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The 5 Love Languages of Children

The 5 Love Languages of Teenagers

THE 5 love LANGUAGES®

OF CHILDREN

The Secret to Loving Children Effectively

Gary Chapman
Ross Campbell

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Love Is the Foundation

Brad and Emily couldn't figure out what was wrong with Caleb, their eight-year-old son. He had been an above-average learner and still did his homework, but this year he was struggling in school. He would go to the teacher after she had given an exercise and ask her to explain it again. He'd visit her desk up to eight times a day, asking for further instructions. Was it poor hearing or a comprehension problem? Brad and Emily had Caleb's hearing tested, and a school counselor gave him a comprehension test. His hearing was normal and his understanding typical for a third-grader.

Other things about their son puzzled them. At times, Caleb's behavior seemed almost antisocial. The teacher would take turns eating with her third-grade students during lunch, but Caleb would sometimes push other children aside so he could be near her. During recess, he would leave other children whenever the teacher appeared on the playground, running to her to ask an insignificant question

and escape the others. If the teacher participated in a game during recess, Caleb would try to hold the teacher's hand during the game.

His parents had met with the teacher three times already, and neither they nor the teacher could find the problem. Independent and happy in grades one and two, Caleb now seemed to show "clinging behavior" that made no sense. He also was fighting much more with his older sister, Hannah, although Emily and Brad assumed that was just a stage he was passing through.

When this couple came to my "The Marriage You've Always Wanted" seminar and told me about Caleb, they were worried, wondering if they had a budding rebel on their hands, or maybe a kid with psychological problems. "Dr. Chapman, we know this is a marriage seminar and maybe our question is out of place," Emily said, "but Brad and I thought that perhaps you could give us some guidance." Then she described her son's worrisome behavior.

I asked these parents whether their own lifestyle had changed this year. Brad said he was a salesman, out on calls two nights a week, but home between 6:00 and 7:30 p.m. on the other weeknights. Those nights were spent catching up on emails and texts and watching a little TV. On weekends, he used to go to football games, often taking Caleb. But he hadn't done that in a year. "It's just too much of a hassle. I'd rather watch the games on TV."

"How about you, Emily?" I asked. "Have there been any changes in your lifestyle over the last few months?"

"Definitely," she said. "I've been working part-time at the college for the last three years since Caleb entered kindergarten. But this year I took a full-time job there, so I get home later than usual. Actually my mom picks him up at school, and Caleb stays with her for about an hour and a half until I pick him up. On the evenings

that Brad is out of town, Caleb and I usually have dinner with my folks and then come home."

It was almost time for the seminar session to begin, yet I sensed I was beginning to understand what was going on inside of Caleb. So I made a suggestion. "I'm going to be talking about marriage, but I want each of you to be thinking about how the principles I am sharing might apply to your relationship with Caleb. At the end of the seminar, I'd like to know what conclusions you have drawn." They seemed a little surprised that I was ending our conversation without making any suggestions, but they both were willing to go along with my request.

At the end of the day, as other participants at our seminar were filing out, Brad and Emily hurried up to me with that look of fresh discovery. "Dr. Chapman, I think we have just gained some insight into what's going on with Caleb," Emily said. "When you were discussing the five love languages, we both agreed that Caleb's primary love language is *quality time*. Looking back over the last four or five months, we realized that we have given him less quality time than we had before.

"When I was working part-time, I'd pick him up from school every day, and we would usually do something together on the way home, maybe run an errand or stop by the park or get ice cream together. When we got home, Caleb would play games on his tablet for a while. Then after dinner, I would often help him with his homework or we'd watch something on Netflix, especially on the nights Brad was away. All that has changed since I started my new job, and I realize I'm spending less time with Caleb."

I glanced at Brad, and he said, "For my part, I realize I used to take Caleb with me to football games, but since I stopped going, I haven't replaced that father-son time with anything. He and I haven't really spent a great deal of time together the last few months. I need to think

about ways I can 'check in' with him when I'm traveling, too."

"I think you may have discovered some real insight into Caleb's emotional need," I told them. "If you can meet his need for love, I think there is a good chance you will see a change in his behavior." I suggested some key ways to express love through quality time and challenged Brad to build time with Caleb into his schedule, even "long-distance" time. I encouraged Emily to look for ways she and Caleb could once more do some of the things they did before she started her full-time job. They both seemed eager to translate their insight into action.

