

Hope for Your Struggling Teenager

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When you're struggling with a wayward teenager, it can seem as though your world is being turned upside down. Everything you've planned and hoped for in the child's life appears to be fading away. In essence, you feel like a failure.

It is common for such parents to have sleepless nights... finger-pointing arguments... tears... and stress far beyond what they've ever experienced before. The energetic little boy who was so fun... or the sweet little girl who used to be full of hugs... has become someone totally different, and is teetering on the edge of disaster. It's enough to make you lose all hope.

Over the past 30 years, my wife Jan and I have spent countless hours with teens and their parents, and we've seen God do some incredible, amazing things. And what I have learned is this: Because God is faithful, there is hope. There is hope for your teen... and there is hope for your family... no matter how desperate the situation may seem.

First of all, hope can be found by focusing on God's promises and seeking support from other caring believers. Search God's Word and let it speak hope into your life. Get into a small group of other parents going through something similar to what you're experiencing.

There's nothing like having a crowd of people around you who are in the same boat trying to bail. Many times, people get involved in small groups just to talk. I would encourage you to get into a small group so you can also listen. When all you know to do isn't working, the counsel of others might spark some new ideas or directions with your teen. There is wisdom and comfort in the presence of many.

Second, hope can be found by pinpointing possible underlying triggers of the problem. You see, good kids generally don't make bad choices or hang out with the wrong crowd unless something else is bothering them. Knowing what those triggers may be — usually a loss or damage in their life of some sort — can help you better understand why your teen is acting the way they do.

This isn't to justify the behavior, but to better understand it. Pinpointing the cause of the struggle will help you realize that your teen isn't necessarily choosing a lifestyle or turning away from you or your values at this point. They are simply responding to or covering up the hurts that they feel by grasping onto new things that their culture says will bring them joy, pleasure and satisfaction.

Third, hope can be found by tightening the boundaries. Just because someone is lost, hurt, or damaged doesn't give him or her license to destroy you or your home, or constantly disrupt your family. When a teen has lost his way, he doesn't know where he is, much less where he is going, so any attempt to get him somewhere or keep him from heading down a path of trouble is usually met with resistance. Parents can spend all the time they want telling their teen that the path he is on will take him somewhere he doesn't want to be, but it will usually have little effect.

So establish solid boundaries, which will give your teen a road map. He'll then know what to expect if he sways off the road. It also helps take some of the parental emotion and anger out of the equation.

And fourth, hope can be found through taking time to build a stronger relationship with your teen. Begin with a conversation of restoration. You do this by admitting where you may have been wrong as well. Tell your teen where you've made mistakes and how you'd like to relate differently in the future. Sharing your failures just might give her the motivation and example she needs to do the same, though usually not right away.

Require that you do something fun together (fun to the teen, not necessarily you) once every week and then let the conversation flow naturally. It may take several weeks of outings before anything is said by the teen, but keep it up. This approach conveys the message that you can still love your child even though she is a mess, even though she is making mistakes and being hurtful. It lets her know that you can love her when she has it all together, and you can love her when she doesn't. Isn't this what we all desire?

You can rest assured that God is pursuing your child just as intensely as you are. And He won't stop until your wayward one is found. God says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" ([Hebrews 13:5](#)). God has not left what He is building. This doesn't mean you can just sit back and let God do all the work. He's going to use you in that process. As an old Russian proverb says, "Pray to God, but keep rowing to shore."