

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black graduation gown over a red dress, is walking away from the camera on a wide brick-paved path. She is holding a black graduation cap in her right hand. The path leads towards a large, modern building with a large glass window. There are black lampposts on either side of the path. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Preparing to Launch

**TEN WAYS TO HAVE BETTER CONVERSATIONS
WITH YOUR TEENAGER ABOUT THE FUTURE**

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WITH PISEY SOK

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Introduction:

PREPARING TO LAUNCH

Many parents can remember the moment when they first taught their child to fly a kite. The fun may have started with the purchase of a kite from a local toy store, followed by the excitement and wonder on their child's face when the parent promised that, together, they would make it fly.

Of course, such flight was not automatic.

Flying a kite is serious business. It requires timing, patience, the right wind conditions, and multiple crashes. But, in the end, it is all worth it. After countless hours of running up and down the beach or field, many failed attempts, untangling the spool a dozen times, to finally see the kite take off and soar freely into the sky is a moment of pure satisfaction.

In many ways, preparing a child to launch into adulthood is like learning to fly a kite. Believe it or not, the most important aspect of flying a kite is learning to navigate the spool and line—that is, knowing when to hold the tension and when to release the slack. Without proper management of its spool and line, the kite would never be able to take off, maintain flight, or reach its potential. These elements are what enable the kite to take off and fly freely without fear of drifting.

Like the spool and line, preparing adolescent children to launch is the ongoing process of learning to stay emotionally connected to your child while also allowing him or her to grow and reach new heights of responsibility and independence as he or she transitions into adulthood.

Most of us, if we are honest, probably feel overwhelmed, sad, anxious, excited, or all of these things at the thought of our children getting ready to make choices about school, relationships, faith, and career goals. On the one hand, you might feel some excitement about having additional freedom (and perhaps more physical space) to explore for yourself, spend time with your partner, or just have a break from the hectic life of daily parenting. But, on the other hand, you might also feel some sadness, grief, and regret at seeing your child grow up, move on, and grow in his or her independence.

Whether this is your first or last time preparing adolescent children to launch into adulthood, it will likely be a challenging and unique journey. Parenting a child into adulthood can bring about lasting legacies of love and trustworthiness. In addition, it is a mutual formative journey, helping you continue to learn and grow in the image of Jesus Christ alongside your emerging adult. To paraphrase an idea from the columnist George Will, *parents raise children physically and children raise adults emotionally*. Together, a parent and an emerging adult form a braided cord of legacy that moves throughout generations.

Whether this is your young adult's first step away to college, a new job, a new place of living, or a new relationship and family, *you can help make this transition for your young adult successful and meaningful while continuing to stay emotionally connected*. This is what this series is all about.

Icons Used Throughout

The icons used throughout these sessions will highlight key concepts and provide a helpful way to direct your attention to important ideas. The following icons have different emphases and meanings to draw your attention to different dimensions of the material.



The **GOING DEEPER** icon:

invites you to turn inward and explore your own feelings, memories, reactions, and behaviors that have shaped your current parenting experiences.



The **KEEPING IT REAL** icon:

is an invitation for you to be courageous about sharing your vulnerabilities, experiences, and feelings with your children. It invites you to model ways to be honest and open with your kids about your own struggles, pain, and journey of becoming an adult.



The **CONNECT** icon:

invites you to consider meaningful ways to connect the concept of the session to your family dynamics. It gives you the opportunity to find ways to emotionally connect with your emerging adult.



The **KEY POINT** icon:

marks an important fact, idea, or research point worth noting as you keep your attention focused on the session at hand.



The **CAUTION** icon:

draws your attention to things that you may want to avoid because they can create obstacles that cause you and your young adult unnecessary pain or harm. This is a reminder to slow the process down.



The **ACTIVITIES** icon:

indicates exercises, activities, and family traditions that you may want to engage in with your kids. You can adapt the activities to fit your specific family dynamics and relationships.

Helpful Tips for Constructive Communication

One goal of this material is to help create opportunities for you to engage in intentional and meaningful conversations with your teenager about adulthood.

