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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING TEENAGE GIRLS

REMEMBERING WHO SHE WAS,
CELEBRATING WHO SHE'S BECOMING

simply for parents

A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Girls
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CHAPTER 1: SHE'S CHANGING

Time for a checkup (don't worry, it's free and won't be billed to your insurance). Do you ever feel like this: What happened to my little girl?

I (Brooklyn) have two daughters, aged 2 and 5. I read parenting advice and try to keep up with where they should be developmentally. From the day they were born, I've kept a record of every pound they gained, the arrival of each and every tooth, and each sitting, crawling, walking, jumping, climbing milestone that came along. I've also watched them transition from liquids to solids, cribs to beds, diapers to big-girl pants. I even try to write down the funny things they say so I'll remember someday and be able to tell them all about it. Even when I'm prepared for all of these things, the changes still continue to catch me off guard like 3 o'clock summer afternoon rains in central Florida. I know they're coming, but they still sneak up on me and catch me unprepared.

My 2-year-old daughter, Mya, recently decided to transition from a blankie and a baby in bed at night, to wanting a harmonica and an extra pair of underwear. Random. Before

she goes to bed she plays a little tune. And I guess it's sort of comforting that she has a backup plan in place (with the extra training pants) just in case she needs help.

It seems perfectly normal that our toddlers would do outlandish things. We don't understand why they suddenly feel more comforted by a harmonica (really, a harmonica?) than by the blanket they've slept with their entire life—but because they are babies, we give them space to grow and change.

It's the same with our teenage daughters. They still need the same kind of noticeable attention. While the milestones and checkups change, it's still important to make much of them and help girls through the things they can't get their minds around.

I (Marko) have an 18-year-old daughter, a senior in high school. I'm at the tail end of this ride. Liesl is an amazing young woman: articulate and creative, passionate and compassionate. But she still surprises me, in both good and frustrating ways. In fact, these days, as she's very much taking the "I'm independent" bull by the horns, I'm blindsided by surprises multiple times each week. Most of these surprises are encouraging. Others are maddening. Some are both!

Other than the first few years of life, teenage girls are going through the most dramatic developmental changes they'll ever experience. And they need us to be there, just as present and involved as we were when they could sleep on our chests and climb into our beds.

There have been many moments in youth ministry when each of us has come into the youth building and noticed girls that we no longer recognize. They are girls we've known since they were little. We've hung out at all hours, painted each other's nails (well, Brooklyn has), laughed, cried, wrestled with ideas—and then they changed.

It seems to happen overnight, in a flash, like those rags-to-riches princess changeovers you might see on Broadway—except that when the smoke clears, you have no idea what you'll find. It feels just that quick, the experience when we notice that she isn't the same, that she looks, acts, and responds differently than she did before. (And by "she," we mean *all* of them.)

When did this change happen? Sometime between seventh and eighth grades (sooner for some, later for some) her body, mind, and emotions start to change. Suddenly, she becomes a wonderfully unique person who can hold a

conversation, can get passionate about things she cares about, and can make some decisions on her own.

As youth workers, we're often grieved when this change starts. It's not the tragedy kind of grief, but more the "We feel like our puppy just ran away" sort of grief, because we see her growing and separating herself from the identity that used to depend almost exclusively on her parents and, to a lesser extent, on us.

Of course, the feelings we experience with countless teenage girls in our ministries are nothing compared to the feelings of seeing this change occur in your own daughter.

It's the strangest combination of loss and gain: It feels like you've just lost the best thing that ever happened to you, yet you've also gained the best thing that ever happened to you. And it can cause us to react in crazy ways, if we aren't ready for it.

So, where do we start in our understanding?

Start with what you know.

Think about where your daughter is in her life.

It might be helpful to map it out. Draw a timeline from the year she was born to the current year. Mark significant milestones above the line. And think about her life from the point of view of someone who is only now just getting to know her.

