

# So You Are a Teenager

So you are a teenager! Or maybe on the way?<sup>1</sup> Well, first of all, congratulations! It is a wonderful, rich, fun, crazy, confusing, deepening time of life. Adolescence, to use the technical term, gets a bad wrap. Sometimes fairly so. After all, as you move toward adulthood, you are developing into your own person. You are moving from dependence to independence. This can be hazardous. You may put adult authority to the test. You may fight with parents or teachers. You may try things you shouldn't. But mostly, it's great. God wants you to grow and more fully become the person you are meant to be. Adults who have never quite left childhood, while perhaps amusing, have a problem. Peter Pan is a fun character, but not a good model.

God wants his people to be properly nurtured so that they may become mature and balanced adults. (Eph. 6:4)


Just as staying physically undeveloped isn't good, so stunted growth in the Christian life isn't normal.

Adolescence is the time when many young people start to drive a car. They become more free to hang out with friends, without parental supervision. They learn about money, and how to use it for themselves. Eventually, it is the time when they will leave home for university or for the work place. All of this is normal and good.

The transition from childhood to adulthood is bound to come with bumps along the road. There will be special

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, specialists tell us, adolescence can begin as early as 10 years old in developed countries.



strains and temptations. You may be in for major disappointments. Some young people contract nasty health problems, or just embarrassing ones, such as acne. Much worse, a good friend might betray you. This can happen at any age, but it is particularly painful when you are an emerging adult. It just seems to hurt more.

Perhaps things won't always go so well between you and your parents, your teachers, or other authorities. Now that you are beginning to see life less as a totally reliant child and more as an emerging grown-up, you may become critical of the way your elders handle things. And you may be right, at least some of the time! You will have different ways of doing things, you will develop different tastes and nurture different career goals than what your elders might recommend. That's not a bad thing, unless it leads to conflicts.

Disagreements with adults are to be expected. But much popular culture simply assumes the youth are right. It sides with the rebel, although, ironically, in films or music it often is paid for by an adult business! You know those teen movies about kids having a good time, and nerdy adults who can't understand? Teens listen to music today of many styles, rap, heavy metal, folk, rock and roll, and much more. Often there is no "deep" meaning to the songs, just music. Some of it, however, carries strong messages about doing what you want, whatever the authorities might say. When I was a young man rock and roll music was being born (that's how old I am!). Some of it was wonderful, creative, rooted in the African-American tradition. In the best of it there was a healthy kind of protest against injustice in society. For example, Woody Guthrie's *This Land Is Your Land* or Elvis Presley's *Mystery Train* reminded us of everyone's responsibility to take care of their country. But some of it was destructive. Although playful and fun, Chuck Berry's *Roll Over Beethoven* encouraged us to part company with our parents and their values. We embodied the "generation gap." We protested against "the establishment" as if we knew better than our leaders what life was all about. In a

word, we were rebellious. This was no fun at all, really.



Today the issues and the music are somewhat different, yet there is still the good and the bad. A good deal, though not all, of rap music is anti-authority, sometimes violently against the police or even anti-women. Yet some of it cries out in an authentic way against injustice. I find generally that young people have much more social concern than my generation did, and they care more about abuses, such as trafficking, sustainable farming, cruelty to animals, and the like. This is partly because they have many advantages we did not, including far more opportunities to travel the world and experience other cultures and thus see their strengths, but also their great need.

Still, there are many temptations toward self-centeredness, much that teaches, “just do it,” from the old Nike advert. And of course they have access to an enormous number of ways to attain various pleasures. Because they are computer savvy and know how to navigate the internet, they can get information and be entertained instantly.

The internet is a mixed bag. You can download favorite tunes, get on Facebook, Twitter, and the rest, seeming to improve communication a hundred fold. Texting is now a major form of communication for young people. If you are typical, you spend hours texting friends, whereas older people use email, the telephone, even personal visits. So what? Such modern forms of communication are not all bad. However, texting can mean you do not necessarily have to meet someone face-to-face. While you may gain from efficiency, you may lose true and personal communication. Also, texting may give you a false sense of freedom. You allow yourself to write things you might never say in person. You can't see your friend's face or gestures, so you are deprived of the body language that usually goes with a personal conversation. At the extreme another person is simply a text, not a real, live human being.<sup>2</sup>

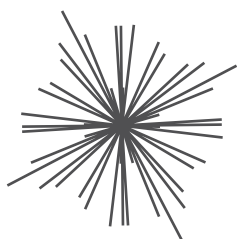
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<sup>2</sup> One characteristic of people, not just teens, who use these means of communication is known as FOMO, or “fear of missing out.”



