



Sunday June 25, 2006

Communicating with Teenagers

Pop quiz:

1. My Chemical Romance is:

A) a band B) a TV Show C) an internet site D) Richard Nixon

2. A Blog is

A) a shoe style B) an online journal C) a type of cell phone D) Yo Mama

3. Dirty Little Secret is

A) Blog B) A Song C) A Band D) Texas

4. Chucks are

A) High-Topped tennis shoes B) Torn and faded Jeans C) Oversized pockets D) The sound you make when throwing up

5. NVM means

A) Nevermind B) Not Very Manly C) Never Missed D) I don't know

6. Your teenager's favorite band is

7. Your teenager's favorite TV Show is

8. When should teenagers be allowed to date one-on-one (not with a group)

A) 12 B) 13 C) 14 D) 15 E) 16 F) 17 G) 18 H) 30 I) When they're married J) Never

What is adolescence?

Main Entry: *ad·o·les·cence* 

1 : the state or process of growing up

2 : the period of life from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority

3 : a stage of development (as of a language or culture) prior to maturity (from <http://www.m-w.com>)

*All in all, adolescence is simply the developmental period between childhood and adulthood. A time when children decide many things. Who they think they are, their likes, their dislikes. Their friends, their "people group." The Latin word we get the name "adolescence" from is the verb *adare* meaning "to grow up." We are essentially telling this age group to grow up! Just kidding around about that.*

But seriously, the period of adolescence is nothing more than the "maturing" process that we go through as we develop into adults. Britney Spears' got it partway right when she sang "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman" a few years back. Adolescents are not children anymore, nor are they yet adults.

So here is another curveball I want to throw your way. How long does adolescence last? Yes, I know some of you are thinking as you look at your spouse that it never ends, but seriously, how long do you think that it lasts? If you said 18, why do you think that? If you said 20 or 21, why do you think that?

The real answer:

Currently 25 years old is how long adolescence lasts. Let that sink in a little bit. In our world today, adolescence starts around 10 or 12 years old and lasts until 25 years of age!!! That is up to 15 years as a teenager! Why is this number so big now? For a few reasons.

Adolescence is marked by a couple of different traits, one of which being dependence upon the parents, either emotionally or financially. Many teenagers are leaving for college, and coming back to live at home again. Teenagers are losing real independence.

Another reason is that adolescents supposedly do not have the portion of their brain that controls risk management until around 25. Then we throw into the mix that Adolescents lack the ability to see past their own self, and deny personal responsibility like it was breathing.

All in all, Adolescents are not ready to be handed the responsibility of adulthood yet! But there are a few good things about this period of development.

Adolescents possess a joy for living, and for truly experiencing life, no matter the cost. They want to feel alive, and they want to revel in the joy that life has to offer them. Adolescence also gives us a willing

disregard for societal norms. I list this in the “good things” section because sometimes we need to break out of the societal norms.

So this explains why teenagers act the way they do, right? Not entirely. We need to get a little deeper into the teenage brain to understand why they act the way they do. (And please bear in mind that there are exceptions to nearly every rule, but even in those exceptions, you will still find these things going on in the teen’s head.)

Teenagers are Egocentric

Teenagers due to their adolescent brain have a very strong urge to stop looking once they see the end of themselves. They rarely see other people’s pain as real, or possibly worse than their own. They seem selfish in this mindset, because they are really giving in to only their own world. The world starts with them and ends with them... and maybe their boyfriend. It is possible to look past this, but many, many teenagers do not want to, so they refuse to.

Teenagers have an Immortality complex

Teenagers cannot grasp the concept of death completely. In their mind, they cannot die. This creates a brain that will take completely unnecessary risks, make poor decisions, and could even lead to long-term damage in some way. Sometimes teenagers lean so far away from the concept of death that they develop an unhealthy attachment to it or an unhealthy fear of it. It becomes the center of their mind, and everything revolves around it.

Teenagers deny personal responsibility

Hand in hand with the lack of acknowledging their own mortality, teens deny personal involvement. The concept goes like this: “I screw up all the time, I can’t do anything right, blah blah blah...” But when you truly confront them with something that their first instinct is to point the finger at others. OR deny that anything really happened at all. They lack the recognition that their actions have consequences.

Teenagers want to be heard

When it comes down to it, teenagers want their voice to be heard. It does not matter if it is an “important” thing or not. It doesn’t matter if they are wrong or right. They want to be heard, they want to think that their voice matters. This is a big part of why teenagers will gain their moral standards from people who seem to listen to them. A 14 year old girl is more likely to gain her moral code from her friends and Laguna Beach than she is from her parents (in most cases) because these are the people she sees as listening to her.

Teenagers are searching for their identity

Searching for a unique identity is one of the problems that adolescents often face. Teenagers often challenge the authority or the rules as a way to establish their individuality. They crave to be adults, to find their place in the society. At this age, role models such as sports players, rock stars and movie and television performers are very popular, and adolescents often express a desire to be like their chosen role model. Again, anyone who they see as listening to them. They want to create themselves, and this is the time to do it.

So now that you know why a teenager acts and thinks the way they do, let’s get to the questions you all came hear to hear the answer to: ***How do I communicate with teenagers?***

There are several things you can do to communicate effectively with teenagers. And they begin at home.

Set clear boundaries with them.

A lot of teenagers acting out is a test of how far they can go. They may initially bristle at the idea of having curfews, time limits on phone and internet services, dating, specific times to eat, or whatever else. But they are crying out for these boundaries. When you create boundaries with them, you are showing them that you do care about them and about what happens to them.