Outside of her adolescent development, do you see any themes in her life? Have there been things out of her control that have shaped the person you see her becoming?

Before you begin to understand, share dreams, and launch her to live them, you need to know her—really know her.

Sometimes teenagers will tell you outright that they don't want you, as a parent, to know them. But our experience tells us that it's mostly a smokescreen, a front put up as part of her necessary and good journey toward becoming who God made her to be.

Think back to the timeline again:

When did God become more than a name for her? *Has* God become more than a name for her?

Where does she sit at the dinner table? How does she communicate with you?

How does she decide what to wear?

What things seem to set her off, frustrate her, or cause conflict between you? Is there an underlying source of pain fueling these things?

You really don't need to try to psychoanalyze her, but asking these questions will help you to get a broader perspective and to begin thinking about what she carries with her as she develops into her own person.

Now, think about the outward changes she's going through.

When did they start?

What did you notice first?

Puberty can start as early as 9 years old! It's important to recognize when these changes begin. Oftentimes, the emotions accompanying menarche (a girl's first menstrual period) start before it happens. Knowing this helps you to see the cycle and embrace it as a healthy part of her

development without being completely frustrated with her changing moods.

Another way to start thinking about your daughter is to consider where she is in processing the three primary "tasks" of adolescence—tasks she'll be working on throughout her middle school and high school years (and often into her young adult years).

- Identity ("Who am I?"): How has she been answering this question in front of you? in front of her friends?

- Autonomy ("How am I unique, and how do my choices matter?"): Do you see her trying out different things? How does she handle responsibility? Do you see her taking ownership in new areas of her life?

- Affinity ("Where and to whom do I belong?"): Are there places where she gravitates more than others? Is she forming a strong sense of belonging? How is that place (or those places) of belonging informing her identity?

There are many more questions you could ask yourself; these are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to your daughter. Remember, it's not about knowing the *answers*. It's about understanding *her*. And that happens with an intentional movement to see her, notice her changes, listen, look, think about her, and pray for her.

We hope you'll use this book as an opportunity to understand your posture in front of your daughter and to let it help you deconstruct some of your assumptions and misunderstandings. Then, from a place of wholeness and trust (in a God who loves you and is passionate about your parenting), you can start to see your daughter for who she is and who she's becoming.

Who Is This Girl?

"One day that little girl that cried whenever you left her and would light up whenever you walked into the room, will not want you around or hear a thing you have to say. Go through these years with patient understanding of your new role in her life, and one day you will open that door and your girl will be back, and she will have learned so much since the time when she knew it all."

—Christy; Southlake, Texas

Raising teenagers is no walk in the park. It takes guts, patience, a willingness to stay present in the everyday chaos that's naturally a part of adolescence, and—maybe most importantly—a daily, active faith that God is working a miracle.

Every now and then, a superbly balanced teenage girl comes through our ministries. It's like the light of heaven shines directly on her. She seems to always demonstrate kindness, she's the first to offer to help, she's doing great in school, and she even likes hanging out with her parents!

When we observe these rare girls, we almost always assume it's because of amazing parenting. We seek out her parents and ask, "You are such great parents; can you share the secret parenting sauce with all of us?" Most often, these parents look at us with bewilderment and say, "We don't know! It surely can't be because of us!" Then, almost inevitably, sometime in the future, the veil is dropped and those same parents come back with tears in their eyes, frustration in their voices, and every form of communication their daughter owns locked in their car.

What happened? Why is she responding so differently? Where did the heavenly girl go? It's like aliens abducted

their real daughter and harnessed forces of evil to control her moods and decisions.

Ever felt that way?

Not every teenage girl goes through emotional aerobics, not every girl gets nasty and mean, not every girl has problems with friends, not every girl has a change in her attitudes toward authority. But every girl does change. Knowing this as a parent, expecting it, and doing your best to see the changes through some great question-asking lenses will help you as you experience these changes alongside her.

