

RELENTLESS

PARENTING

THE CRUCIAL PURSUIT OF YOUR TEEN'S HEART

BRIAN & ANGELA
HAYNES

RELENTLESS *PARENTING*

THE CRUCIAL PURSUIT OF YOUR TEEN'S HEART

By Brian and Angela Haynes

To Hailey, Madelyn, and Eden. We love you.

To the parents raising the young men that
will marry our daughters some day...

SH'MA! (Dt. 6:4-7)

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Published by Randall House Publications
114 Bush Road
Nashville, TN 37217

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN-13: 9780892659890

Acknowledgments

Several years ago, when we began leading churches to think about making disciples by equipping families, we never dreamed that God would allow us to influence people beyond our own home and our own church. We are humbled and grateful that Jesus would choose to use us to communicate anything on His behalf. Particularly a message as important as one bent on turning the hearts of parents toward their children, and the hearts of children to their parents. We acknowledge, Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He is the Alpha and the Omega; the beginning and the end. He is the victorious Lamb of God who takes away sin and reverses its monstrous effects. He is the Good Shepherd who keeps His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands. It is by you and for you, Jesus.

We want to say thank you to Sandra Hardesty and Katy Buckaloo for their tireless support in this project. Thanks, once again, to Francis Knox for opening her home in Jamaica Beach, Texas to us as a writing getaway. Thanks to Randall House and the D6 family, particularly Michelle Orr and Ron Hunter for believing in our message. I pray the world is becoming a different place because of our collaboration... one home at a time.

Table of Contents

Preface	ix
Chapter 1	1
Who Your Teenager Is and Who They Are Not	
Chapter 2	13
The Importance of Home during Adolescence	
Chapter 3	31
Tireless Compassion... and Driven Insensitivity	
Chapter 4	41
Time... and Dying to Self	
Chapter 5	57
Clear Boundaries... or Conflict and Chaos	
Chapter 6	75
Words of Power... or Words of Pain	
Chapter 7	89
Learn to Listen	
Chapter 8	103
Build Their Identity	
Chapter 9	117
Freedom to Parent Relentlessly	
Final Thoughts	133

Preface

Our story to this point is one of imperfection and extravagant grace. This is now the third book in the area of family ministry and parenting that we have written. I say we because, even though the first two books have my name on them only, Angela was a source of wisdom, a partner in parenting, and personally sacrificial so that I could write and speak with churches and families about equipping strategies for leading children spiritually. The first book, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* (2009), was birthed out of our personal struggle to learn how to lead our children biblically. As we developed a plan, it developed for the church in ways that we could not have imagined back then.

Chapter one of that book started like this: “I’ll never forget it as long as I live. I packed up her new pink backpack, tied her shoes, and strapped her into the car seat to take her to school. It was the first day of Kindergarten and Hailey, my oldest daughter was ready to go. I, on the other hand, was a total mess.”¹ Since that day a lot of water has gone under the bridge, so to speak. We now have two teenagers, and another one not far behind, living in our house. More recently, we sat at Whataburger®, God’s “fast food hamburger” gift to Texas, and watched our daughter who we once strapped into the car seat, drive off on her own. We reminisced about the Kindergarten drop off and laughed. What a crazy, imperfect, stressful, grace-filled, relentless, joyous journey, is this thing called parenting. Man! It never stops and the experience seems to change moment by moment.

The teen years are especially challenging but also incredibly great, no doubt about it. We are living it. We have been

parenting at least one teenager for about five years now. If my calculations are correct and if the Lord is willing, we will be parenting at least one teenager for the next eleven years. As you can imagine we are now around a lot of teens and their families. Many of our best friends are parents of adolescents. Add to that our work in the local church and in family ministry and you could say we hear from tons of parents of teenagers.