Active listening

This is more than a psychological trick. When you actively listen to a teenager, you reflect back to them what they are saying. You are showing them that you are listening and hearing them, and you are making

yourself pay attention to them. This is one way of letting them see that you do care, and that you are investing in them.

Get involved

Don't settle for a "nothing" answer when you ask how their day was. Get to know their friends, their TV shows, their favorite bands, their boyfriend or girlfriend. Make it a requirement to know where they are, when they will get home, who they are with. TO truly invest in teenagers, you need to get involved in their life.

Praise their accomplishments and use constructive criticism of their mistakes

Teenagers already think they suck, so make sure to point out the good that you see, each and every day. Even a little, "Thanks for flushing the toilet this morning" goes a long way. And when they screw up, don't jump down their throat and chew them out. Walk them through their mistake and help them see why they messed up and how to fix it the next time around. Never get into a shouting match with them. It reduces your authority to nothing. It takes practice.

Remember they are not adults

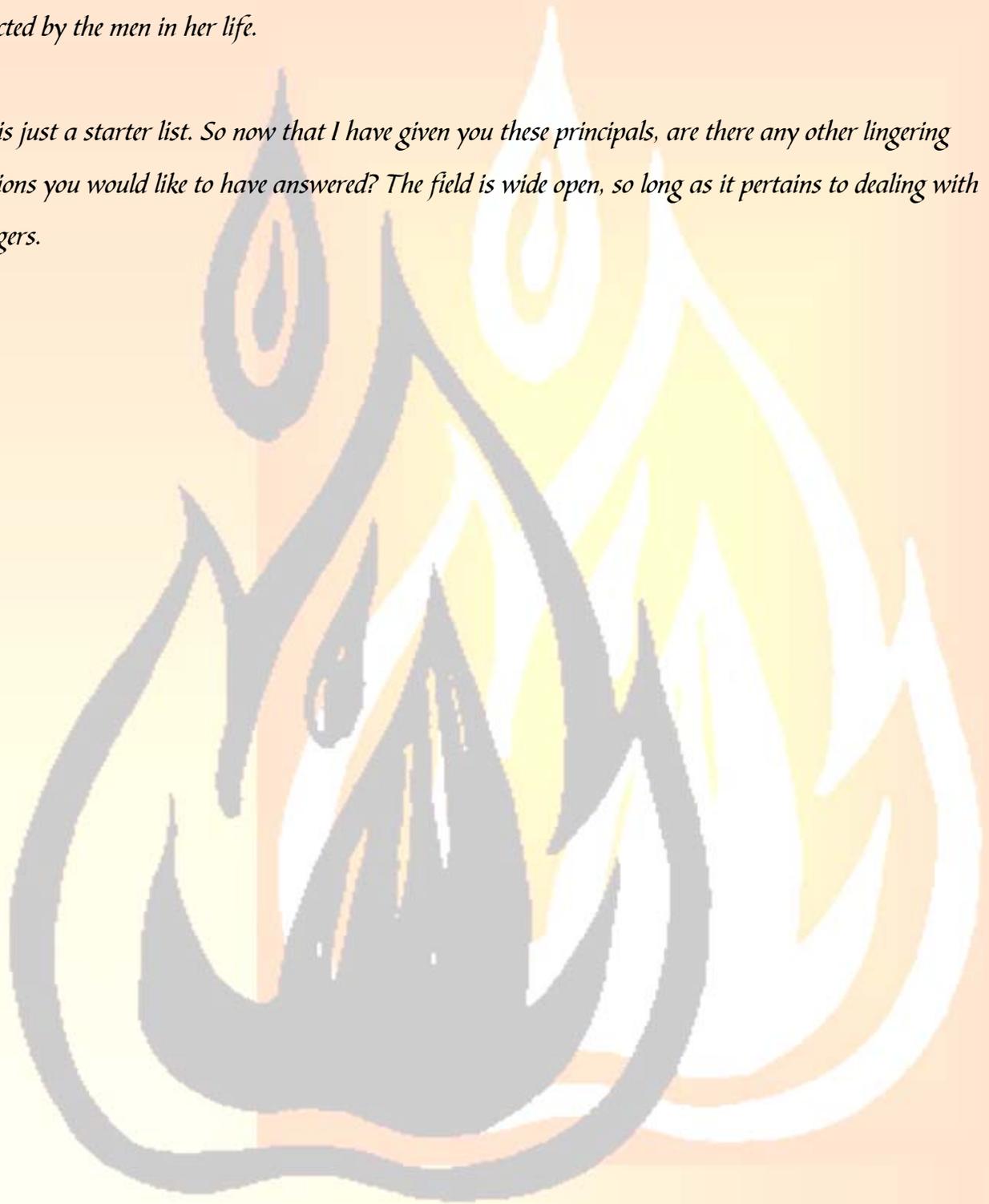
This comes across in many, many ways. First, do not treat them as a friend. They are a teenager and you are an adult. You are an authority figure, a parent, a youth leader. You are not their buddy. Do not gossip with them, do not fight with them, do not become a teenager (completely) when you are with them. IF you give into this temptation, you completely decimate your opportunity to be able to set boundaries, and let them look up to you, as they need to. Don't be sarcastic with them. Don't hesitate to tell them they are being rude, or wrong. IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO TELL THEM THIS STUFF!

Find something about them you want to know more about

Especially when starting a conversation with them. Not a skateboarder, then bring up their fashion sense and ask them why they have chosen their particular style. Don't feel you can connect with a 13 year old boy-

crazy girl? Ask them about their dad, or their brothers. See if you can find out how this girl has been impacted by the men in her life.

This is just a starter list. So now that I have given you these principals, are there any other lingering questions you would like to have answered? The field is wide open, so long as it pertains to dealing with teenagers.



Firehouse Ministries