We like how Ginny Olson puts it in her book *Teenage Girls* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006):

During this phase of her life, change is the only constant; every relationship is shifting, and every belief is questioned. What she once knew as solid ground now feels as though an earthquake hit it. She's not quite sure where to find the stability of her childhood, or if she even wants to. In the midst of this chaos, she's screaming the question of adolescence, "Who am I?" and a whole series of other questions…Who is she in relationship to her friends? To her family? To her community? She's seeking to find her identity.

Like the parents who end up in our offices (honestly, *most* parents would end up in our offices if they had time), you may feel moments of helplessness. You may feel like curling up in a ball and crying like a baby because what she said to you on the phone was one of the most hurtful things you've ever heard. You may look at her and say, "Who is this girl?" And this is when you realize that your own faith is the only thing that's going to carry you through.

A mom that I (Brooklyn) know well, after raising two daughters (and two sons!), offers this advice:

"Above all else, make certain that your own spiritual life is where it should be. Be ever in the Word and on your knees praying for wisdom. God doesn't promise raising your daughter will be a bed of roses, but when you get stuck in the thorns, he will take your pain and turn it into something beautiful."—Natalie; Logan, Ohio

Intentional Engagement

So what do you do in the meantime (in between banging your head against the wall and praying)?

Enjoy her.

Sit with that one for a moment. Can you distance yourself from the fear and confusion long enough to enjoy her?

Look for ways you can learn new things about your daughter. She doesn't even know everything about herself yet, so you won't be able to learn everything. But strive to discover things about her that will help her answer the questions she's asking, such as:

Who am I?

What's my relationship with my parents supposed to look like?

What's my role in my community? Do I matter?

Who are my friends, really? What role do they play in my life?

She'll be changing quickly and going through plenty of extremes. However, if you're taking the time and putting effort into getting to know her over and over again, it will pay off.

You might be thinking, “But she won’t let me get within a hundred yards of her world. How am I supposed to get to know her when she doesn’t even want me around?”

That’s a great question, so whether you asked it or not, let’s talk about some ways you can be a part of the changes she is going through without becoming the helicopter parent of the year—who hovers and intrudes but doesn’t engage.

Get involved before the changes occur. It’s always easier to stay involved in her life than to suddenly start involvement when your daughter is 16.

Watch for early physical signs of change. When you notice evidence that puberty has begun, don’t ignore the signs; celebrate puberty’s arrival in a way that would honor her and make her feel special. (Dads: Of course, your experience of these physical changes will be different from a mom’s, but you can still pay attention to the early signs of your daughter’s entry into adolescence.) For moms, this might means taking your daughter to get a manicure and talking to her about the approaching changes. For dads, this might mean buying her flowers and setting up a time to tell her how much you love her and how happy you are with the young woman she’s about to become.

When my daughter (Marko here) had her first period, we actually had a “period party” for her! We took her out of school for a day, got her a massage and a new haircut, and took her out to dinner. We were intentional about celebrating her budding womanhood without making it weird or awkward, but also without ignoring this significant milestone.

Look for opportunities to have conversations about friendship. This is thin ice, of course, as you can easily come across as intrusive, or like you’re interrogating her. The trick is to focus more on asking questions (and being genuinely interested in the answers), rather than attempting to get your opinions heard. If you ask good, open questions, you’ll often find that your daughter will, at some point, express a conundrum or some tension she’s processing. That’s your opportunity to affirm the tension and to ask if she’d like to hear how you have dealt with the same tension in your own friendships. More often than not, if you’ve created a safe environment for this conversation, she’ll be interested in hearing your experience (more than your platitudes or directives).

Notice and encourage competencies. The default parenting approach for so many people, often anchored in

fear, is to parent by control. But the best parenting is less interested in control and more interested in facilitation: helping a girl identify and nurture her unique gifts and passions and means of contributing to something greater than herself.