We have noticed a trend that, while understandable, is sad to us. So many parents of teenagers seem frustrated, even verbalizing a level of disdain and disconnection with their adolescent children. More than once we have heard parents of teenagers say things like, “Now I know why animals eat their young” or “I can’t wait for them to leave home.” Often these sentiments are coupled with relational disconnection because it is easier to be distant than to relentlessly engage with this age group. Maybe you have had similar thoughts or even feel contempt and withdrawal from your own children. Maybe you are tempted to take the easy road when it comes to parenting your teen by avoiding the conflict that often comes with leading them. It is very possible that you feel hopeless when it comes to your teenager. Or, you may just feel like you need some practical help navigating a new season of parenting. All of this is totally understandable. We have felt it, thought it, and lived it. And...we still are. We are sojourners and, like you, we need others to encourage us to be relentless in the pursuit of our teenagers’ hearts.

We have made an attempt in this book to be as honest and as transparent as possible without dishonoring our children. We have their permission to share everything you will read in this book. We think it is in our openness that you will best learn to relentlessly love your teenager. Rest assured, as you are reading this, we have prayed for you—not by name but in general. We have prayed for every parent that God allows to read this book. May the Lord grant you much hope and joy in the relationship you have with your child that is becoming an adult. May He grant you wisdom beyond yourself to know what to do when you don’t know what to do. May God guide your steps as you lead

your teenagers biblically. May the Lord connect your heart with your teenager’s heart as you relentlessly pursue him, especially when you don’t feel like it. You are not alone, friend. Be relentless. It is crucial.

Endnotes

- ¹ Haynes, Brian. *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today*. Group Publishing, Loveland, CO. 2009. Pg 27.

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 Corinthians 12:9-10



Chapter 1

Who Your Teenagers Are... and Who They Are Not

Let's start here. We are not experts, though for some reason God has given us a voice with other parents. Like you, we are on a journey. Our prayer is that at the end of our lives as we look back we will observe a legacy of faith spanning the generations that will flow from our family of five. We are not there yet. It's not time to look back. It's too soon to declare victory. We are in the midst of the most joyous, gut wrenching, grace covered, adventure and love story called parenting; and we have teenagers. Each child is completely unique and each is a blessing in her own way. We would not trade any of them. We are madly in love with our kids. Daily we are learning what it means to parent them toward adulthood. We've never done this before and because of our imperfection and inexperience and truthfully our sin, it's not easy. What was God thinking when he made forty-something sinners the parents of teenage sinners? Yet, we count this journey as undeniably the most amazing experience of our lifetime and we are thankful. We are compelled to be faithful because of our love for God and our love for the children He gave us. I bet the same goes for you.

Parenting teenagers is different than parenting younger children. It's funny how right before our eyes in a very short time, four-year-olds become fourteen. Though we can see the four-year-olds when we look into their eyes, at fourteen they

have changed drastically in every way: physically, biologically, emotionally, and spiritually. They think their own thoughts, have their own dreams, and are beginning to live their own way under the covering of, you guessed it, their parents. This is no time to check out. We have to understand who our teenagers are and how they are different from the little ones we have been parenting for so long. We also need to clearly understand who they are not...or at least not yet.

Who is my teenager?

I can think of several times as a father, that I have been shocked by who my teenagers are becoming. Sometimes in my mind they are still seven. Recently I was at an event for church and I was looking for one of our daughters. I scanned the room three or four different times. I looked near. I looked far. And then I finally asked someone if they had seen her. They pointed to a table where Angela was sitting and there with her back to me sat a beautiful young woman—my daughter. I missed her three or so times because I was looking for my little girl. For many parents this kind of epiphany elicits fear. However, we must walk in faith seeking to understand who that teenager is despite the season of life.