"There may be other factors involved," I said, "but if you will give your son large doses of quality time and then sprinkle in the other four love languages, I think you will see a radical change in his behavior."

We said goodbye. I never heard from Emily and Brad, and to be honest, I forgot about them. But about two years later I returned to Wisconsin for another seminar, and they walked in and reminded me of our conversation. They were all smiles; we hugged each other, and they introduced me to friends they had invited to the seminar.

"Tell me about Caleb," I said.

They both smiled and said, "He's doing great. We meant to write you many times but never got around to it. We went home and did what you suggested. We consciously gave Caleb lots of quality time over the next few months. Within two or three weeks, really, we saw a dramatic change in his behavior at school. In fact, the teacher asked us to come in again, and we were worried. But this time, she wanted to ask what we had done that had brought about such a change in Caleb."

The teacher told them that Caleb's inappropriate behavior had stopped: no more pushing other children away from her in the lunch-room; no more coming to her desk to ask question after question.

Then Emily explained that her husband and she had begun to speak Caleb's "love language" after attending a seminar. "We told her how we had started giving him overdoses of quality time," said Emily.

This couple had learned to speak their son's love language, to say, "I love you" in a way that Caleb could understand. His story encouraged me to write this book.

Speaking your child's primary love language does not mean he or she will not rebel later. It does mean your child will know you love him, and that can bring him security and hope; it can help you to rear your child to responsible adulthood. Love is the foundation.

In raising children, everything depends on the love relationship between the parent and child. Nothing works well if a child's love needs are not met. Only the child who *feels* genuinely loved and cared for can do her best. You may truly love your child, but unless she feels it—unless you speak the love language that communicates to her your love—she will not feel loved.

FILLING THE EMOTIONAL TANK

By speaking your child's own love language, you can fill his "emotional tank" with love. When your child feels loved, he is much easier to discipline and train than when his "emotional tank" is running near empty.

Every child has an emotional tank, a place of emotional strength that can fuel him through the challenging days of childhood and adolescence. Just as cars are powered by reserves in the gas tank, our children are fueled from their emotional tanks. We must fill our children's emotional tanks for them to operate as they should and reach their potential.

But with what do we fill these tanks? Love, of course, but love of

a particular kind that will enable our children to grow and function properly.

We need to fill our children's emotional tanks with unconditional love, because real love is always unconditional. Unconditional love is a full love that accepts and affirms a child for who he is, not for what he does. No matter what he does (or does not do), the parent still loves him. Sadly, some parents display a love that is conditional; it depends on something other than their children just being. Conditional love is based on performance and is often associated with training techniques that offer gifts, rewards, and privileges to children who behave or perform in desired ways.

Of course, it is necessary to train and discipline our children— but only after their emotional tanks have been filled (and refilled—they can deplete regularly). Only unconditional love can prevent problems such as resentment, feelings of being unloved, guilt, fear, and insecurity. Only as we give our children unconditional love will we be able to deeply understand them and deal with their behaviors, whether good or bad.

Ana remembers growing up in a home of modest financial resources. Her father was employed at a plant nearby and her mother was a homemaker, except for occasionally working at Target. Both parents were hardworking people who took pride in their house and family. Ana helped her mom cook the evening meal, and later she, her dad, and brothers would pitch in on cleanup and then watch some TV. Saturday was a day for weekly chores and the occasional youth soccer game, and Saturday nights they sent out for pizza. On Sunday mornings, the family went to church and that evening they would spend time with relatives.

When Ana and her brothers were younger, their parents would

listen to them practice their reading almost every night. They always encouraged them in their studies because they wanted all three children to attend college, even though they did not have this opportunity themselves.

In middle school, Ana spent a lot of time with Sophia. The two had most classes together, often shared lunch, texted one another. But the girls didn't visit each other at home. If they had, they would have seen vast differences. Sophia's father was a successful executive who was away from home most of the time. Sophia's mother was a doctor with a busy practice. An older sister was out of college and living out of state. The family did take vacations to places like London and LA, which Sophia loved. Her mother did her best to make time for her younger daughter and understood the dangers of lavishing her with things rather than simple attention. . . .