Preparing to launch well involves building constructive communication habits with your emerging adult that include good listening skills and a desire to understand their thoughts and feelings. Modeling these skills is generally the most effective way to initiate genuine conversations, stay emotionally engaged, and help your adolescent feel safe about sharing their journey into adulthood.

Genuine conversation involves a dialogue that includes having “real talk”—that is, telling funny stories, sharing meaningful memories, and laughing, while also having the courage to be vulnerable about your own thoughts and feelings. Here are some helpful constructive communication skills to keep in mind as you engage in better conversations with your son or daughter.

1. Calm down before having or continuing a difficult discussion.

- Conflict can be triggered by a word, a tone of voice, or a nonverbal look.
- Be mindful of your *tone* and *nonverbal body language*.

2. Listen in order for your adolescent to feel heard.

- *Focus your attention* on your teenager and avoid defensive thoughts.
- Try to understand both his or *her thoughts and feelings* without trying to change them.
- Show that you understand by *paraphrasing* (e.g., “What I hear you saying is ...”).
- *Ask clarification questions* (e.g., “What was that like for you to ...?”).

3. Speak in a way that makes it easier to listen.

- Give your adolescent the *benefit of the doubt*.
- *Lead with the positive* (i.e., start with a positive comment rather than a complaint).
- Avoid *blaming* and *criticism*.
- Speak most about *your own thoughts and feelings*.
- *Focus on the present* rather than dwelling on the past.
- *Make room* for your adolescent to respond (i.e., pause frequently for feedback and avoid talking at him or her).

Session 1:

A TIME TO CELEBRATE

In many ways, the transition toward adulthood is a time to celebrate the growth that has occurred in your relationship with your child up until now. So much has changed over the years.

As therapists, we often say that there are three solid objectives to consider in the growth and development of a child. First, when the child is born until they toddle off to kindergarten, it is mostly about *loving the child and helping them develop a secure sense of identity and safety* in their relationships and environment. We love the child with almost reckless abandon, being fascinated with his or her every move. We celebrate his or her gifts and *uniqueness*. We make heartfelt sacrifices to ensure that he or she gets every possible advantage for the future.

From your sacrifice, the child learns that he or she has great value and learns about his or her sense of *worthiness*. You make an emotional bond with your child. You help your child discover his or her talents, interests, and intellect. This bond lays the foundation for your child to feel secure and connected to you, even when you are not around. In so doing, your child develops a healthy sense of *belonging*. When a child feels as if he or she is unique, worthy, and belongs somewhere, then you can be assured that he or she will have a strong sense of identity.

The second objective begins around early school age and continues until adolescence. This stage is mostly about *teaching the child limits and consequences, while helping them develop a sense of personal and social responsibility*. Of course, it is not that we start loving the child any less or wait until the child is five years old to introduce limits or consequences. However, during this developmental stage, we continue to build on the emotional foundation by concentrating on teaching him or her about important limits and how consequences work in life.

When the child grasps appropriate limits, he or she will inevitably test those limits. When those boundaries get crossed, the wise parent will have enforced natural and logical consequences that the child must experience in order to learn that the consequences and boundaries are there to ensure his or her wellbeing. Through these natural consequences, the child develops a healthy sense of responsibility, and by *respecting life's rules and having good ethics, the child brings honor to their family, themselves, and their community.*

As the child grows to understand boundaries and limits, the wise parent gives the child more opportunities to contribute to the family and other relationships. Through this sequential giving, the child learns that he or she *has valuable gifts to offer through a balanced give-and-take relationship, and learns to be responsible and to contribute his or her part.*



By the time the child reaches adolescence and transitions into adulthood, the third objective is to *sequentially leave the young person more and more so he or she can claim his or her own identity, responsibility, and adulthood.*

Returning to the analogy of the kite, the wise parent knows when to slowly release more line on the spool in order for the kite to reach new heights. When you think about it, you have probably been slowly releasing the line for quite some time now. It started in small ways when you let your baby fall asleep on his or her own. Later, you let your young child pick out his or her own clothes, ride a bicycle, or even cross the street without holding your hand. These days, perhaps you let your adolescent handle his or her own money, transportation, and schedule. You and your teenager have been preparing to launch for quite some time, and you are simply approaching another milestone where he or she will claim a fuller part of adulthood.