Foundationally we must understand that our teenagers were created by God and like all of humanity, they are His children. When you look into the face of your teenager whether it is a good or bad day, keep this in mind, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹ Your teenager was created in the image of God. If you espouse a biblical worldview, this is where we begin in parenting at any season. Certain implications arise from this pivotal understanding. If God created our children then by nature, He knows them best. He knows all about their spiritual, physical, and emotional reality. He understands the thoughts of their minds, the meditations of their hearts, and the root associated with the words of their mouths. God is their

designer and their perfect Father. He knows what they need, when they need it, and how they need it. The good news is He is also your designer. He knows what wisdom you need, when you need it, and how you need it. He is a perfect Father when our parenting skills seem grossly inadequate. He knows when you need grace, patience, endurance, and compassion. He knows when you are angry—when that anger is righteous and when it is not. He is your counselor and source. This is an amazing, supernatural source of hope and comfort. Remember, God chose you as a parent to steward His creation (that teenager you call your own), which is a blessing. Understanding that they are His creation is fundamental. Realizing they were created in His image is sometimes baffling. In the good moments it's easy to glimpse the handiwork of God. If you are like us, in the rough moments all you can see is your own image making for a potentially upsetting and convicting experience. This is when it is important to remember whose creation we are stewarding.

God, as a perfect Father, did not just create our teenagers in His own image and then walk away. Instead He created each of them with a distinct sense of uniqueness for His glory. Psalm 139:13-16 says, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”²

From the moment of conception, God began weaving together the heart, mind, soul, and bodies of our now teenaged children for a greater reason than just blessing us as parents. He has a purpose and a plan for them that when lived out, mysteriously colors in a part of the grand mosaic of creation, bringing glory to God throughout the generations. The unique nature of each child requires personalities, skill sets, passions, and dreams that might be altogether different than those of

dear old Mom and Dad. As children become teenagers, personalities, bents, and desires begin to immerge and should be honed. God uses parents and the family of origin among countless other experiences like church, relationships, and environment to shape children into the men or women He designed them to become for His glory. Think about this with a great sense of hope. Our teenagers are created precisely by God to accomplish His purpose. That principle is easy to see on the “proud, teary-eyed, look at my baby” mountaintops. The axiom is equally true in the “depressive, fearful, throw up in a trash can” moments. Here is your handhold when you feel like you are hanging off the sheer cliff of parenting teenagers: God created your teenager in His image with uniqueness to accomplish His purposes. This is what we build on, hope in, and lead toward as parents of teenagers. It is just so easy to lose sight of who they are in the craziness of parenting them.

It is helpful as parents to comprehend the general aspects of teenage development. If you are parenting a teenager, we assume that you understand your teenager’s body is rapidly changing. We’re sure that you regularly observe the realities of raging hormones, but there may be some things going on that you have not thought about. We hope to alleviate some parental confusion or even frustration with this information. In an article titled, “The Teen Brain is Still Under Construction,” the National Institute of Mental Health reports on research findings related to the brain development of teenagers. They draw some simple yet enlightening conclusions. In many ways the brain does not look like that of an adult until the early twenties. It’s interesting; a teenager may be at their lifelong pinnacle related to physical health and strength, yet the brain is still developing. It may not be surprising to understand that, “The most basic functions (of the brain) mature first: those involved, for example, in the processing of information from the senses, and in controlling movement. The parts of the brain responsible for more ‘top down’ control, controlling impulses, and planning ahead – the hallmarks of adult behavior – are among the last to

mature.”³ At the same time, hormones are raging—impacting the brain’s response to stress. Our conclusions and experience: while the teenager is at peak learning capacity, they are often unable to adequately process emotions experiencing some level of impulsiveness. They definitely are not yet able to cope with stress as an emotionally healthy adult. This little tidbit of research tells you that you are not alone when parenting an emotional or impulsive teenager.

Interestingly enough, Christian thinkers suggest this late brain development has a lot to do with environment. Dr. Richard Ross of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a leading expert in the development of teenagers reminds us that, “At seventeen, your great-grandfather likely plowed all day behind a mule and then went home to help with the baby. Your great-grandmother worked just as hard and just as competently. At sixteen she washed clothes by hand with soap she made, cooked from a fire she built, roasted chickens she raised herself, took care of the children, planted her own garden, and still had time to care for her husband. Both performed well in their roles because adults had invested years preparing them for just that.”⁴ How many times have you heard the phrase, “Kids these days...” uttered in a frustrated, sarcastic tone in observance of the youth culture. It is likely true that “kids these days” just like “kids back in the day” are a product of their environmental and cultural journey. As parents we influence that.

