

Should Believers Expect Their Children to Become Rebellious Teenagers?

By Steve Burchett



What do you hope becomes of your children when they are teens? If honest, some of you want your child to be a top athlete. Others might admit they hope their children do well academically and earn college scholarships. Those wishes are not necessarily bad. Most importantly, I trust that you really hope your teenage children will love and follow Jesus.

The Bible gives us some hope that this might happen, though it's not guaranteed.

I would put it like this: *Christian parents should not be surprised if they have teenagers who are believers, or who are at least submissive and respectful.* This immediately confronts the cultural narrative about teenagers today that assumes teens will typically be ungrateful and rebellious. But the Bible tells believers to expect something else. For example, consider Proverbs 23:13-14, “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with the rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.” That’s a hopeful prospect (certainly requiring a measure of obedience from parents). Also, godly teens are found throughout the Bible, such as Joseph, Daniel and his friends, David, Mary, probably many of the Apostles, and I dare not leave out Jesus (particularly seen at the age of 12)

Even the critical New Testament texts (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21) about parenting assume typically positive results. For example, Paul writes, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). It is illogical to think Paul is saying this but also, subliminally, saying, “But this isn’t going to have a good effect on your children.” Additionally, those who serve as elders must have “children who are believers” (Titus 1:6), better translated, “having faithful children” (NKJV). The rest of the verse explains what it means to be a faithful child: “not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” Paul assumed there would be men in churches with children like this — not perfect, but at least respectful, if not believers — and these men and their families are models of what should be normal.

But having teenagers who are believers, or who are at least submissive and respectful, doesn’t happen automatically. It takes intentional, consistent, humble, Spirit-empowered parenting. Now that I’m no longer a parent of younger children, I’m able to look back to patterns and practices that I’m convinced will be critical for you as a younger parent if you are going to see your child come to Jesus, or at least be a respectful young man or woman. What follows are just a few of those patterns and practices.

First, *don’t neglect your walk with Christ.* The best parenting happens out of a close relationship with Jesus. Yes, they must hear objective content about Jesus to be saved. Still,

our example is surprisingly powerful, and it has a way of authenticating what we say about knowing and following Christ.

Second, *talk often and pray regularly with your spouse about your children and parenting.* It is essential that you work together as husband and wife, are on the same page regarding matters like discipline, and sincerely help and pray for one another. Men, take the lead on this!

Third, *love your church.* There are other godly parents in the church, farther along than you, plus elders given to shepherd you. You’ll need their wisdom. Also, in multiple decades of pastoring, I have observed that if children have parents who are joyfully committed to their church even during the tough seasons, and their parents talk well of other believers and gladly submit to their elders, and they revolve their lives around church life, those children are far more likely to love the church once they are no longer under the authority of their parents.

Fourth, *have structure, expectations, and discipline in your home.* Not every family is the same regarding piles of things on the table versus no piles, what level of decibels are allowed in the home, or how late the kids are allowed to sleep in on Saturday. Issues like those are not critical. However, establishing healthy patterns and expecting quick obedience will only help your children once they are older. I cannot put into words how clearly God’s wisdom has been vindicated in my home regarding the efficacy of the rod — measured, under-control spankings that often included discussions about sin and the need of a Savior. At some point earlier than you might think, that child will decide that rebellion or a bad attitude is not worth it. Then, when teens, even if not converted, they will at least be under control.

Fifth, *keep the conversation flowing with your children.* Notice, I used “conversation,” not “lectures.” There is a personality type that is hyper-careful about parenting, always asking, “Am I doing it right? Am I saying what I need to say? Are we being too nice? Too mean?” This type of parent can exasperate a child by being overbearing and always having long talks about super serious things. But, ironically, you might just need to talk less, relax, have some fun with your kids, and even goof off with them sometimes to keep the conversation about essential matters flowing. Alternatively, harshness, unrealistic expectations, or not ever allowing for immaturity or childishness, will shut a child down.

With God’s help, these practices and patterns are possible, and it won’t then be surprising if your children come to Christ, or are at least respectful teens. If that happens, there should be no pride in your heart. We say with Paul, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” Any success in parenting should be followed with thanksgiving to God.

But what if our children do not become believers, or are consistently rebellious once they are teens? Don’t despair. Even if your neglect contributed to their defiance, God is still for you in Christ, and he can redeem what has been lost. Confess your sin to them, ask for their forgiveness, and adopt better practices moving forward, always remembering that God is good and wise and sovereign. He alone makes Christians, and no parent’s failure has ever kept God from saving a child if that’s what he desires to do.

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