The girls were good friends until the ninth grade, when Sophia went off to a college-prep school near her grandparents. The first year, the girls kept in touch on social media; after that, Sophia began dating and communicated less. Ana got busy with her studies and other friendships. After Sophia's family moved away, Ana never heard from her again.

If she had, she would have been sad to know that after marrying and having one child, Sophia struggled with alcoholism and the breakup of her marriage. In contrast, Ana was in grad school studying advanced biology.

What made the difference in the outcome of two childhood friends? Although there is no one answer, we can see part of the reason in what Sophia once told her therapist: "I never felt loved by my parents. I first got involved in drinking because I wanted my friends to like me." In saying this, she wasn't trying to lay blame on her parents

as much as she was trying to understand herself.

Did you notice what Sophia said? It wasn't that her parents didn't love her but that she did not feel loved. Most parents love their children and also want their children to feel loved, but few know *how* to adequately convey that feeling. It is only as they learn how to love unconditionally that they will let their children know how much they are truly loved.

A WORD OF HOPE

Raising emotionally healthy children is an increasingly difficult task these days. The influence of media (including our ever-present screens), the rise in psychological issues like narcissism, the violence and hopelessness that plague some communities, the decline in the influence of the church, even simple middle-class busyness—these things challenge families daily.

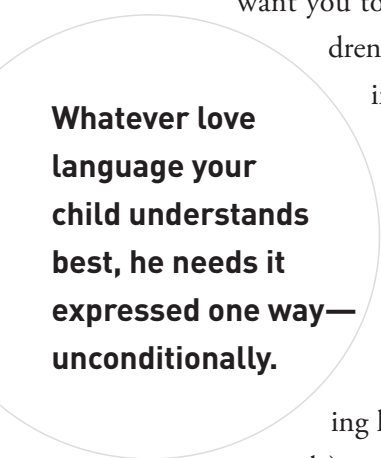It is into such reality that we speak a word of hope to parents. We want you to enjoy a loving relationship with your children. Our focus in this book is on one exceedingly important aspect of parenting—meeting your children's need for love. We have written this book to help you give your children a greater experience of the love you have for them. This will happen as you speak the love languages they understand and can respond to.

> **Whatever love language your child understands best, he needs it expressed one way— unconditionally.**

Every child has a special way of perceiving love. There are five ways children (indeed, all people) speak and understand emotional love. They are *physical touch*, *words of affirmation*, *quality time*, *gifts*, and *acts of service*. If you have several children in your family, chances are they speak

different languages, for just as children often have different person-
alities, they may hear in different love languages. Typically, two children
need to be loved in different ways.

Whatever love language your child understands best, he needs
it expressed in one way—unconditionally. Unconditional love is a
guiding light, illuminating the darkness and enabling us as parents
to know where we are and what we need to do as we raise our child.
Without this kind of love, parenting is bewildering and confusing.

We can best define unconditional love by showing what it does.
Unconditional love shows love to a child *no matter what*. We love
regardless of what the child looks like; regardless of her assets, liabili-
ties, or handicaps; regardless of what we expect her to be; and, most
difficult of all, regardless of how she acts. This does not mean that we
like all of her behavior. It does mean that we give and show love to our
child all the time, even when her behavior is poor.

Does this sound like permissiveness? It is not. Rather, it is doing
first things first. A child with a full love tank can respond to parental
guidance without resentment.

Some people fear that this may lead to "spoiling" a child, but
that is a misconception. No child can receive too much appropriate
unconditional love. A child may be "spoiled" by a lack of training or
by inappropriate love that gives or trains incorrectly. True uncondi-
tional love will never spoil a child because it is impossible for parents
to give too much of it.

If you have not loved your children in this way, you may find it
difficult at first. But as you practice unconditional love, you will find
it has a wonderful effect, as you become a more giving and loving
person in all your relationships. No one is perfect, of course, and you
cannot expect yourself to love unconditionally all of the time. But as

you move toward that goal, you will find that you are more consistent in your ability to love, no matter what.

You may find it helpful to frequently remind yourself of some rather obvious things about your children:

1 They are children.

2 They will tend to act like children.

3 Much childish behavior is unpleasant.

4 If I do my part as a parent and love them, despite their childish behavior, they will mature and give up their childish ways.