The prevailing research suggests that the brain constantly develops and remaps throughout life not only according to biology and physiology but also according to experience. “That is, what we choose to experience, where we choose to place our attention, shapes the structure and functions of our own brains. This shaping continues following the choices that we make as long as we live.”⁵ This is an important concept for every parent of an adolescent to understand. Though their brain may not be fully developed—explaining impulsivity, experiences during the elementary and teenage years actually matter to brain development. It is why our forefathers functioned as adults in the

teen years. They were trained for it in model and experience, shaping their brains. It is good to know that as a parent you can demonstrate a way of living and afford the child experiences that will influence the development of their brain.

Not only that, either in a positive or negative way, what a teenager thinks about regularly or dwells on also affects the brain. “What we give our focused attention to – to this action and not that one, to this attitude and not that one, to this thought and not that one changes the actual structure and wiring of our brains for as long as we live.”⁶ This is also good news for the parent. Hopefully, early in childhood parents can begin to focus the attention of their children on the person of Christ, the truth of His Word, the importance of living His way, and the gravity of His mission. Even if they do not start this at an early age, the parent in partnership with the faith community has the opportunity to focus teenagers this way and it’s not really that difficult. It is easily observable that teenagers are searching for a cause to live for that will out-live them. There is nothing quite as compelling as the thought of taking the saving message of Jesus Christ to every man, woman, and child, offering a message that will change the eternal destiny of a person. What they are consumed with will consume them, for a lifetime.

We have chosen to involve our children in the mission of Christ as teenagers because we have seen with our own eyes how serving the world with the gospel whether it be on your street or on the other side of the planet, impacts the way of a teenager, for life.

Years ago, Angela and I served in a local church as youth pastor and youth leader. We had the opportunity to involve dozens of teenagers in local, national, and international short-term mission experiences. We saw firsthand how leading teenagers to be on mission with Christ in a short-term way impacts their ability to walk with Christ every day. This is largely due to the ability of Jesus to consume the mind of a teenager, leading them to meditate on His words and live according to His mission. Experiencing that with the children of others later influ-

enced us. Now parents of teenagers, we give our teens these experiences. We have served side by side with our children in our neighborhood, our church, our city, and as far away as hard places in the Middle East. We don’t have perfect kids who never act impulsively, but we see a growing heart for the people of the world. We are also cultivating passion for the expansion of the Kingdom of Jesus. We pray this will impact their thinking for a lifetime.

So, take a deep breath right here. Some of what you are going through with your teenager, both positively and negatively, is normal because of how the teen brain develops. Gratefully, as parents, we can influence that development by crafting experiences and influencing focus. With God’s help we can shape our teenagers to accomplish the unique purpose for which they were created.

Who My Teenager is Not...

Equally important to comprehending who our teenagers are today is the inverse understanding of who they are not. Even though your teenager has grown tall, filled out, and gotten stronger—bearing the resemblance of an adult, they are not yet mentally or emotionally mature. In other words they still need a guide, they still need boundaries, they still need coaching, maybe now more than ever. Tragically, because it often becomes difficult in ways very different than parenting elementary children, parents of teenagers often either clamp down or let go—not understanding the real needs of their child who is becoming an adult. Teenagers are no longer little children who need instruction for every granular aspect of life. However, they are not yet adults mature in their decision-making abilities, especially under extreme stress. Remember, the characteristic of impulsivity and roller coaster of emotions on any given day can be deceiving. They may look like adults but they need parenting adapted to their teenaged season of life, personality,

and demonstrated levels of responsibility. Here are a few clear statements describing who your teenager is not:

- Your teenager is not yet an adult.
- Your teenager is not yet in charge.
- Your teenager is not perfect.
- Your teenager is not immune from making bad decisions.
- Your teenager is not able to process emotions at the same level you are.
- Your teenager is not the parent.

