

PARENTING TEENS

FOR A LIFE OF FAITH

HELPING TEENS
MEET AND KNOW GOD

Rachel Turner

Author of *Parenting Children
for a Life of Faith*

PARENTING TEENS
FOR A LIFE OF FAITH



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For all the parents of teens
who graciously shared with me
their stories of pain, humour and joy.

Thank you.

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INTRODUCTION

‘I just don’t know what to do anymore.’ Sarah’s face twisted in frustration and exhaustion as she shared her heart with me. Like many mums, she desperately longed for her son to enjoy church and have some sort of input about God. Lately, they had been heatedly clashing about his desire to play football on a Sunday instead of attending church. ‘He’s eleven years old, and I still don’t know if God is real to him at all.’ She sighed deeply. ‘I don’t even know if he’s really a Christian. What did I do wrong?’

Agu was encouraged as his 14-year-old daughter began to talk about her faith in God. In the past she had always avoided the topic, but recently she started opening up, occasionally mentioning how she sometimes prayed at school and had conversations about God with her friends. Agu wanted to help his daughter grow in her faith, but he was unsure how to do it. He worried about getting too keen and squashing her exploration of faith. He remembered how his own parents had forced Christianity on him when he was a teenager, and he didn’t want to replicate that experience with his daughter. Finding the right steps forward felt hard.

Johannes and Liz were keen that their three teenagers attend their church’s youth group events. They felt that their teens didn’t care about their opinions anymore, much less their faith, so the best thing they could do for their children was to get them involved in the youth ministry. One of their sons really struggled with confidence, and no

matter how much they affirmed him and tried to talk with the youth leaders about him, they could feel their son shrinking more and more into himself. They knew their son had some level of relationship with God, but their hearts ached, wishing he could find the same peace, vibrancy, identity and power that they had found through their own faith and relationship with God.

From the moment our children enter our lives, our hearts begin to dream for them. We have hopes for their futures and a profound sense of wanting them to flourish in every area of their lives right now. As they grow into teenagers, we agonise over their friendships, character, happiness and self-confidence. We want the best for them. As Christian parents, our dreams for our children also include their spiritual lives. We want our children to find their own journey of faith and know the significant benefits it brings.

Our hearts are stirred up when we watch our children at church or as they head out to school, and we are filled with a desire for them to know God in a way that gives them life, makes them feel loved, helps them understand who they are and gives them a purpose on this earth.

It doesn't seem to matter whether we are single, divorced or married; whether we are new to the faith or have been raised in it; whether we have tweenagers, teenagers or grown-up children – we want more for our children spiritually than what they already have. We want all that God has for them, now and in the future.

Helping our children on their journey of faith is intended to be one of the most joyful, natural, significant parts of parenting, even when we are parenting teenagers. God designed it to be light, to be easy and to work in the chaos and beautiful mess of family life. This book won't help you conquer the entirety of parenting. I'm sorry. It would be nice if it did, but I'm not that smart. It won't teach you how to discipline a 16-year-old who refuses to revise for her GCSEs or how to convince your teenagers to volunteer more personal information about their

days. This book is about one thing: equipping us, as we are right now, to confidently enable our teenagers to have a vibrant, two-way relationship with the God who loves them.

My prayer is that this book helps you find your next steps in seeing your children grow in their connection with God. May God, our Father, give you sleep, stamina and grace as you go on this brilliant adventure of parenting with him.

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TYING TOGETHER TRUTH AND EXPERIENCE

Gwynneth ran out of the Sunday group room and slammed the door behind her. Her three-year-old brother had just died, and her world had been turned upside down. When I caught up with her, she scowled at me. ‘I know all of this stuff!’ she said, waving her arms. ‘It’s not like any of it matters anyway. I memorised these stupid verses and I’ve heard the story of Noah a billion times. And don’t tell me God loves me, blah blah blah. It doesn’t mean anything!’ Tears poured down Gwynneth’s face and her whole body shook with anger. She so needed to connect with God’s comfort and love, but none of her knowledge was helping her find him.

Moments of need often expose the cracks in our faith. Gwynneth realised how disconnected she actually was from God when she discovered her knowledge of him couldn’t help her when she needed him the most. What she really needed was a relationship with God, and she didn’t have it. But a relationship with God isn’t just for crisis points; it’s for every moment of every day. When we live in relationship with God, we can access all he has for us all the time: his joy, his guidance, his companionship, his strength and power, his love and truth. Within that relationship, God helps us and sustains us through all the good and bad times of our lives.