5 If I love them only when they please me (conditional love), and if I express my love to them only at those times, they will not feel genuinely loved. This will damage their self-image, make them feel insecure, and actually prevent them from moving into better self-control and more mature behavior. Therefore, their development and behavior is as much my responsibility as it is theirs.

6 If I love them only when they meet my requirements or expectations, they will feel incompetent and will believe it is pointless to do their best, since it is never enough. They will always be plagued by insecurity, anxiety, low self-esteem, and anger. To guard against this, I need to often remind myself of my responsibility for their total growth.

7 If I love them unconditionally, they will feel comfortable about themselves and will be able to control their anxiety and their behavior as they grow to adulthood.

Of course, there are age-appropriate behaviors with our sons and daughters. Teens act differently than little children, and a thirteen-

year-old will respond differently than a seven-year-old. But we must remember they are still minors, not mature adults, so we can expect them to fail at times. Show patience with them as they learn to grow.

WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS FROM YOU

This book focuses primarily on our children's need for love and how to provide it. That's because it is their greatest emotional need and greatly affects our relationship with them. Other needs, especially physical needs, are easier to recognize and usually easier to fulfill, but they are not as satisfying or life-changing. Yes, we need to provide our children shelter, food, and clothing. But we are also responsible to foster the mental and emotional growth and health of our children.

We used to worry about "self-esteem." Then we sought to provide it in parenting, schooling, sports, all areas where adults were interacting with kids. Perhaps we were too successful! The child with an embellished sense of self will see himself as superior to others—as God's gift to the world and deserving of whatever he wants. Studies show this inflated sense of self-esteem is rampant among the young today. Psychology professor Jean Twenge notes that measures of self-esteem have risen consistently since the 1980s among children of all ages— and "what starts off as healthy self-esteem can quickly morph into an inflated view of oneself."[1]

But equally damaging, the child who underestimates his worth will struggle with thoughts such as, "I am not as smart, athletic, or beautiful as others." "I can't" is his theme song, and "I didn't" is his reality. It is worthy of our best efforts as parents to see that our children develop appropriate self-esteem so that they will view themselves as important members of society with special talents and abilities and will feel a desire to be productive.

Children also have a universal need for *security and safety*. In our world of uncertainties, at home and "out there," it is increasingly difficult for parents to provide this sense of security. At the same time, parents can't hover like the "helicopter parents" we've all heard of (and may worry we're turning into). As we said earlier, our task as parents is to raise mature adults capable of functioning and flourishing in the world.

A child needs to develop relational skills so that she will treat all persons as having equal value and will be able to build friendships through a balanced flow of giving and receiving. Without these skills, a child is in danger of becoming withdrawn and remaining that way into adulthood. A child lacking essential relational skills might also become a controlling bully who lacks empathy and treats others cruelly. Finally, a child must learn to relate properly to authority. Without this, no other abilities will mean very much.

Parents need to help their children nurture their special gifts and talents so that the children will feel the inner satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that come from using one's innate abilities. Conscientious parents must maintain the delicate balance between pushing and encouraging. (See *8 Great Smarts*, by Kathy Koch, PhD, for more on this.)

Your children will sense how you feel about them by how you behave toward them. If you began to list all the behavioral ways to love a child, I doubt that you could fill more than one page. There just aren't that many ways, and that is fine, because you want to keep it simple. What matters is to keep your children's love tanks full. You can simply remember that behavioral expressions of love can be divided into physical touch, quality time, gifts, acts of service, and words of affirmation.

Beginning with chapter 2, we will help you uncover your child's primary love language. If your child is under age four, speak all five languages. Tender touch, supporting words, quality time, gifts, and acts of service all converge to meet your child's need for love. If that need is met and your child genuinely feels loved, it will be far easier for him to learn and respond in other areas. This love interfaces with all other needs a child has. Speak all five languages when your child is older, too, for he needs all five to grow, even though he craves one more than the others.

When you discover your child's love language and thus she receives the love she needs, don't assume everything in her life will be problem-free. There will still be setbacks and misunderstandings. But your child, like a flower, will benefit from your love. When the water of love is given, your child will bloom and bless the world with beauty. Without that love, she will become a wilted flower, begging for water.