Perhaps you feel like you have done this process of *loving, limiting, and leaving* very well. Perhaps you feel like you could have done much better. Regardless, the truth is that all of us who have been parents could always have done better. But it's also true that you probably have done far more right than you have done wrong. Your emerging adult will continue to learn and grow into his or her identity and how to be a trustworthy person long after he or she leaves your home. You are still learning these things about yourself, so it only makes sense that your young adult will continue learning these things in the years ahead. You have reached a significant milestone; be sure to take the time to mark this point as a time of celebration and achievement.

Case Study: The Silva Family

The Silvas are a family of four: Mr. and Mrs. Silva and their children, Michael and Stefany. Mr. and Mrs. Silva were starting to feel anxious about Michael finishing high school and potentially moving away. Michael, a sophomore in high school, was already talking about possible colleges that he was interested in attending after high school.

On the drive home from church one Sunday afternoon, Michael asked his parents what they thought about him going to college out of state. A few of his friends have been talking about getting an apartment together when they moved out of their parents' houses. In the back of their minds, Mr. and Mrs. Silva had a sudden knot in their stomachs. How would they help Michael finance his education? How would they handle him leaving the house, moving out of state, and living with friends?

After a moment of awkward silence, Mrs. Silva offered, "Well, it sounds like you have been thinking a lot about this. Let's talk more about it during lunch." Right then, Mr. and Mrs. Silva could not avoid the inevitable reality that their son was no longer a child and, in a few short years, he would be moving away from their parental supervision. Perhaps this was the most natural and appropriate time to start the conversation.

SESSION 1: EXERCISES



1. What are some of the thoughts, hopes, and dreams that you have had for your child over the years? When most appropriate, share these with your teenager, validating his or her areas of growth along the way.



2. Consider one or two admirable attributes about your adolescent that impresses you the most. During a conversation, take the opportunity to affirm these attributes.



3. Launching is a transition for your entire family. During a conversation, focus on what your family has done well so far to stay connected. Some ideas to share could focus on family traditions, holiday, meals, vacations, trips, events, or activities that were most memorable and meaningful for your family. Discuss how, as a family, you can continue or change these traditions during the new season ahead.

Session 2:

LEAVING WELL

Preparing an adolescent to leave home is often a transition filled with anticipation and anxiety. Many parents approach the task like sending a child to summer camp. We concentrate on preparing our young adult with organizational skills that will help him or her cope with his or her needs when he or she leaves the house. We make sure that we have packed the necessary clothes and toiletries. We make sure that our child has some spending money and we offer numerous reminders to be responsible and wise with it.

In this process, we often focus much of our attention on reminding our emerging adults how to act, how to behave, and how to stay out of trouble. We remind them to make good choices, we say goodbye, and then we hope everything turns out well.

In other words, we usually focus on teaching our teenagers organizational skills and how to manage their lives.

In reality, emerging adults want and need much more from us. Yes, they do want and need our help and wisdom on how to organize and navigate adulthood. They need information on what types of insurance to consider, how to handle money in a responsible way, and how to take care of their transportation to or from campus or work. However, while interviewing young adults in various groups about the transition toward adulthood, we learned that they also want to have an *emotional connection* and *their questions answered honestly and vulnerably* by their parents. Moreover, these young adults expressed a clear desire to learn more about their parents' spiritual journeys and how those impact everyday realities.



In other words, young adults want to have a secure emotional connection with their parents, clear and real information about their parents' *spiritual life and formation*, and an understanding about how to organize and manage the responsibilities of adult life. As wise parents, helping your young adult leave home well grows out of years of healthy relationship, where all of these elements can be shared along the way.

Preparing to launch well, by and large, is not about giving your child a checklist of do's and don'ts. Rather, it stems from investing in time to share your life experiences with your young adult. The sessions in this study will equip and empower you to have these important discussions, and to keep the lines of communication open as your young adult continues to develop.

