

① Written in 1995, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* is a classic in the field of psychology of religion. Fowler's groundbreaking study shows how human life is progressively centered around a basic set of meanings and values that shape the faith people live by. Available from Harper San Francisco, 800-331-3761.

② In this issue's Ready-to-Go Bible Studies section, starting on page 100, we've adapted four studies from Karl Leuthauser's excellent new book *Character Counts*. Each study is tied to the story of a Christian who exhibited a particular character quality. It's a great way to introduce kids to faith heroes they've probably never heard of before. Available from Group Publishing, Inc. 800-447-1070.

③ For 13 risk-rated ways to help kids learn about other religions, go to our Web site at groupmag.com, click on "xtra," and then select "Crucial Pursuit" (Group, November/December 1997). To order a quick, accurate comparison chart of five world religions and 13 cults, contact Rose Publishing, 800-532-4278. If you want to give your kids a deeper understanding of world religions, try *Which Way to God?* by Thea Leunk, CRC Publications, 800-333-8300.

help them grow spiritually through the explosive changes of adolescence.

In *Stages of Faith*¹, author James Fowler uses the work of psychologists Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg to build a definition of faith development. This definition includes six stages, beginning in infancy and stretching through adulthood.

According to Fowler, most adolescents are in Stage #3—"synthetic-conventional faith." In this stage, their world—along with their faith—is expanding beyond their family. Their faith is now an issue in friendships, sports, and the media. It also comes into play at school, work, and youth group. In this stage, young people are highly sensitive to others' opinions and expectations. And they must wrestle with big challenges to their faith.

1. They're learning to think abstractly. Teenagers can—and want to—understand and experience faith on a deeper level than they have before. They're ready to go beyond talking about their own experiences to understanding others' experiences. And they're beginning to see God as more than just a personal guide and friend.

2. They're feeling the tension between their own beliefs and those of others. Teenagers struggle to reconcile their beliefs to others' opinions and expectations. As their world expands, their childhood beliefs bump into opposition, producing lots of questions. They want to understand what others believe, how those beliefs differ from their own, and why various belief systems have developed. At times they may feel desperate to make sure their faith can coexist with others' experiences.

3. They're trying to fit faith into their emerging identities. As young people test boundaries of who they are, they often "try on" various belief systems. They may seem to bounce between different states of spiritual enthusiasm—disinterested one day, reveling in spiritual commitment the next, cynically accusing others of hypocrisy the next.

This outward inconsistency is evidence of a positive internal process that's working to form a committed, personal faith. As young people go through this process, Fowler says they look to others to act as "mirrors," reflect-

ing who they are so they can "see the image of *person-ality* emerging and get a hearing for the new feelings, insights, anxieties, and commitments that are forming and seeking expression."

4. Their struggle's chief export is doubt. As teenagers face the challenges of other belief systems and struggle to form a new spiritual identity, doubts about their faith start popping to the surface. And these doubts fuel questions targeted at the beliefs of their parents, teachers, mentors, pastors, and others they've relied upon for spiritual direction. Again, this is positive. As teenagers successfully struggle through doubt, they grow strong and secure in their faith.

So how is a teenager's faith development different from an adult's? Most adults have progressed at least to Fowler's Stage #4—"individuated-reflective faith." They've learned to take personal responsibility for their own beliefs, actions, attitudes, and values. They have a strong sense of personal identity. They have highly developed abilities to think abstractly, and they view God as a spirit who embodies truth and is personally present to them.

Some adults progress beyond Stage #4 to Stage #5 or Stage #6—basically, that means they have increasing levels of commitment, confidence, acceptance of "gray areas," and self-sacrifice.

So repeat this like a mantra: "Teenagers can't experience or consistently express their faith the way adults do." It's clichéd, but the more often we filter our expectations through our own memories of adolescence, the more likely we are to give our group members the grace they need to grow.

helping teenagers grow

So what can you do to help your teenagers' faith grow? Plenty.

1. Challenge them. Ask difficult, open-ended questions. Use this question test: If it can be answered yes or no, throw out the question and craft a new one. Challenge them to apply God's Word to their everyday lives, and expect them to put their faith into action. People who profess faith in Christ are either fans or followers. Fans are with Jesus as long as he's not headed to the cross. Followers go where Jesus goes.