Because you want your children to grow into full maturity, you will want to show them love in all the languages and then teach them how to use these for themselves. The value is not only for your children but for the people with whom they will live and associate. One mark of a mature adult is the ability to give and receive appreciation through all the love languages—physical touch, quality time, words of affirmation, gifts, and acts of service. Few adults are able to do this; most of them give or receive love in one or two ways.

If this is not something you have done in the past, you may find that you too are changing and growing in understanding and in the quality of your relationships. In time, you will have a truly multilingual family.

THE 5 love LANGUAGES®

OF TEENAGERS

The Secret to Loving Teens Effectively

Gary Chapman

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Understanding Today's Teenagers

Teenagers didn't even exist seventy years ago . . . well, sort of. At least they weren't given their own separate generational distinction until the recent past. The word *teenager* first came into popular use around the time of the Second World War. Though many changes have taken place since the first teenagers arrived formally on the social scene, there are plenty of similarities between the teens of the 1940s and those of the twenty-first century.

From the early days of emerging teenage culture to its contemporary counterpart, the underlying themes have been the same: *independence* and *self-identity*. Throughout the years, teenagers in our American society have been active in searching for their identity while trying to establish independence from their parents. Neither of these themes played too loudly in the "pre-teenager" era.

Before the industrial age, teens worked on their parents' farms until they were married and were given or inherited their own acreage.

Identity was not something the teen sought; he was a farmer from the time he was old enough to work in the fields. The adolescent boy or girl was a child until he or she married—then the child became an adult.

THE SEARCH FOR INDEPENDENCE AND IDENTITY

Until the early 1940s, independence was unthinkable until the adolescent was married. However, a lot of that changed with the coming of industrialization—one's identity became more a matter of choice. You could learn a trade and work in the factory, thus becoming a machinist, a weaver, a cobbler, etc. Independence was also more of a reality because securing a job could mean moving to a neighboring village where, with monies earned, one could establish a separate residence from parents. Thus, the larger cultural changes became the backdrop for an emerging teenage culture.

Since the 1940s, teenagers have followed this paradigm of developing independence and identity, but they have done so in a rapidly changing world. One by one electricity, telephones, automobiles, radios, airplanes, televisions, computers, and the Internet have expanded the possibilities of developing new styles for seeking independence and identity. The contemporary teenager lives in a truly global society. Interestingly, however, his focus continues to be upon himself—his identity and his independence. There will be much more about this later.

The places where the teenager expresses independence and identity have changed through the years, but the means continue to be basically the same: music, dance, fashion, fads, language, and relationships. For example, the musical genre has expanded through the years from big bands to rhythm and blues, rock and roll, folk, country, heavy metal, rap, and so forth. The teen continues to have

much more variety from which to choose. But you can be certain that, no matter what, the teen's musical taste will be different from that of his parents: it's a matter of independence and identity. The same principle is true in all other areas of teenage culture.

So what characterizes the contemporary teen culture? How is your teenager similar to and different from teenagers of other generations?

THEN AND NOW: FIVE SIMILARITIES

1. Facing Physical and Mental Changes

The basic challenges facing today's teenager are very similar to the challenges you faced when you were a teenager. First, there is the challenge of accepting and adapting to the changes that take place in the teen's body. Arms and legs, hands and feet are all growing, sometimes at a disproportionate rate, producing the reality of "teenage clumsiness" (which can be a source of extreme embarrassment for the teenager). Sexual characteristics are also developing, which may be both exciting and anxiety inducing. And what parent has not felt the pain as they watched their teenager struggle with that most devastating of enemies—acne?

These physiological changes spur numerous questions in the mind of the teenager. "I'm becoming an adult, but what will I look like? Will I be too tall or too short? Will my ears protrude too far? Will my breasts be too small? What about my nose? Are my feet too big? Am I too fat or too skinny?" The parade of questions marches on and on through the mind of the developing teenager. The manner in which a teenager answers these questions will either have a positive or negative effect upon his/her self-identity.

With this physical growth, there is also an accompanying "intellectual growth spurt." The teenager is developing a new way of thinking.