While these statements probably make us seem like the “masters of the obvious,” we have learned that these simple concepts are very easy to forget. We often catch ourselves expecting our teenagers to think and process like adults, or we’re surprised if they make a bad decision.

Several years ago we moved our children to a new school on the other side of our town. While overall this has turned out to be a great investment and experience, our kids left their friends behind to begin a new life. One of our teenaged daughters quickly made some great friends. She became particularly close with one friend and we were grateful. As parents we are constantly praying about peer relationships and the influence of friends. This seemed to be a great connection, and actually it still is, except for one minor detail. This friend no longer goes to the same school with our daughter.

When our daughter received the news that her friend would be leaving the school it was especially devastating for her. She would no longer be with her best friend all day every day, though they would still hang out at church and they could still see each other on the weekends when time allowed. This changed the dynamic of our teenager’s day-to-day life and she was not happy. Sadness, anger, and a bit of anxiety overwhelmed her. She was processing just like you might expect—unless you were like me and expected her to process it like a forty-year-old man thinks. Angela handled this well understanding who our teen-

ager was in her emotional development as opposed to the “old man maturity” expectations I placed on our girl. Our teen was in need of a listening ear more than a quick solution. I (Angela) remember losing a friend who moved away when I was as a pre-teen. I remember the very real pain of loss and the associated grief. Putting myself back in that place of empathy allowed me to understand what my daughter needed. We walked laps and laps for hours in the mall as our teenager conversationally expressed her pain, anger, and fear. At the end of that, I leaned in for a hug and said, “I am going to walk with you through this.” That was exactly what our daughter needed. Parenting teens is most effective, as we embrace who they are in their youth and as we understand who they are not.

As sojourners like you, we are learning some things as we go. In light of the content of this chapter we have discovered these five practices in parenting that we find useful:

1. *Learn their unique bent and parent accordingly.*

Understanding that each child is created in the image of God and for a unique purpose helps us, as parents with multiple children, wrap our brains around the fact that each child is so different. Each one has a unique personality, differing natural affinities, individual dreams and passions, and certain skill sets. In light of this it is important that we as parents, especially of teenagers, understand each child’s uniqueness and lead them accordingly. In the Bible, the book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom literature and not a promissory note. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go: even when he is old he will not depart from it.”⁷ One interpretation of the original language is to train the child according to his or her bent. As parents we work hard to understand that unique bent and train them toward that design for their life. Understanding that affects how we disciple and how we discipline. It gives us insight into what opportunities to afford our teenagers. It helps us coach them into adulthood the way God wants.

2. *Keep the big picture in mind.*

We are learning that it is important to regularly take a step back and look at the big picture. It is easy to get caught in the minutia of the typical day in the life of a parent of teenagers. But step back. Beyond the argument, maybe the disappointment or discouragement, beyond the accolade of the day or the stress of the moment is a grander plan. Take a look at who they are and who they are becoming. When you are tempted to be fearful or frustrated, ask an important question about the real gravity of the situation. “Will this matter in ten years?” Much of what we battle for, demand, or simply become frustrated over as parents of teenagers does not matter ten years from now. Keep it in perspective and remember, relentlessly pursue them and help them chart their course toward all that God designed them to experience for His glory.

3. *Compassion first, wisdom second.*

We are learning that hugs before words make our words able to be heard. Most of the time our teenagers need to know we hear them and we love them. When they know that, they will hear the wisdom we have to share. In our experience, leading with wisdom makes teenagers feel like we are always telling them what to do. A hug first leads them to ask, “What should I do?” Offer compassion laced with patience and follow through with words of wisdom. The way to a teen’s head is through his heart. Heart connection is the conduit for wise counsel.