Possible Problems

In our interviews with young adults, they reported that in most cases, the information they received about leaving home was mainly about how to manage and organize life as an adult. They told us that they most often got instructions about how to spend money, set up bank accounts, take care of a vehicle, and manage new relationships. Only about 30% of the young adults interviewed got any sense of vulnerability or open discussion from their parents about the emotional process of leaving home. The majority of this group reported that this advice was given to them at the actual time of leaving home, such as at a going-away dinner or when the goodbye took place.

The figures are even lower for the percentage of young adults receiving information about their parents' spirituality or formation. Only about 10% reported having some kind of intentional discussion concerning their parents' spirituality or formation.

In our interviews, it became clear that about *85% of the time parents spent preparing their young adult to launch focused on teaching organizational skills to manage the responsibilities of adult living*. Indeed, from our interviews, very little information or input was given to these young adults regarding emotional connections or spiritual formation.

One Troubling Fact



One troubling fact emerged from our interviews with young adults: of those who received some kind of emotional connection or spiritual counsel from their parents, several unfortunately received damaging information. These emerging adults reported that one or both of their parents made it clear that they were *emotionally dependent* upon the young adult.

In several cases, this was the result of one parent not wanting to be married to his or her spouse any longer and not wanting the young adult to leave home and remove the “buffer” between spouses. In several other cases, it was clear that one of the parents used the child as a “parent” and manipulated the child to take care of the parent’s emotional needs of feeling cared for and nurtured. In some cases, the parents used biblical texts to try to manipulate the young adult to stay home or not to marry because “honoring your parent” was the job of the child.

It is our duty as parents to prepare our children for their growth and responsibilities as adults. And, of course it is right for children—even young adults—to honor their parents. But it is incumbent upon us as parents not to use our children for our own emotional benefits and it is certainly not healthy for us to use emotional or spiritual manipulation to meet our own needs. Our job in preparing our young adult to leave home is to give him or her a blessing so that he or she can become a blessing to others.

To ensure that our adolescent grows into adulthood with our blessing, we want to make sure that we have infused him or her with our emotional resources and spiritual direction for his or her own good.

Breaking the Ice

Over lunch, Mr. Silva decided to break the ice by inquiring about Michael’s desire to go to school out of state, and shared about the time when he had to make a decision about college.

Mr. Silva: *(calmly) What do you like about that school, Michael?*

Michael: *I dunno. I thought it might be something new and because most of my friends were planning to go there.*

Mrs. Silva: *It sounds like your friends are important to you. How do you feel about moving to a different state?*

Michael: *Yeah, my friends are important to me. We still have two more years to think about it. But I thought it would be good to start thinking about it now. I think it would be fun to live with Jase and David.*

Mr. Silva: *Did I ever tell you about the time when I made my decision about college?*

Michael: *I don't think so. You told me how you met Mom in college but never about why you decided to go to college.*

Mr. Silva: *I never thought I would go to college because our family couldn't afford it. What I decided to do instead was work part-time, while still living at home to save up money. I went to school at our local community college for two years and then transferred.*

Grandpa didn't have much to say about my schooling because he joined the military after high school and wanted me to find a job instead. I wish I had more conversations with him about my schooling. To be honest, I was a little scared about leaving the house because I didn't know how I was going to pay for college or what I wanted to study. Most of my friends joined the military, but I decided to work and go to school.

It was hard, but I'm glad that I stuck with it. Otherwise, I may have never met your mother!

Mrs. Silva: *We think it's a good thing that you want to go to college, and it may also be good to be with your friends. How can we help you think about this more?*

Michael: *I don't know yet. Let me think about it.*

SESSION 2: EXERCISES



1. Think about your own experience when you were a young adult leaving home for the first time. What kind of input or advice did you receive from your parents?



2. What were your impressions regarding the emotional connections and spiritual direction that you received from your parents in the year or two prior to you leaving home? How much time was dedicated to connecting emotionally or spiritually during this phase?