As a child, she thought in terms of concrete actions and events. As a teenager, she begins to think in terms of abstract concepts like honesty, loyalty, and justice. With abstract thinking comes the expanded world of unlimited possibilities. The teen now has the ability to think about how things could be different, what a world without war would look like, or how understanding parents would treat their children. The world of expanded possibilities opens all kinds of doors for self-identity. The teenager realizes, "I could be a brain surgeon or a pilot or a garbage collector." The possibilities are unlimited and the teen may envision himself in numerous vocational settings.

2. Entering the Age of Reason

Adolescence is also the age of reason. The teenager is able to think logically and to see the logical consequences of different positions. This logic is applied not only to his own reasoning but also to the reasoning of his parents. Do you see why a teenager might often be perceived as "argumentative"? In reality, he is developing his mental skills. If the parents understand this, they can then have meaningful and interesting conversations with their teenagers. If they don't understand this, they can develop an adversarial relationship, and the teenager must go elsewhere to flex his newfound intellectual muscles. With this rapid growth in intellectual development and the gleaning of new information, the teenager often believes himself to be smarter than his parents and, in some areas, he may be right.

This advanced level of thinking leads the teenager into a whole new arena of challenges in the field of social relationships. The discussion of "ideas" with his peers and listening to their point of view gives rise to new levels of intimacy on the one hand and opens the possibility of an adversarial relationship on the other. Thus, development of

cliques (small, close social groups) among teens has far more to do with agreement over intellectual ideas than it does with things like dress and hair color. Teens, like adults, tend to feel more comfortable with those who agree with them.

3. Confronting Personal Morality and Values

The intellectual ability to analyze ideas and actions in a logical manner and to project outcomes of certain beliefs gives rise to another common teenage challenge: examining the belief systems with which one was raised, and determining if those beliefs are worthy of one's commitment. "Were my parents right in their views of God, morality, and values?" These are heavy issues with which every teenager must wrestle. If parents do not understand this struggle they will often become a negative influence and actually push the teenager away.

When the teenager questions the parents about basic beliefs, wise parents welcome the questions, seek to give honest answers in a nonauthoritarian manner, and encourage the teenager to continue to explore these ideas. In other words, they welcome the opportunity to dialogue with the teenager about the beliefs that they have espoused through the years. If, on the other hand, the parents reject the teenager's questions, perhaps heaping guilt upon him for even thinking that the parents' beliefs may be incorrect, the teenager is forced to go elsewhere to share his questions.

4. Thinking About Sexuality and Marriage

Another important challenge for the teenager is beginning to understand his own sexuality while learning masculine or feminine social roles. What is appropriate and not appropriate in relating to members of the opposite sex? What is appropriate and inappropriate

in dealing with their own sexual thoughts and feelings? These questions, often ignored by parents, cannot be ignored by the teenager.

The teen's emerging sexuality is a part of who he is, and relating to members of the opposite sex is an ever-present reality. Most teens dream of someday being married and having a family. A few years back, when a survey asked teens to rank a number of the important issues in their future, "eighty-six percent said that having a stable family will be the most important item on the blueprint of their future lives."[1] Making the journey from early adolescence to that stable marriage and family that the teen desires occupies many hours of teenage thought.

Parents who want to help will use the normal flow of family conversation to address issues related to sexuality, dating, and marriage. They will also guide their teenager to the right printed materials and websites that speak on the teenage level while providing practical and sound information. For those teenagers who are involved in church or youth group, caring adults and youth ministers often provide sessions relating to sex, dating, and marriage. These classes provide a social context in which teens can learn and discuss this important aspect of teen development in an open and caring way.

5. Questioning the Future

There is one other common challenge faced by teenagers of the past and present. It is grappling with the question: "What will I do with my life?" This question does involve choosing a vocation, but it is far deeper than that. It is ultimately a spiritual question: "What is worth the investment of my life? Where will I find the greatest happiness? And where can I make the greatest contribution?" As philosophical as these questions may appear, they are very real to our

teenagers. More immediately, teenagers must answer the questions: "Will I go to college, and if so, where? Should I join the military, and if so, which branch? Or should I get a job, and if so, which job?" Of course, teenagers understand that these choices all lead somewhere. There is something beyond the next step and somehow, the next step will influence where teenagers end up. It is an awesome challenge for these young minds.