2. Forgive them. When teenagers fail to live up to their commitments, make sure

they experience the natural consequences of their failures within an environment of grace. Help them process and learn from their mistakes, then move on. And be sure to give them another chance.

"Parents tend to focus more on what people should be doing," says teenager Meredith Payne, "teenagers focus more on, 'It's okay if I screw up.' They focus more on God's forgiveness."

3. Expose them to the experiences of others. Give kids many opportunities to hear how God is working in others' lives.²

4. Ask them to share their stories. When kids must talk about God's influence on their life stories, it helps them make sense of God's presence in their lives. When his youth leader asked Danny Jones to share his story at a youth-led meeting, the experience helped him connect more deeply to God. "It was hard to say it, but once I got done, I felt good because I knew God wanted me to tell my story," says Jones. "And other people could learn from my experiences. It helped me understand how God works in my life."

5. Offer them meaningful and varied worship experiences. Instead of seeing your worship time as an opportunity for kids to sing, see it as an opportunity for them to hear God and respond. Worship songs should give teenagers a vocabulary for an intimate conversation with God.

6. Teach them who God is. As they gain independence from adults, your young people will need to know who God is so they can trust him for themselves.

7. Teach the basics. As kids question what they were given as children, they'll need to build a new foundation for their faith. That's why it's a mistake to assume kids raised by Christian parents already know all the basics of the faith.

"I want to learn more about the basis for Christianity—factual events no one can deny happened," says teenager Katie Rose. "I'm growing in my desire to understand the basic doctrines so I can witness to others not just in an emotional sense but with solid information."

8. Invite questions. The church has nothing to fear from life's big questions. So welcome kids' questions by asking them a few tough questions of your own: "How can the Apostle Paul say _____?" "If God says _____, how do you explain _____?" "How do we know _____ really happened?"

9. Teach about other belief systems.

The only way to help teenagers understand how Christian truth is distinctive is to honestly compare it to other religions and beliefs.³ As long as kids think faith in Christ meshes well with Hindu meditation, they'll feel free to sit on the fence rather than follow Jesus.

10. Involve them in the church. Kids need the opportunity to fill important, relevant roles in the church, including ushers, greeters, worship leaders, Sunday school teachers, small-group leaders, child-care providers, and parking lot attendants.

11. Help them come to their own conclusions. Be a guide, not a director. Present truth and confront false beliefs, but allow kids to decide for themselves. If they discover truth, they're much more likely to hold onto it. For example, when kids doubt or question something about the gospel, show them how and where to find the answers instead of simply telling them.

Teenager Tim Stahlnecker says, "Right now I'm learning to believe for myself instead of just taking whatever people tell me to believe."

12. Encourage youth leadership. Help young people discover their gifts and exercise them. They'll need plenty of support to build their confidence.⁴

13. Be patient. Expect growth and change to

4 Excellent leadership training resources for teenagers include:

Training Youth for Dynamic Leadership, Group Publishing, Inc., 800-447-1070; and *Developing Student Leaders* by Ray Johnston, Zondervan Publishing, 800-727-3480.

researching teenagers

How do you do "youth research"? We asked that question on our Web page (groupmag.com). Here's what youth leaders said:

- ◆ At church we ask simple questions that require involved answers. Listen, listen, listen!
- ◆ Do a search in an online news area using topics such as youth culture, teenagers, or kids and school.
- ◆ Live with one! I also do volunteer work at a local school and chaperone trips.
- ◆ I watch television programs geared toward this age group (WB and FOX networks).
- ◆ Observe kids where they hang out.
- ◆ We can't just listen for the right answer. We must learn to listen to their ideas, trying to understand where they're coming from. I think surveys can help, too.
- ◆ Sit down with them at lunch or during a school event. Then you're on their "turf," and they're more likely to be real.
- ◆ I try to befriend kids from each segment of our group—jocks, cheerleaders, loners, hippies—and I pay attention to what they say.
- ◆ When I can't guess what's on their minds, I go and ask them outright. I've found when I'm up front with them and tell them why I'm asking the questions they'll usually open up and tell me.
- ◆ Visit Web pages just for teenagers such as Midlink Magazine (<http://Longwood.cs.ucf.edu:80/~MidLink/>), ChannelOne.com (www.channelone.com), and Bolt.com (www.bolt.com).

be a long, slow process. Translation: Do everything you can to stick around long enough at one church to help see your kids through their forward/back growth.

