

are teens listening?

by Steve Wright

"Will you listen to me?"

"Be quiet and listen."

"You're such a typical teen; you never listen."

Parents know the frustrations of raising teens who they wish would listen to them. Many parents are discouraged because what they say blows right past their teens most of the time... or so they think. Before you assume too quickly that teens don't listen to mom and dad, look at what the research is telling us.



An extensive study of 272,400 teenagers conducted by *USA Today Weekend Magazine* found that 70 percent of teens identified their parents as the most important influence in their lives. Twenty-one percent said that about their friends (peers), and only 8 percent named the media.¹ This study obviously contradicts cultural misconceptions that peers and media are the primary driving force for teens. Teens are listening.


An important article in *TIME* magazine says that teens are hungry for dinnertime with the family. Miriam Weinstein says, "We've sold ourselves on the idea that teenagers are obviously sick of their families, that they're bonded to their peer group. We've taken it to an extreme. We've taken it to mean that a teenager has no need for his family. And that's just not true."² The article continues to say, "Parents may be undervaluing themselves when they conclude that sending kids off to every conceivable extracurricular activity is a better use of time than an hour spent around a table, just talking to Mom and Dad."³

It is a fact that when families eat dinner together kids are less likely to drink, smoke, use drugs, have an eating disorder, get depressed, consider suicide, fail at school, or have sex.⁴ All that accomplished through time spent talking with mom and dad over dinner. How can dinner be that powerful? It's because teens are listening.

An Associated Press/MTV study states, "So you're between the ages of 13 and 24. What makes you happy? A worried, weary parent might imagine the answer to sound something like this: Sex, drugs, a little rock 'n' roll. Maybe some cash, or at least the car keys. Turns out the real answer is quite different. Spending time with family was the top answer to that open-ended question.... Parents are seen as an overwhelmingly positive influence in the

lives of most young people. Remarkably, nearly half of teens mention at least one of their parents as a hero."⁵

Not enough to convince you that teens are listening? Here is what the experts say:

- The Barna Research Group found, "Eighty-five percent of parents with children under the age 13 believe they have primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matters. However, a majority of parents don't spend any time during a typical week discussing religious matters or studying religious materials with their children."⁶
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- Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger say, "Parents of those who 'kept the faith' emphasized religion twice as much as the parents of those who became apostates." They continue to say, "We acquire our religion from our parents almost as certainly as we inherit the color of our eyes."⁷
 - Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi wrote, "The best way for a child to learn about God, is to know a real Christian. The best way for them to discover the power of prayers is to live with parents who pray and truly walk with God."⁸
 - Mark DeVries, vice president of Youth Builders says, "It's not the job of the church to be the only force behind students' spiritual formation. It is, and always has been, the role of parents."⁹

I'll be honest with you—I found the studies and expert opinions hard to believe. Do teens really listen to mom and dad and want to have them involved with their lives? My co-author and I decided to put the research to the test (and I encourage you to do the same). We asked roughly 250 teens in our ministries some questions about parents. We asked, "If your parents gave you advice, how likely would you be to follow it?" Only 2 percent responded that they likely wouldn't follow it. We asked them about praying with their parents—only 1 percent didn't like praying with mom and dad. We asked them about reading the Bible with their parents—only 1 percent didn't like that time, which means that 99 percent desire to maintain the same or a greater amount of time spent in Bible reading and prayer with their family.¹⁰

We ended the survey by asking teens, "I wish my parents..." and allowed them to finish that statement. Responses included:

"...would talk to me more."

"...had time to talk and have fun together."

"...would give me advice."
"...read the Bible at dinnertime more."
"...talked more directly about God."

Maybe the mountain of research is right; teens are listening. No wonder the Bible emphatically tells parents to teach their children: "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6:7-9).

Why would the Bible say to talk so often to your teens about spiritual things? It's simple: because they are listening. Maybe Josh McDowell said it best: "Parents... carry more weight—for good or bad—than they give themselves credit for."¹¹ Your teens are listening... so what are you saying?



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A downloadable and emailable version of this article is available at www.inquest.org.

NOTES:

1. Wayne Rice and David Veerman, *Understanding Your Teenager* (Lakeside, CA: Understanding Your Teenager Books, 1999), 118.
2. Miriam Weinstein, *The Surprising Power of Family Meals* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2005); quoted in Nancy Gibbs, "The Magic of the Family Meal," *TIME Magazine*, June 04, 2006, available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1200760,00.html>; Internet.
3. Nancy Gibbs, "The Magic of the Family Meal," *TIME Magazine*, June 04, 2006, available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1200760,00.html>; Internet.
4. Ibid.
5. "MTV And The Associated Press Release Landmark Study of Young People and Happiness," Thinkmtv—Research, August 20, 2007, available from <http://www.mtv.com/thinkmtv/research>; Internet.
6. Barna Research Group, May 6, 2003; quoted in *Current Thoughts and Trends 20* (July 2003): 21.
7. Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger, *Amazing Conversions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 226.
8. Johann Pestalozzi; quoted in Barbara Joy Clark, *How to have Amazing Kids-A Simple and Sensible Guide to Raising Children*, 2007, available from <http://www.guideyourchildren.com>; Internet.
9. Mark DeVries, "The Role of Parents in Kids' Spiritual Formation," *Youth Worker Journal* (March/April 2003), 22.
10. Surveys conducted July 2007 and November 2007.
11. Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006), 60.