Parents who wish to be helpful will share something of their own struggle, their own joys, and their own disappointments. As a parent, you cannot and should not offer easy answers, but you can encourage the teenager's search and perhaps introduce your son or daughter to people of various vocations who can share their journey. You can encourage your adolescent to take advantage of vocational counselors both at high school and later at the university. But ultimately, you should encourage your teenager to follow the example of Samuel. The ancient Hebrew prophet heard God's call as a teenager, and said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."[2] The men and women who have made the greatest impact upon human history have been men and women who had a sense of divine call and who lived out that call in their vocation.

FIVE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES

With all these similarities, let's not forget that a mighty gulf exists between the contemporary teenager and teenagers of the past (even the recent past); that gulf is the modern cultural setting in which teens face the challenges noted above. What are some of these cultural differences?

1. *Technology*

One of the most observable differences is that contemporary teenagers have grown up in a world of highly advanced technology. Their parents grew up with mobile phones, cable TV, and the dawn of the Internet, but the contemporary "digital native" teenager has hardly known a world without mobile Internet, social media, and wired-in classrooms. Every movie ever produced is available through streaming; every song ever sung can be heard on Spotify, courtesy of the teenager's ever-present smartphone.

The contemporary teen has also grown up with no "pre-Internet" memories; the teenager and the Internet have both come of age together. What we used to call the "information superhighway" has grown into a vast mobile web with both positive and negative influences upon the contemporary teenager. Besides giving our teens immediate access to the latest in movies, fashion, music, and sports, it allows them to have up-to-the-second updates on where their friends are, and who has broken up with whom. In fact, with the proliferation of social networking and mobile updates, the Internet has not only outpaced the traditional telephone as the teen's method of communicating with friends and discussing ideas, but it has literally taken it over. You are much more likely to see your teenager texting, browsing, and/or playing a video game (often at the same time) on their telephone than you are to see them talking on it. These technological realities put your teenager in touch with the world and the world in touch with your teenager. The contemporary teenager is exposed to far more cultural stimuli than his parents ever could have dreamed at his age.

2. Knowledge of and Exposure to Violence

A second cultural difference is that your teenager is growing up with far more knowledge of violent human behavior. Part of this is because of technological advances, that is, more violence is reported through the media, but a part of it simply reflects our culture's thirst—almost obsession—for violence. Our movies, songs, and novels often rush toward violent scenes. One youth survey found that 36 percent of teenagers had seen a movie or television show containing a lot of violence in the past month.

Interestingly, the survey said that eight in ten teens, 78 percent, told the Gallup organization that they "do not have a problem watching violent movies or television programs." However, 53 percent of the same teenagers agreed "violence on television and in movies sends the wrong messages to young people." The same survey indicated that 65 percent of the teens surveyed believe that "movies and television have a great deal of influence on the outlook of young people today."[3]

Exposure to violence is not limited to the media and movies. Many contemporary teenagers have experienced violence on the personal level. They have watched their fathers physically abuse their mothers or they themselves have suffered physical abuse from fathers, stepfathers, or other adults. Most teenagers acknowledge that the public school is often the scene of violent behavior.

Some teens are even perpetrators of violence—including homicide. While the overall homicide rate in the United States has remained somewhat steady for the past thirty years, the youth homicide rate has continued to increase. The period of greatest growth was from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when youth homicide increased 168 percent. The FBI reported that there are about twenty-three thousand homicides each year in the

United States, and in 25 percent of these killings, the perpetrator is twenty-one years of age or younger.[4] Thankfully, in more recent years, statistics show a decline in youth violence—but in many communities, youth violence remains the most serious challenge.

3. The Fragmented Family

A third cultural factor that influences the contemporary teenager is the fragmented nature of the modern American family. According to a Gallup youth survey from a few years ago, four of every ten American teens (39 percent) are living with only one of their parents. In eight out of ten cases, the absent parent is the father. The same survey indicated that 20 percent of American teenagers live with a stepfather or some other adult male who lives with their mother.[5]

Sociologists have observed "in unprecedented numbers, our families are unalike: we have fathers working while mothers keep house; fathers and mothers both working away from home; single parents; second marriages bringing children together from unrelated backgrounds; childless couples; unmarried couples with and without children; and gay and lesbian parents. We are living through a period of historic change in American family life."[6] Another researcher noted, "The data is not yet in on the residual of this fragmentation, but a sociological view suggests a direct link with many of the social strains we see every day. Some of the attitudes, stress, alienation . . . and shortened attention spans are directly related to strains of adjusting to new kinds of families."[7]