To help our teenagers develop a relationship with God, we need to look at how good relationships develop. Relationships require many

things, two of which are knowledge and experience. People who read my CV may gain some knowledge about me, but they still want to meet me in an interview to match that knowledge with the experience of knowing me in a relationship. Other people might first meet me casually at a party or conference and then later want to deepen that experience by meeting up to gain more knowledge about me. This is how we, as humans, build and maintain relationships. When we grow in our knowledge and experience of people, we also grow closer and deeper in relationship with them. Eventually, we might add in personal commitments to extend that process of discovery, and voila – we're on the road to developing and maintaining deep, connected friendships and relationships.

God meant our relationship with him to work in the same way – because *knowledge about him* and *experience of him* go hand in hand. When a teacher of the law asked which commandment was the most important, Jesus replied, ‘The most important one says: “People of Israel, you have only one Lord and God. You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength”’ (Mark 12:29–30, CEV). This is a holistic way of loving, involving everything in us – our emotions, our will and our understanding – in which all aspects of love are tied together.

We also see our teenagers tie together knowledge and experience as they work out their relationship with us. We tell them that we love them, but they want to match this knowledge with experiences to see if it is true. They want to know if we still love them when they are disruptive or disappointing or when they fail. They test out the truth of our love and eventually grow to feel secure in it. Their experience of relationship with us matches the truth of our love, and the truth of our love is made evident in their experience.

Too often, we don't allow our children to go through the same process with God. We feed them information about God but don't guide them to experience the truth of it in relationship, so they have no experience to match it to. Conversely, if they have an experience with God, we

might forget to guide them to the biblical truth behind that encounter, so they have no truth to anchor their experience. This happens to us as adults, as well. When truth and experience aren't tied together, we try to make sense of it on its own, which often leads to forming wrong assumptions about God and our relationship with him.

Problems when biblical truth is not tied to experience

If teenagers know biblical truth but haven't been guided to see how that truth fits in with their experiences with God, they often make wrong assumptions about how their relationship with God works. These wrong assumptions often become the prime reasons tweens and teens struggle with their faith. For example:

- **Biblical truth:** God has a plan (Jeremiah 29:11).
- **Wrong relational assumption:** Everything that happens to me is part of God's plan, and I shouldn't do anything until I am sure that it is part of his plan.

- **Biblical truth:** God is loving (Psalm 42:8; 57:3; John 3:16).
- **Wrong relational assumption:** Nothing bad should happen to me or anyone I love because God loves me.

- **Biblical truth:** God knows everything (Psalm 147:4–5; Acts 15:16–18).
- **Wrong relational assumption:** I don't have to tell God how I feel or share anything with him in prayer because he knows everything already.

As we see, there can be a vast difference between our children's wrong assumptions and the following ways God designed our relationships with him to work:

- God has wonderful plans for us that we can choose to take part in. He also gave us free will, as well as desires and dreams for our lives which he wants to bless (Psalm 37:4).
- God loves us, but his love doesn't mean that he puts us in a bubble to isolate us from the world. It means that he is committed to being in relationship with us, comforting, guiding, strengthening and encouraging us as we walk with him through life. Things will go wrong in our lives that he didn't cause, and we will make poor choices that affect us badly, but, because he loves us, he promises that he will work them together for our good (Romans 8:28).
- Although God knows everything about us – our thoughts, our hearts, our actions – he has forged a way for us to have a relationship with him, even sacrificing his Son, because he longs for us to want to share our lives with him in a two-way relationship.

No wonder many of our teenagers struggle with their faith when their knowledge of God leads them to wrong expectations about their experience with him, which then disconnect them from God and result in disappointment. The truth they know should be drawing them *closer* into relationship with him as they see it reflected in their experience. We can help our teens tie their knowledge *about* God to their experiences *of* him.

Problems when experience is not tied to biblical truth

If we simply validate children's experiences and perceptions of God without grounding them in biblical truth, we are enabling them to invent 'truth' out of their experience.