4. *Sleep is important.*

Most studies reveal teenagers need between eight and ten hours of sleep each night. However, many teenagers are sleep deprived. “Research suggests that adolescence brings with it brain-based changes in the regulation of sleep that may contribute to a teens’ tendency to stay up late at night. Along with the obvious effects of sleep deprivation, such as fatigue and difficulty maintaining attention, inadequate sleep is a powerful

contributor to irritability and depression. Studies of children and adolescents have found that sleep deprivation can increase impulsive behavior; some researchers report finding that it is a factor in delinquency. Adequate sleep is central to physical and emotional health.”⁸ We are discovering that even as we protected sleep time for our kids when they were infants; it is just as important to encourage a schedule that allows for enough sleep in the teen years. This gives them the best chance at proper brain development and mental health, as well as improving moods and attitudes. Remember when your baby cried when he was tired? He does the same thing as a teenager. The tired cry for a teenager simply manifests itself in different ways. Pursue your teens by making sure they get their sleep. It’s good for who they are and who they will be.

5. *What goes in the brain comes out as behavior.*

This is sort of a “no brainer” but it is worth stating. According to the research, what we focus our attention on changes the wiring of our brain. Those wiring changes internally manifest in external behaviors. “As far as the brain is concerned, thought of an action and the action itself have the same effect.”⁹ Consider the words of Jesus. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”¹⁰ We are relentlessly pursuing our teenagers by teaching them to manage what they put in their brain. This can easily become a point of contention and it is important to strike a proper balance. However, monitored Internet usage, approval of music and movies, and a clear understanding of how our teens use social media, are all part of the pursuit for a pure teenaged heart. Don’t grow weary in the pursuit. The how comes later. For now, recall the wise words of David. “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your Word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments.”¹¹ Lift their eyes from their mobile technology and lead them to, “Set your minds on things that

are above, not on things that are on earth.”¹² Parenting a teenager is a relentless pursuit, but it is crucial. We believe the eternal payoff will be so worth it for our children and the generations that will come from them. Step one is to understand who our teenager is and who he is not.

Endnotes

- ¹ Genesis 1:27 (ESV)
- ² Psalm 139:13-16 (ESV)
- ³ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>, “The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction.” (Accessed February 25, 2015)
- ⁴ Richard Ross, *Accelerate: Parenting Teenagers Toward Adulthood* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2013), 10.
- ⁵ William R. Yount, *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher’s Introduction to Educational Psychology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 523.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 532.
- ⁷ Proverbs 22:6 (ESV)
- ⁸ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>, “The Teen Brain: Still Under Construction.” (Accessed February 25, 2015)
- ⁹ William R. Yount, *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher’s Introduction to Educational Psychology* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 531.
- ¹⁰ Matthew 5:27-28 (ESV)
- ¹¹ Psalm 119:9-10 (ESV)
- ¹² Colossians 3:2 (ESV)



Chapter 2

The Importance of Home During Adolescence

Have you ever been overwhelmed, wondering if you are preparing your child to thrive as an adult in an aggressively changing culture? Have you felt anxious about the amount of time left before they graduate? Life speeds up in the years we are parenting teenagers and seemingly becomes more demanding, even overwhelming. There is real pressure. When our children become teenagers it is common for the sound of the clock ticking to “tick-tock, tick-tock” quite loudly in our parental ears. Every birthday comes more quickly. We feel the pressure to teach our kids to be on their own, and to shape them for their future outside of our home. Also with the ticking of the clock comes stress to prepare financially for college or whatever comes next for them. We also are driven to experience life together before the big change when they leave home. On top of that, teenagers have schedules. They work, they play sports, they have to study, they may be involved at church and they have a social life of their own. They have opportunity like never before to be away on mission trips, school trips, and a host of other activities. If we are not intentional in this season, life can become really chaotic for the family. In this phase it is possible for parents and teenagers to live totally separate lives in which paths rarely cross. The chaotic schedule and the relational chasm due to busyness often breeds contempt in the family—yield-