## You Asked

Here's another thing. As an emerging adult today, you live with a contradiction. On the one hand, you are more compassionate than previous generations. At least that is the direction you are moving in. You care more about justice, and issues such as sex trafficking and embezzlement, and the like. Tragically, too, there is more brokenness today, and families are more dysfunctional than in previous generations. You are more likely to have been affected by such brokenness than in previous times. Your experience may lead you to have special concern for others who are suffering. On the other hand, you are more self-oriented, and have real difficulty caring about an objective world beyond yourself. Much of your morality is based upon the live-and-let-live philosophy of relativism. Less true of Christian young people than of unbelievers, but still, seeing the world from the perspective of your own head, not God's standards, is characteristic of people within the church as well as those outside.




# Becoming an Adult

Your growth into adulthood brings several major challenges. As if you had not noticed, your body is changing. Puberty is a transformation that moves you away from childhood and into physical maturity. Among other things, puberty enables you to have children. Hormones may insistently pressure you into discovering the opposite sex, in a way that was never so earlier. This is as it should be. Indeed, it is wonderful!

Marriage and having children was God's plan from the very beginning (Gen. 1:26-28).

Yet, sexuality is an area where serious problems can develop. There is a great deal of confusion out there. Relationships may get perverted. Premarital or extramarital sex never quite deliver what they promise. The atmosphere is polluted with pornography and lewd images. The ideal of "beauty" which is preached at us by advertisers is usually about very superficial attraction, not real beauty at all. Many young people put themselves under enormous pressure to conform to a hopelessly unrealistic image of beauty. Then come the eating disorders, the macho posturing, and feelings of inadequacy.

Another challenge is the need to become serious about the next step. It might be attending university. It might be finding a job. When things are going well a young person begins to learn how to make decisions, have goals, learn how to handle money, and other processes that ought to lead to financial independence. In almost every culture there is a training time which enables one to learn certain skills. School is meant to provide such preparation. Of course,



schooling is more than learning a subject. When it goes well, one also may learn to relate to others, the value of friendship, and athletic training. This too can go wrong, of course. Many young people today have no idea what to do next. They become apathetic. In our advanced technological societies study or work may seem boring. We now can do so much by pushing a button or clicking a mouse, we give up caring at all. Or, the opposite, we may be told that work will save you. Get a job, and all will be well? Nonsense! Some adolescents are under so much pressure to succeed that they break down psychologically. Or perhaps they become apathetic, which is on the surface less of a concern, but in reality a serious problem as well. They cease to care.

Third, and most important for our purposes, this time in your life is often when the deepest questions about religion are raised. Children ask such questions, but when they grow a bit the issues become much more significant, and much more personal. In ancient societies, asking the right questions about religion was even institutionalized. In Israel of old various provisions were made for young people to embrace the true religion as they grew into adulthood. They were expected to understand the faith of their fathers and make it their own. One way this was done was just story-telling. Israelite literature often contained stories about how God's people got to where they were.

Psalm 44 begins with, "Our fathers have told us what deeds you [O God] performed in their days."

Psalm 78 is one long account of Israel's history from the older to the younger generation. In addition to telling stories there was in the Old Testament a special ritual, just after the Passover celebration.

After the meal, the first son of the family was meant to ask "What does this mean?" which was followed by a recital of the way God redeemed his people out of bondage. (Exod. 13:14; Deut. 6:20) Practicing Jews today still hold the Bar Mitzvah for boys and the Bat Mitzvah for girls. Have you ever been to one?

Many churches today, reflecting this practice, celebrate “confirmation.” This is usually done after a period of instruction, or catechism, where the young person learns how to embrace the faith for himself or herself. While they may have been baptized as infants, they were too young to understand, and so their parents took the vows in their place. Then the time comes when they must make their own commitment. Coming to faith can and does occur at any age, of course. But often the teen years are when a mature decision can be made about the faith.



This book is for you, my friend, if you are thinking about the reasons for faith. I suppose we should let grown-ups listen-in if they'd like. It could even serve as a discussion point in the home or at the church with both generations involved. The book is not a general guide through all things adolescent. Such books exist, although their quality is often mixed. Check out the bibliography in the back. Rather, this book is about apologetics. This field is dedicated to answering questions of many kinds challenging the Christian faith. Such questions are bound to present themselves throughout your growing up years. This book is meant to help you as an emerging adult, to face the inevitable period of questioning, and to grow into a greater confidence in your convictions.