Parenting our Grieving Teens

(as if parenting teens isn't hard enough)



by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT

A family member died. Parents divorced. A friend diagnosed with cancer. A classmate overdosed. The world turns upside down, and once-in-a-lifetime moments disappear. Where grieving teens exist, parenting challenges arise. How do we meet those challenges?

From adolescents to young adults, our grieving children require our parental understanding, parenting challenges awareness, and effective grief-parenting skills practice.

Understanding our Teens' Challenges

God created humanity with body, soul, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Each part affects the other creating an internal cycle (Romans 12:1-3).

We consider grief an emotional challenge, but internal cycles mean grief affects our teens' health, faith, motivation, and thoughts as well. Grief most impacts developmentally growing areas, including abstract-thinking and forming a self-identity.

Grief plus budding abstract-thinking creates a significant challenge. Teens ponder loneliness and death concepts. Negative thoughts and feelings intensify each other- creating a downward spiral. Death distorts life.

Identity formation requires shifting focus from family to peers. Grieving impacts these shifts. Some teens seek isolation. Others use avoidance coping and become hyper-social. Our denying their unhealthy coping methods can cause explosive reactions, even when they understand we decided appropriately.

Grieving teenagers challenge parents. Makes you want to jump right into this parenting cesspool, doesn't it?

> ***…I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be."***
>
> ***~Stephen Chbosky***

Parenting Challenges

William Shakespeare wrote, "Everyone can master a grief but he that has it" (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Parents still need to parent despite our teens' grief affecting us.

Our internal cycle challenges us. Thoughts and emotions spin as we lose situational control. We increase teen-care while decreasing self-care. Our teens need us too much to destroy our health.

Our thoughts frequently confuse our faith. We question why God allows our teens' pain. We become angry. Our anger shames us.

Our parent-teen interactions shift. Our teens' changes bewilder us. They need us. We offer help, and they refuse. We overreact, feeling frustrated as our "good kids" spiral downward.

Grief's unpredictability tries us. Just when it appears to be resolving, grief suddenly reappears and intensifies. It catches us off-guard. Special moments- like prom and graduation- magnify loss and become bittersweet. Grief steals joy.

We find ourselves challenged beyond comprehension.

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Grief-Parenting Skills to Practice

However…while grief challenges, it also enriches. Grief provides rare growth and learning opportunities. Loss magnifies appreciation. Faith blossoms.

It's just… how do we get *there* from *here*?



Build your parent-teen connection

We cannot help our teens when a damaged or broken connection exists. Some connection needs require these practices.

1. When together physically, be present in attitude and attention (Deuteronomy 11:19).
2. Find and focus on their pluses without pretending the rest doesn't exist (Philippians 4:8).
3. Do the right, hard stuff when necessary (Hebrews 12:5-11).
4. Don't deliberately provoke them (Colossians 3:21).
5. Pray with and for them (Ephesians 6:4).
6. Have fun together (Proverbs 17:22; Psalm 126).

A quick encouragement: consistently eating meals together strongly improves our teens' odds of future success. Practice doing it *without electronics* (see #1).

Decrease the impact of grief

Use this time to teach more "how" than "what" to think. Stronger thinking skills result in improved self-confidence and decrease the overall negative impact of grief.

We must consider our teens' abilities and personalities. We use the most effective parenting techniques when we match our parenting to them. However, even secular counseling and the bible agree on some basic principles:

Listening: The more we listen, the more we understand. We begin understanding the way she thinks or the way he feels. When we understand them, we can carry on an intelligent conversation. When they know we understand them, they listen more to what we say. James emphasized, "…You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." (James 1:19, NLT).

Questioning: Our teens ask, "Why do the people we love leave us?" or "If God loves me, how come he let… happen?" Try asking "what do you think?" before just answering. Ask thought-provoking questions and remain willing to discuss hard realities in respectful ways. Don't pretend you know everything; point to God's answers (Isaiah 55:8-9). Thinking skills and self-confidence rise dramatically when they find success (Proverbs 17:28; 1 Corinthians 3:18).

Demonstrating: Corresponding words and actions build trust. Grief provides opportunities to live out some really difficult abstract and biblical concepts like: patience (James 1:2-5), trust (Proverbs 3:3-5; Psalm 23:4) and contentment "in all things" (Philippians 4:11).

Despite our best efforts, we *will* still not like some reactions. We will still argue. Well, we prayed for "normal," right?

So we must remember to understand our teens' grief, recognize our own challenges, and practice our best known parenting skills. Give it all to God, and he can do amazing things.

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good…"
~Apostle Paul, Romans 8:28



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