3. If you are comfortable, discuss with your emerging adult how your leaving home went and the input that you received or wish you had received. Share your desires about giving him or her good emotional connection, insight into your spiritual journey and formation, and advice on organizing life effectively. Ask what he or she most wants from you in this season ahead.

Session 3:

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a little like the experience of high-altitude mountain climbing. Time, energy, and resources are invested at base camp by sometimes hundreds of climbers. Like each person connected to your family by relation, friendship, or mentorship, each climber has dedicated a part of his or her time to ensure the expedition has the necessary resources for a successful ascent.

From this base camp of tremendous resource and sacrifice, fewer climbers make it to stations higher up the mountain. In guiding a child into adulthood, these climbers are those favorite teachers, essential peers, and coaches who infuse their inspiration, skills, talents, and gifts into the adolescent.

But in every climb, there comes the moment that all the moments lead up to: the attempt to summit. At this moment, it is only the smallest of groups—sometimes only two—who make the final ascent up the mountain. Even though you and your emerging adult have benefitted from all of the contributions of others, when it comes to this last transition, only the most essential players make the trip. This is the culmination of the goal of parenthood, namely, to navigate the climb of life well enough so the child now becomes the experienced adult climber.

When that moment approaches for you and your young adult to cross the summit of the transition, it does not mean that you will cut off your child to be alone. You will likely still have a strong tether that links you together for mutual support and care. You cannot, however, do the climbing for your young adult, and he or she will have to learn to make decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions. All of the training and resources invested in your child's development now have to be trusted in your co-climber emerging adult.

At that moment in the climb, what will be the most important thing that you can give your child? Instead of last-minute instructions, we believe *it is best to infuse your young adult with a sense of emotional support, love, and care.*

In the previous session, we suggested that in the transition of your child to adulthood, it is wise to concentrate on three elements: *emotional connection, spiritual formation, and organizational skills.* Most often, the emphasis of many parents is the third of these three.



However, we suggest starting with *emotional connection* because we believe that it is always the most important place to begin in important transitions. *A person cannot do what he or she needs to do unless he or she feels secure in his or her sense of identity and safety.* In other words, young adults cannot do the important work of becoming an adult unless they know *who they are* and that *relationships can be trusted.*

Why Emotional Connection Matters

Emotional connection is vitally important for human beings because it builds feelings of safety and trust between members—what family therapists refer to as *secure attachment.* Humans are designed to attach to one another, and this attachment is just as important for emotional health as food and water.

We have known for quite some time now that if newborns do not attach to a caregiver within hours of birth, they simply will not thrive. If these babies continue to be deprived of this basic bonding and attachment, they tend to lose weight and do not adjust properly. In the most extreme cases, the lack of attachment with very young children can lead to the development of a syndrome called *failure to thrive*, which can produce serious developmental scarring.



Attachment is essential because God created us to be in relationship with God and each other. The way we are attached—especially to our parents—tells us about our identity and safety, *who we are* and *whether or not we are safe in the world.*

Attachments make an essential statement on our identities and our sense of how healthy relationships operate. When this attachment is lacking in our relationships, our senses of both self and safety suffer.

The Role of Love and Trustworthiness

We are born and designed to receive love. God loves us in a way that is endless, selfless, and sacrificial. Even though we fall short of expressing this kind of love or receiving it from our parents, God intends to let us know how precious and worthy we are to him. In the same way that God loves us, God is just as steadfast in expressing his trustworthiness to us through his faithfulness. God invites us to trust this faithfulness, out of which our obedience toward God flows.

Similar to the way we were designed to receive love, God created us to seek and experience trustworthy relationships. If you grew up in a household where your physical needs were met, people were reliable, where you felt supported and cared for, and were taught to be responsible, then you likely grew up believing that relationships are safe and secure. On the other hand, if you grew up in a family where the opposite was true, chances are you feel skeptical and suspicious of relationships and are guarded when you interact with others.

Of course, many of us grow up in families with complex realities. Perhaps you felt overwhelmed with responsibilities that you did not think you could handle or you consistently found yourself being closer to your mother or father than they were to each other. Perhaps you grew up with one parent, or were raised by grandparents or foster parents.