It is not news that today's teen often grows up without the presence of extended family. James Comer, director of the Yale Child Study Center, sees this as a factor nearly as critical as the breakdown of the nuclear family. Speaking of his own childhood, Comer said,

"Between home and school, at least five close friends of my parents reported everything I did that was unacceptable. They are not there anymore for today's kids."[8] In the past, teenagers could depend upon extended families, healthy neighborhoods, churches, and community groups. The contemporary teen (and parent) most often does not have these nets of support.

4. Knowledge of and Exposure to Sexuality

Today's overtly sexual atmosphere, the one in which our teens are growing up, is a vastly different situation. The baby boomers of the 1960s rebelled against the traditional sexual mores of their parents, but they remembered what the sexual rules were and sometimes even experienced guilt in breaking them. But the contemporary teenager has grown up in a world without sexual rules. Movies, media, and music all equate sex with love and depict sex as an expected part of a meaningful dating relationship. Thus, vast numbers of teenagers are sexually active.

Teenagers who are not sexually active struggle with thoughts such as *Am I missing out on something important? Is there something wrong with me?* Meanwhile, those teens who are sexually active have other negative feelings: They often feel used, abused, and empty.

The contemporary teen lives in a world where sex is not only an expected part of the dating relationship but living together before marriage is more and more common, and homosexual relationships are being promoted as alternative lifestyles. Indeed, the words bisexual and transgender are common vocabulary for the modern teen. In a very real sense, sex has become the American goddess, and the shrines and venues for worship are as varied as the mind can imagine. This is the world in which the contemporary teenager must navigate the already scary waters of his/her own emerging sexuality.

5. *Neutral Moral and Religious Values*

Finally, the contemporary teen is growing up in a world that is truly post-Christian. In the area of religion and morals, there is no sure word. In past generations, most Americans could have defined moral and immoral behavior. These moral judgments were primarily based on the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. This is not true for the contemporary teenager. For the first time in American history, an entire generation is growing up without certain moral values. Values are often neutral; the teen is told that what feels good—is good. Right and wrong are relative.

The teenage years have always been the time to explore religious beliefs. Teens are asking questions about the religious beliefs—or disbeliefs—of their parents. As in other areas of life, they are seeking to clarify their own identity. The difference in the contemporary world is that because of the global nature of today's world, our teens are exposed to numerous religious beliefs—both by means of modern technology and through friends who are involved in other religious groups.

Religion is important to the contemporary teen. A recent survey indicated that about half of teenagers (51 percent) see religious faith as important in shaping their daily lives.[9] More than three quarters of teenagers (82 percent) identify themselves with an organized religious group. A third of the teenagers (36 percent) say that they feel "very" or "extremely" close to God and more than half have made a personal commitment to live their life for God (55 percent).[10] Four in ten teenagers (40 percent) reported that they attend services for religious worship at least once per week.[11] Today's teenagers are more interested in the experiential, relational nature of religious groups than abstract religious belief. If the group is accepting, caring, and

supportive, they are drawn to the spiritual group even though they may disagree with many of the group's religious beliefs.

PARENTS *CAN* GUIDE

This is the world into which your teenager has come of age. The good news is that contemporary teenagers are looking to parents for guidance. In a recent survey, teens reported that parents have more influence than peers do in the following areas: whether to attend college, whether to attend religious services, whether to do homework, and whether to drink. Parents also had an impact on the teens' job or career plans. Friends had more influence on their decisions in terms of immediate issues such as whether or not to cut classes, who to date, hairstyles, and what kind of clothes they wore.[12]

The survey found that when teenagers were asked to report "Who has the greatest influence on your decisions? Parents or friends?" the decisions most heavily weighted toward parental influence were those that appear to have a major effect on what kind of person the teen will be. Yes, your teenager will be influenced by friends on some issues, but parents are still the major influence on their teenager's thoughts and behavior. The remaining chapters of this book are designed to help you learn to effectively meet your teenager's need for love and thus lay the foundation for influencing your teen more effectively in all other areas of life.