Serve together. Whenever you can, show how putting others first gives you life and meaning, even when life feels dull and meaningless. The two of us have seen over and over again how parents and teenagers who find ways to serve alongside each other have the strongest relationships. You can model a way of living for your daughter in a way that you could never accomplish with words alone.

Help her feel safe. There's a tension with this one. On one hand, it couldn't be more critical that your daughter feels safe in your home and in her relationship with you. A teenager experiences plenty of unsafe feelings in her rapidly expanding world, and your home and relationship can become a beautiful haven where she can truly be herself without constantly worrying about whether people will like her or not. But one of the problems the two of us often see in parenting today is how *overly* protective parents are of their teenage children. Your daughter needs

experiences that *aren't* controlled in order to grow. Safety, yes; control, no. (We're not suggesting that's simple, by the way.)

This might be a tough statement for you to believe, but we're asking you to trust us. We have 40 years (combined) of experience working with thousands of teenage girls, and research backs this up: Teenagers *want* and *need* boundaries. They thrive with appropriate independence *within* clearly defined boundaries.

Here's another one that might be tough for you to swallow (but we can affirm with experience and research): Teenagers *want* their parents involved in their lives. Your daughter might give you every signal possible that this isn't true, but that isn't the full story. Those "pushing away from you" signals are merely her important and good efforts at learning about the extent of her power. Don't throw in the towel by misreading her deepest desires.

There isn't a one-to-one correlation between happy and healthy teenage girls and parents who clearly set boundaries and stay engaged. But it has to be, from what we've seen, a close correlation. Sure, we've seen plenty of fantastic parents who work to set boundaries and deeply desire to stay engaged but whose daughters

still go off the deep end in one way or another. And we've seen disengaged parents who set zero boundaries but the teenage girl is a paragon of awesomeness. But those examples are both exceptions, and not the norm.

If your daughter is already a teenager, you only have another lap or two around the parenting track. Your role (while still a parent, of course) will shift dramatically as your daughter reaches the end of her teen years. So re-up your commitment to walk (or run!) these laps with intentionality, generosity, love, and presence.

"Every day at dinner, my parents eat quietly while I walk them through my 10-hour day. They think nothing of it, but whenever something big happens (irritating teachers, impossible tests, idiotic friends), I spend the rest of my day preparing the story to tell them that night."
—Sarah; Lexington, Massachusetts

Some Body

"In my experience, it is the good girls, the dutiful daughters and high achievers who are at the greatest risk for anorexia."
—Dr. Mary Pipher,
Reviving Ophelia *(Riverhead Trade, 2005)*

We could hardly overstate the importance of how your daughter sees her own body and how she thinks other people see her body. Being aware of body image issues will help you see more quickly when your daughter struggles with them.

Not only is your daughter's body changing, but the amount of time and effort she spends noticing other people's bodies is changing, too. She'll compare herself with girls her age. And she'll compare herself with "perfect" strangers she sees on TV and in magazines.

She's also noticing guys more. (Some of you are thinking, "Thanks for the brilliant insight, captains of the obvious!") The posters in her room shift from horses and kittens to teenage heartthrobs from her favorite movie or TV series.

This might crack you up: The word *estrogen* (the hormone rampaging through your daughter's body right now) is formed from two words, *estrus* and *gen*. Its root meaning is "to generate estrus." Estrus (ready for this?) means "frenzied passion"! This may be the last thing in the world we want for our daughters as their bodies and minds go through such swift changes!

Estrogens are actually a group of hormones produced by the ovaries, and they're strategic to a girl's development of secondary sex characteristics, such as breast and pubic hair growth. They also heighten her sense of smell, which is most sensitive halfway between her periods.

As you may have discovered already, once puberty begins, the differences in your daughter can become drastic. And now her body is setting her up to experience "frenzied passion" and causing her to have a freakishly perceptive sense of smell.