In the midst of family complexity, *we come to know and understand who we are when we are loved and feel safe by the trustworthiness of others*. Maybe this was done for you growing up; maybe it was not. Maybe you felt loved, but your situation was not as safe because you grew up in a family with alcohol or drug abuse. Maybe your family was loving and trustworthy, but issues such as racial prejudice or community crime jeopardized your safety.

Whatever the reasons, violations of love and trust will make us feel a deep sense of pain and, as a result, we may not feel *attached* to our family or other relationships. Before your young adult makes this important transition, it is helpful for him or her to hear about the experiences that shaped your identity as a parent and your feelings about relationships. The following exercises will start the process of organizing your thoughts to discern what is most important to share about your story.

Growing Up in a Military Home

While driving to visit his grandparents for Memorial Day, Michael and Mr. Silva had a discussion about politics and America's involvement with conflict overseas from the latest headlines. Soon the conversation moved from current events to Michael's curiosity about his father's experiences growing up in a home where his grandfather served in Vietnam.

Michael: *Did Grandpa ever tell you stories of Vietnam?*

Mr. Silva: *Your grandpa keeps to himself and doesn't like to talk about his experience in Vietnam. I've tried to ask him many times, but he keeps his stories pretty general. I'm guessing it was difficult for him to go to war and come back home and pretend that things were the same.*

Michael: *Yeah. I wonder what it was like for him. What was it like for you when you were a kid, Dad? I mean growing up in a military home?*

Mr. Silva: *Well ... it wasn't easy. Grandpa wasn't home a whole lot. He was kind of private, and I cannot remember ever sitting and talking with him about his career. Your grandpa was not an easy man to talk to when he was younger.*

Michael: *What do you mean?*

Mr. Silva: *Well, Grandpa got easily irritated and didn't put up with a lot of nonsense. He was often strict about how we dressed, how we cut our hair, and made sure we organized our rooms. And if it didn't meet his standards, we would hear about it. I never questioned that your grandpa loved us because he worked so hard to provide for our family. But, I was always worried that he would get angry and take it out on us. He's gotten a lot better, but when we were younger I was afraid of him. I felt like at times I was never good enough to meet his expectations.*

Michael: *I never knew that about Grandpa. It was probably hard trying to always prove yourself, especially if he was so strict.*

Mr. Silva: *Yeah. It wasn't easy growing up in a household with a dad who was a military officer. Being the oldest, I got most of the blame when something went wrong. Come to think of it, I guess that's why I sometimes get angry and take it out on others. Now that I am more aware of my anger, I'm trying to work on it.*

SESSION 3: EXERCISES



1. Think about one or two stories about growing up that impacted you deeply concerning your identity and sense of safety. From these stories, what did you learn about who you were as a person? What did you learn about other people and relationships from your childhood?



2. Take a look at the list of words and phrases below. Circle two to four emotions below that best describe how you *felt about yourself* or about how you *felt about relationships* when reflecting on these stories.

Abandoned	Failure	Judged	Uncertain
Alone	Fearful	Misunderstood	Unloved
Betrayed	Guilty	Not Measuring Up	Unknown
Controlled	Helpless	Out of Control	Unwanted
Defective	Hopeless	Powerless	Unworthy
Devalued	Inadequate	Rejected	Unsafe
Discouraged	Insecure	Sad	Used
Disconnected	Insignificant	Unaccepted	Vulnerable
Disrespected	Invalidated	Unappreciated	Worthless

Session 4:

PRACTICING VULNERABILITY

Why is it important to identify these feelings associated with the past?

First, it connects you with your emotions and how those emotions shape the way we learn to attach. Understanding our attachment experience is essential because it often still plays out whenever these strong feelings get triggered in our everyday lives. Pain and a lack of attachment occur when our emotional triggers or “hot buttons” from our previous experiences get pushed during our worst interactions in our families and relationships.

