Ephesians 6:1-3). Paul is clear and definite in this letter: The right role for teens is to be obedient to parents.

The meaning of the Greek word for *obey*, *hupakouo*, is very interesting—something to study and think about. According to *Strong's Concordance*, it means "to hear under (as a subordinate), that is, to listen attentively; by implication to heed or conform to a command or authority" Paul uses a very strong word to describe a young person's obedience.

Every child and teen must come to lovingly recognize his or her subordinate position to that of the parent and then be willing to obey.

How rare is this today? The majority of our youth believe themselves to be equal or superior to their parents. Not only do most refuse to accept a command to do something, they resist even the mildest suggestion.

Paul stresses here that parents have the right to command their children. The word *hupakouo* should hold meaning for parents as well. Many parents fail to command their children. Why? We have become a culture that is anti-authority.

Applying the right amount of corporal punishment at the right time requires wisdom. It is true that some parents take it too far. Child abuse should never be tolerated. But failing to discipline our children altogether is *also* a deadly form of child abuse! Parents who go to one extreme or the other are simply parents who have never grown up.

The sad truth is, many parents still live and act like teens themselves.

Habitual Obedience

The good habit of obedience should be well established in children by age 5. But generally, teens will need continual training. An important lesson here is that teens must come to understand the wonderful benefit of having parents who *care enough to require obedience*. All teens must become and remain obedient to parents such as these. They must obey their parents as long as their parents are teaching them *lawful and moral* ways.

Jesus Christ set a perfect example of being in subjection to His parents (Luke 2:51). All teens must strive to follow His example.

The book of Proverbs, written specifically for young people, stresses obedience to those in authority more than any other subject. Every human being must study this book. Of course, no teen is required to obey

a parent when he or she encourages the breaking of God's or man's laws.

Paul clearly reminds teens of the all-important Fifth Commandment: "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20:12). Teens and young adults must come to deeply honor their parents. When teens deeply respect their parents, they are also deeply respecting God, who is the Father of the God Family. Any teen who disobeys and disrespects his or her parents actually disobeys and disrespects God. Giving honor to parents is very pleasing to God and will produce untold blessings.

As Paul shows, the Fifth Commandment is the first commandment with promise. God zealously guarantees a long and healthy life to children who obey and respect their parents.

Many woes and even death have come to teens as a result of the sins of disobedience and rebellion. Our newspapers are full of stories about how promiscuous sex and the use of illegal drugs have permanently damaged a multitude of young bodies and minds. Teens must learn to obey their parents for the protection of their physical and mental health.

A Father's Vital Role

In Ephesians 6:4, Paul gives important instruction to parents, especially fathers. In fact, Paul directly charges fathers to play a very specific role in rearing children, which obviously includes teens. A separation or a divorce does not absolve a father from his responsibility.

Paul commands: "And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

Provoke not your children to wrath. We must learn this lesson. *An attitude of love must dominate a father's commands.* Paul shows clearly that all fathers (and mothers) must be balanced in their correction. *True love gives us balance.* To be balanced requires that discipline be neither too soft nor too hard. Either of these extremes will produce anger in a teen.

Fathers: Do you realize that both extremes show your children that you don't love them? When you are too soft, a child interprets that as a lack of concern and interest. This makes children frustrated and angry. Even though a child may complain about rules and limits, those rules are exactly what he or she desires most from us. Firm but balanced limits prove that we love our children.

On the other hand, if you are too hard on a teen—too restrictive or even verbally or physically abusive—that also shows the teen that you don't love him or her.

Realize that teens, even though they have adult bodies, are still children emotionally. They need ample amounts of patience, mercy, forgiveness and love because they are learning how to live properly. Teens will make mistakes—many mistakes. All fathers must lovingly guide them through their errors, showing the correct way to live life. Being too impatient, unforgiving or hard will drive our teens away from us. If we are not cautious parents, we could become responsible for wrecking a child's life. A balanced approach to teen rearing can only come through education and experience.

Notice that Paul also states that fathers (and mothers too) are to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." This instruction is vital. God requires that we *nurture* and *admonish* our young people His way—not our own! So many parents make mistakes in child rearing because they do not look to God and the Bible for instruction.

It is prudent for all parents to come to the same humble attitude that Jeremiah displayed when he prayed, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing" (Jeremiah 10:23-24). God, the perfect parent, must teach us how to be parents. If we are not teachable, and refuse correction in child rearing, we will make many mistakes.

Parents Are Educators

We must come to understand the word *nurture* better. The word in the Greek, *paideia*, means tutelage, education or training. It also implies disciplinary correction, which includes chastening, chastisement and moral instruction. (Study the word *admonition* on your own. It is similar to nurture but has more to do with mental understanding.) *Nurture* means that fathers are to be *educators*.

Fathers must oversee the imparting of knowledge to their children. Teachers outside of the family can and often should teach subjects like reading, writing and math—but fathers must do the majority of the spiritual and moral instruction. Of course, mothers have their part as well.

Yet, this word *nurture* demands that fathers perform their instruction in a loving and protective manner. All fathers must have a commanding presence in their teens' lives. Behind that presence, there must be ample amounts of love and support.

Nurture also means that fathers are directly responsible for their child's welfare both financially and emotionally. Emotional support far outweighs even finances. We must recognize that a child's can-do attitude is built by a loving and supportive father. So many children are insecure because they have missed out on a father's emotional support. We must see that the word *nurture* carries a grave responsibility.

Take the Time

Properly nurturing a child requires time—a lot of time. All children—sons and daughters—need to spend time with Dad! Not spending the proper amount of time with children is perhaps the most significant failing for most fathers. Many child-development experts are coming to see the vital importance of fathers spending time with their children.

Judith Wallerstein, a family-counseling expert, writes, "After decades of minutely recording mother-child interactions as if they existed in a 'daddy-less' world, researchers have finally discovered fathers and how important they are to a child's development. ... Children with sensitive, involved fathers surge ahead in their cognitive and social development as they explore their environment and play with other children. One important study that followed children for 25 years showed that those who were closely involved with their fathers at age 5 were more empathic as adults and were happier as husbands and parents than those who had not experienced close relationships with their own fathers... And just to dispel the strange notion that fathers are more important to their sons than their daughters, a study of young women who excelled in their academic studies ... revealed that they attributed their high ambition to their father's long-standing encouragement" (*The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*). Please read this quote a second time.

Fathers: Your children, especially teens, need your time and undivided attention. Your teens need you involved in their lives.

So many of our young people are growing up alone. Let's not neglect our teens. Let's sacrifice our time

and get involved. ●

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