It can be overwhelming to think about all she's going through physically. But the biggest, most important parenting practice, when considering the *physical* changes going on inside your daughter's body, is to look for ways to love her unconditionally. Get beyond acne breakouts, rapid growth, and gangly awkwardness to see who she's becoming on the inside.

If your daughter is maturing early, don't be fooled into thinking she doesn't need your help (in fact, girls who mature early often need *extra* help from Mom and Dad). She might *look* mature, but that doesn't mean she is. Girls who physically mature early often receive confusing and

unwanted attention. And in possibly the most unfair of all teenage judgments, they are often considered sexually loose by their peers (both girls and guys).

If your daughter is maturing later, reassure her that everyone matures at a different pace, and comfort her when she gets impatient. Remind her that she'll soon be on the road and will quickly catch up to her peers. Above all, remind her that God looks at the heart—it's the most important growth that will happen for her. The seeds of courage and character being planted in her heart will far outshine the outward signs of her maturation.

Going into the sixth grade, there were only a few things I (Brooklyn) was worried about. First, having a white pair of leather K-Swiss™ shoes. They were the shoes that most girls showed up wearing on the first day of school (or so I'd heard). Second, not getting a scary teacher. And third, being able to find my locker and remember the combination. That was all.

The first month of sixth grade wasn't too bad. I don't remember much, just that I was there. But it didn't take long for me to start noticing the girls who were already wearing bras. It also didn't take long for me to figure out that I was

a GIANT towering over really cute but little guys. I must have seemed like a monster from their perspective. My growth spiked in the sixth grade, continuing all the way into the eighth grade. I grew nearly 7 inches over the course of about two years. It was like a death sentence—no chance of getting a date to the dance.

I (Marko) remember when my daughter, about 15, decided she wanted a super-edgy haircut: a subtle Mohawk. Deciding it wasn't a fight on which we wanted to spend our parenting chips, my wife and I let her make this decision. She was very proud of it, for a couple of months. But I remember intensely the day she cried and told us that she "didn't feel pretty anymore" and wanted to grow her hair back.

Knowing how awkward and significant these body image changes are gives us a lot of empathy for teenage girls. And, once again, we can see how *critically important* their parents' voices and affirmation are during these shifts. Bottom line for moms: Your verbal processing with your daughter about these issues is irreplaceable. Bottom line for dads: Your regularly communicated affection and unconditional acceptance is irreplaceable.

I Think I Can

My (Brooklyn) youth ministry has an honesty box. A few times a year we give teenagers cards and ask them to write down any question they want to ask. They can ask *anything*. It's anonymous, and we encourage them to write something that they really are wondering about and may be a little embarrassed or ashamed to ask. Because there's a box for the girls and a box for the guys, we are able to organize our answers around the hot points.

For our middle school girls, the biggest and most pressing questions center around clothing. Is it is a sin to wear short shorts? How short is too short?

For our middle school guys, well, they basically want to know how *things* work. And by *things*, I mean sex.

We see their curiosity and creativity coming out in exercises like this, as well as their budding desire to challenge conventions as part of figuring things out. Many of the girls don't write down their opinions, but I know it to be true because of conversations we've had. If a girl were being really honest, she might have written, "My parents think my shorts are too short. I don't. I need some biblical evidence that they're not too short, so I can keep wearing them."

Ask high school girls for gut-level honest questions, and the flavor has changed. Some still ask “help me disagree with my parents” questions, but many are wondering how to get out of messes they’ve made since junior high. Or they want to know how to help a friend who is in a mess of her own. They really are thinking and trying to discern. But we know their base for decision-making is inexperienced, in process, and incomplete. That’s why parents play such an important role. Teenagers are lacking in development of the brain’s frontal lobe, the decision-making center of the brain. Parents need to be “surrogate frontal lobes.” Otherwise—in the midst of this pivotal time of learning to understand moods, plan ahead, weigh choices, and control impulses—they’ll be on their own, influenced by peers and media in deciding which way to turn.