When these buttons from the past get pushed in our current situations, we are overwhelmed with the *weight of emotion*, which can be summed up as *feeling unloved* or *unsafe*. In other words, when you feel the emotions that you identified from past interactions with family or experiences, they also play out in your current relationships whenever you get into conflict or stress. This informs you that these feelings have been with you for a long time and clarifies where you might have challenges emotionally in relationships. For example, when Mr. Silva feels like he *does not measure up*, feels *controlled*, or is *inadequate*, he gets angry and takes it out on the other people in his family.

Second, it is essential to clarify these feelings in your story so that when you share your story and identify the emotions connected with it, it gives your family members the opportunity to securely attach.



When you take the time to be vulnerable with your young adult about your history, stories, and emotions, you open the door to helping him or her understand what has shaped your identity and behavior. When your young adult witnesses this *vulnerability*, it gives him or her *the permission needed to explore, understand, and relate to you in terms of his or her history with you*. It opens the conversation and eventually gives opportunity for you to speak into his or her life at the most honest and “real” level. In short, it gives you an opportunity to attach at a key moment in his or her transition. The next exercise will give you some ideas for how to share your story.

Connecting the Dots

Michael and Mr. Silva are still driving on their way to visit Michael’s grandparents.

Mr. Silva: *Did I ever tell you the time I tried to grow out my hair in high school?*

Michael: *I don’t think so. What happened?*

Mr. Silva: *Well, let’s just say that I was trying to impress a girl. I wore a hat to school and around the house for several months and hid my hair from your grandpa. I was hoping to have it long for the prom, but he found out. He didn’t like long hair because he thought men should have short, well-kept hair. When he found out that I was trying to grow out my hair, he ripped the hat off my head, told me to sit down in the bathroom, and buzzed off my hair! I cried and cried because I knew everyone was going to make fun of me when I got to school the next day. I got so angry with your grandpa that I went to my room and started punching your uncle for making fun of me.*

Michael: *No way! That really happened?*

Mr. Silva: *Yeah, it did. That day, I felt so powerless and inadequate, like my personal expression was taken away from me. That’s why when people try to tell me what to do or control me, I can get very angry and take it out on you or your sister. I’m not proud of it, but that was what it was like growing up. I’m sorry if you felt like I was too strict on you. That’s what was modeled for me. I hope you can understand where I’m coming from.*

Michael: *It makes sense, Dad.*

Mr. Silva: *Do you ever feel like I try to control you?*

Michael: *Um, well ... sometimes, I guess.*

Mr. Silva: *I’m sorry for that. Can you share a time when you felt that way?*

SESSION 4: EXERCISES



1. Make some time to tell your young adult one or two stories of your past about challenges to your identity and sense of safety. Be sure to identify and connect some of the emotions that you felt in Session 3 that were a result of the past. Push yourself to be vulnerable so that you can foster the opportunity to attach.



2. Invite your young adult to ask questions about your past and some of the emotions connected to your story. Encourage him or her to share any similar stories or feelings that he or she has experienced growing up. The focus here is to empathize and understand in order to validate his or her sense of identity and create a safe space for you to make a meaningful connection.

Session 5:

OWNING OUR STORIES

One of the best things about parenting is watching your child discover the many great things about life by helping him or her unlock various gifts, talents, and skills, also while instilling your family values and hopes for them. In the midst of this effort, we learn and grow alongside our children.

We also all fall short of our intentions. Many of these mistakes are connected to our responses when our “hot buttons” get pushed and we feel the emotions identified in Session 3.

When we feel these emotions that are deeply connected to our past and our attachment histories, our brain is programmed by the *fight/flight mechanism* to react almost automatically. We are built to respond quickly to cope with the pain that we feel by taking action. Just as with anything that our brain practices, it can become a defensive habit or reaction. For instance, if people feel inadequate or controlled, they might tend to withdraw from relationships. They probably will then have a tendency to withdraw every time they run across those emotions in the future. The brain tends to practice what it is used to doing and feeling.



It is then almost automatic from our experiences that certain habits—both healthy and unhealthy—become reactions to particular feelings. Remember, we practice these reactions or habits because we believe that they will help us survive our emotional pain. Our reactions are understandable given the reality that we are simply trying to cope with painful emotions from not feeling loved or safe.

