

# LOVING TEENAGERS

## 1. Expect to be given a hard time.

The guys will test to see who's really the dominant male. The girls will swarm around trying to find their place. As often as you feel threatened or uncomfortable or even angry, just tell yourself to relax. Guard your heart well during these first stages- determine to have a thicker skin than is normal for you.

## 2. Stick to your guns.

Whatever rules you establish, your kids will test them. They will treat your boundaries as unreasonable, unfair; and impossible. Then they'll respect you for sticking to them. It is crucial that kids experience adults resisting peer pressure and sticking to their guns. They get too little of that in their everyday lives.

## 3. Give them a hand.

Touch is a difficult issue in church landscape that's been polluted by a few abusers. And nothing will derail your ministry faster than a false accusation of sexual impropriety. However, if we overreact we deprive our kids of something they really need from us. So many teenagers communicate through touch. They punch each other in the arm, embrace their friends, jump on each other's backs, braid each other's hair. We can offer appropriate touch to our kids as often as we can. They're desperate for the warmth of touch- it helps them feel grounded and affirmed.

## 4. Find ways to feed them.

Even the roughest-looking teenagers still want someone to give them food and listen to what's happened during their day. They're looking for someone who will listen to their small-scale tragedies and challenges. And they need someone who can handle the big stuff, too-like the rude thing their dad's girlfriend said to them last night.

## 5. Include them in your family.

If you're known for offering food to teenagers, expect them to pop over to your house. Many of them come from families that aren't willing to take the time to be with them (or make them a home-cooked meal). They love to be included in a family. So, as much as possible, let them hang out with you as you move through our everyday life. Family activities actually lay the groundwork for real conversation. When the focus is on something else, they're more eager to talk casually about what's really going on in their lives. In direct, eye-to-eye conversations they often clam up.

## 6. Be excited to see them, every time.

Whenever you encounter a student, light up with excitement. They love knowing that they're wanted and enjoyed.

## 7. Ask them how their friends are doing.

## 8. Be real, especially about the small stuff.

You already know that teenagers have an acute ability to sniff out fakery in adults, and they tend to be ruthless when they find something false. So know your own weaknesses and don't be afraid to let your kids see some of them. It gives them a template so they can learn how to deal with their own weaknesses.

## 9. Don't tell them everything.

Honesty is important, but it's better to be vague about specifics when it comes to your past mistakes. Teenagers often reason that because you did something and ended up okay, so will they. Or you might plant a struggle in their mind. Be vulnerable and intentionally vague about your sins. But be graphic about the damage they've caused you.

10. Pay attention to details.

Know what teachers are royal pains. Know who they have a crush on, and who's crushing on them. Know their hobbies. Know when finals are, when they're grounded, where they like to shop, what kinds of cars they like, and who's dating whom. These details may seem insignificant, but they're exactly what teenagers think about most of the day. If you know this stuff, they'll feel more confident that you understand their world and will be more open to trusting you.

11. Don't correct everything at once.

12. Never embarrass them.

As much as possible, be "neutral" in their eyes. Neutral means your clothing neither distracts nor embarrasses them. It doesn't draw attention to you. Neutral says you're familiar with their world but not overcome by it.

13. Be bold in affirming them.

When a guy in your group gets a new haircut, tell him it makes him look older. Praise their sports or band accomplishments. Ooh and ahh at their new cars (even if they cost more than your house). Cut out their newspaper clippings. Brag on their grades. Talk about how responsible they're becoming in front of their parents.

Your teenagers hear so many negative comments every day. Your affirmations give them a new lens through which they can see themselves.

14. Fight your pride and empathize.

It's easy to give in to pride when you're ministering to teenagers. There's that one guy in your group who's had three speeding tickets in the past week. Another got caught smoking dope at a party last Saturday. That girl on the fringe of your group has fallen in love with four losers in a row. This time she might be pregnant. How can they be so dumb? Remember you never dealt with a tenth of the temptations that these kids do.

Adulthood is so much easier. Instead of looking down your nose at their "dumb mistakes," put your arm around their shoulders and help them take the next step uphill.

15. Know their family situations.

Some of our kids are shouldering a world of hurt at home. They walk into Relig with tough-guy attitudes but gaping, painful, festering wounds on the inside. Visit the home of every kid. Once you get a feel for what's "normal" for them, it opens your eyes to why many of them act the way they do.

16. Let them see you walk with God.

Teaching times "get in" more than it appears to us. But our biggest impact always happens when we invite our kids to watch us walk with God. What does that look like? They see when you admit you've lost your temper and then apologize. When you live like God is ordering your steps, you show them how Christ can have a real-world impact in their lives. You lift God up as the sustainer of your life and theirs. And you show them how to drink from the Source.