Teenager Josh Briggs says, "We're still learning about our faith. Obviously, we have fewer years behind us. And that means we experience our faith differently."

14. Stay off the roller coaster. As kids experience the ups and downs of adolescence, don't go up and down with them. Be a steady, stable presence in their lives.

15. Be honest and straightforward. Help teenagers understand themselves by letting them know when they hurt you, make you proud, or cross your boundaries. They need to know how their choices impact others before they get a clear picture of themselves.

16. Affirm the positive. So many kids are desperate for someone to see and celebrate who they are. So find excuses to tell them they're getting it right.

17. Be an example. Think of the person who's most influenced your growth in Christ. Was it his or her words or actions that made the impact? Now you know why your own relationship with God is your most potent ministry tool.

18. Encourage them to express their faith in ways that fit them. Don't try to mold young people in the image of their parents or other adults. When teenager Jeni Blaylock is by herself, she loves to worship God by lifting her hands and dancing to praise music. But she didn't feel comfortable doing it in public until she talked to her youth pastor.

"My youth pastor and I talked about how different people express themselves differently through music," she says. "He encouraged me to go for it and express my worship in ways that really help me experience God. That's been really powerful for me to feel like I can be real when I worship God in public."

Tim Stahlnecker says, "Adults tend to express their faith individually. Teenagers express their faith more socially, with other people their age."

19. Help them make intergen-

erational connections. Teenagers need to see people of all ages putting their faith into action. They also need relationships with people outside their own subculture. So whenever you're planning a youth event, ask yourself: "How can I transform this into an inter-generational event?"

20. Communicate unconditional love. Kids should sense that you'll never give up on them, no matter what.

21. Resist acting shocked by their doubts. If God isn't stunned by our unbelief, we can reflect his strength by taking kids' doubts in stride. Don't live in their doubts; live in the truth.

22. Admit you don't know everything. This is just being real. Be sure they know you're still growing in your faith.

23. Affirm the sovereignty of God. Always point them to Christ for the truth. When kids come to you with a need, do you answer first or pray first?

24. Stand up for them. Be an advocate for teenagers. Challenge other adults to respect young people and look for opportunities to publicly celebrate their victories.

25. Educate adults about kids. Help other adults understand the forces that are shaping your group members. Teach them about Fowler's faith development stages, and help them remember the challenges they faced when they were young people.

26. Build a safe community. Don't tolerate cruelty, sarcasm, exclusion, fighting, or other hurtful behaviors. Encourage teenagers to hold each other accountable for the way they treat each other.

27. Pray for them. You can't overemphasize the role of prayer in spiritual growth. As teenagers face the battles of everyday life, they need the prayers of you, their parents, church leaders, other adults, and their peers. Tell them you're praying for them. It will encourage them and build confidence. ■

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Breaking Away
continued from page 29

**Wednesday,
March 24**

I heard from Scott

today. He told me that Abraham and Moses were probably terrified when God told them to pack up their families and move. Basically, he told me to quit being a whiner, listen to what God has to say, and enjoy the ride.

**Saturday,
March 27**

We got back at about 7

p.m. from Kalamazoo. What a great place! There were no red flags or flares. The pastoral staff is even more awesome than I expected! The congregation's leadership is mission-conscious and ministry focused.

They don't have boards or committees, so ministries are lay-initiated, lay-directed, and self-governing. Their professional staffers resource the ministries, direct volunteerism, and equip the saints for ministry. How very biblical of them! Professional staffers still have hands-on ministry, but it's less than it is at my present church. The Kalamazoo church also has about 3,000 fewer people, so I would expect it to have a different philosophy of ministry, style, and function . . . which it does.

The two churches are like night and day, yet they both have great gospel-directed missions. I was thinking about this yesterday when we were with the real estate guy. I'm just amazed how God works so differently in churches and yet achieves the same ministry purposes.

NEXT ISSUE: "Fear and Loathing in Michigan." ■

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