When I was a child, my mum always made me eat the crusts on my sandwiches. Based on my experience – that this was important to my mother and that crusts had an unappealing taste – I assumed some ‘truths’ about crusts. I believed that the crust of the bread held more nutrients than the rest of it. The more types of bread I saw and tasted, the more I felt confirmed in my belief. I passed this ‘truth’ on to the children I worked with, and I insisted it was true when I talked with my friends. I would even force myself to eat crusts to ensure I was benefitting from all the nutrients in them. Embarrassingly, I made it to the age of 26 before I discovered that my assumed truths about bread crusts were not, in fact, true!

Although this may seem like a silly example, it illustrates how easily we can encourage an experience and leave out the underlying truth that goes with it. As parents we may do the same by encouraging too much experience of God without tying it into biblical truth. When we leave truth out, children will draw their own assumptions, which will often be wrong, and then they’ll apply those assumptions to other aspects of their relationship with God, as well. For example:

- **Experience:** Some people hear God speak occasionally.
- **Wrong truth assumption:** God doesn’t speak very often. His speech is very unpredictable. And if he speaks to others and not much to me, then he must be cross with me or doesn’t care about me.

- **Experience:** My world is falling apart.
- **Wrong truth assumption:** God has abandoned me or is punishing me.

- **Experience:** I had a wonderful time with God at the church retreat/conference/camp.
- **Wrong truth assumption:** It was a ‘mountaintop’ experience, which doesn’t happen in the everyday world.

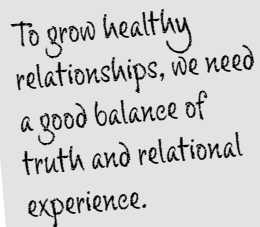
These kinds of experiences are very poignant and very real to teenagers, but, if no one helps them connect their experiences to biblical truths, they may create assumed truths that aren't found in the Bible. Assumed truths lead to wrong views of God and result in a disconnected relationship with him. Real biblical truths lead to a rooting in God that guides, informs and increases a healthy relationship with him, as in the following:

- God is constantly speaking to us, and he promises that we will grow to recognise and know his voice (Jeremiah 33:3; Job 33:13–14; John 10:2–5, 14–15).
- He promises to be with us and walk with us through our struggles, comforting and encouraging us (Psalm 23).
- We can experience his presence and closeness every day, and we can enjoy him wherever we are, in whatever circumstance (John 14:16; Matthew 28:20).

Many teens struggle because they need help to measure and deepen their experience with God by rooting those experiences into biblical truth. We can help them do that.

Practical ways of tying together biblical truth and experience

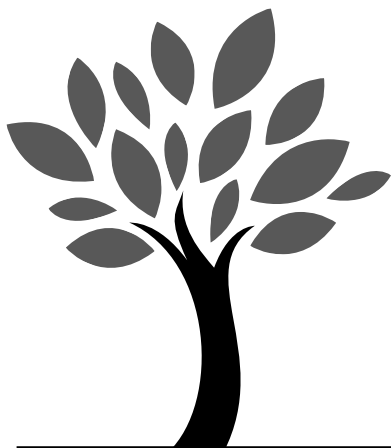
To grow healthy relationships, we need a good balance of truth and relational experience. It is important that we learn to wrap one around the other, viewing one in the context of the other, so they become inextricably linked.



To grow healthy relationships, we need a good balance of truth and relational experience.



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



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Parenting teens has its challenges.

The once-small children we had are pulling away from us, growing in independence and making decisions with bigger consequences. It can be easy to think we are less influential in their lives, particularly when it comes to faith.

But that is not true. Parents remain the significant spiritual influencers in a teen's life, and they need us to help them navigate the world and faith together. This book will help all parents, carers, grandparents and others involved in teens' everyday lives to understand the teenage faith journey more and find their place within it.



Rachel Turner is an author, speaker and the pioneer of Parenting for Faith. Until March 2022, she led the Parenting for Faith team at BRF, and she presents the **Parenting for Faith** course, a video-based resource for church groups and individuals.

'As always, Rachel speaks straight from the heart – a heart brimming with love for God and for people and that longs to see young people know for themselves the joys of a life lived with God. Whether you are a parent, carer, godparent, youth leader or simply someone who shares Rachel's heart, this book will challenge, inspire and equip you to share the path of faith with the teenagers around you.'

Ruth Hassall, author of *Growing Young Leaders*

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