The problem is that these reactions become increasingly automatic for us, even the reactions that we are not proud of. For example, we may feel discouraged for always nagging, blowing up in anger, escaping into addictive behaviors, or over-controlling situations. We know that these behaviors only complicate our relationships, yet when a situation occurs that causes us stress or pain, we find ourselves again committing the same behavior that we despise.

We do these things over and over again not because we are weak or incompetent. Instead, we do them because our brains have been trained to cope with painful and distressing feelings in the same way. In the case with Mr. Silva, we notice that he would get angry when he felt inadequate or controlled, and would take it out on other family members. These feelings and behaviors stemmed from his upbringing and continue to play out in his current relationships.



In other words, when we *feel unloved or unsafe*, we move into our *coping behavior* (e.g., yelling, controlling, blaming, etc.) before we even are aware of what we are feeling. It may be hard to face the reality that we have some reactions to our pain that are not so helpful, but these reactions are part of our story. Not only is it essential for us to understand our own emotions and reactions, but it is also important for our young adult to understand us.

When we take responsibility to organize our story in light of our emotions and reactions, it helps our young adult *understand* his or her past experiences with us, *clarify* issues of identity and trust with us, and *models* how he or she can also *take responsibility* for his or her emotions and reactions. The following exercise can help you identify some of these reactions to your pain identified in Session 3.

SESSION 5: EXERCISE 1



1. Circle three to five behaviors that best fit the way you react in moments of stress. (Example: *When I feel the way that I identified in Session 3, I normally cope or find myself acting in the following ways ...*)

Addicted	Defensive	Inconsolable	Rage
Aggressive	Depressed	Invulnerable	Retaliation
Angry	Disconnected	Irresponsible	Sarcastic
Anxious	Discouraged	Isolated	Secretive
Arrogant	Entitled	Judging	Selfish
Avoidant	Escaping	Manipulating	Shaming Self
Blaming Others	Fault-finding	Nagging	Suspicious
Catastrophizing	Fearful	Negative	Threatening
Chaotic behavior	Harsh	Numbed Out	Unhappy
Closed	Holding grudges	Out of Control	Unreliable
Controlling	Hopeless	Perfectionistic	Withdrawn
Critical	Impatient	Performing	
Demanding	Impulsive	Provocative	



2. After identifying these behaviors, reactions, or attitudes, now take some time and connect how the feelings that you have identified in Session 3 are connected to these actions that you circled.



3. Find a time to share how you perceive that these types of behaviors have affected your young adult's perceptions of identity and safety.

SESSION 5: EXERCISE 2

Remember that the reason we share is not to make ourselves feel better or to just confess our shortcomings. Instead, we share and open up because it models for our young adult a way to deepen trust in our relationships. If you have completed the exercises above and come this far, perhaps you can now press yourself to go just a bit further. You have opened the door of vulnerability and responsibility, and you now have the opportunity to speak into the heart of your young adult to strengthen your relationship.



1. In light of the story that you have told your young adult and the connected feelings and behaviors that you identified, ask him or her about some of the emotions that he or she felt in response.



2. Take the opportunity now to assure your young adult what you feel towards him or her and how you desire to nurture, connect with, value, and respect him or her. Speak from the heart!

Session 6:

LEAVING AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

One of the great mysteries and truths of all living things is that they have a beginning, a process of maturity, and an eventual ending. If we provide the right kind of nurture to a seed that we plant in the ground and cultivate it with the right soil, light, and water, it will eventually grow. *The same is true with human beings and relationships. When we provide the right physical food and nutrition along with the right emotional support of love and trustworthiness, people and relationships will grow and flourish.*

God designed all of us to thrive. But no matter how much we cultivate and provide the right elements—no matter how much we feed, water, and nurture—there is still an eventual ending of our mortal condition. Death reminds us that our physical life will come to an end. This reality invites us to make the here and now meaningful.

The fact that there is an end to growth and striving draws our attention to consider the spiritual dimension of our lives. We ask questions like, “What is the meaning of my life? What happens to us when we die? What part of me will last and make a difference?” In short, the fact that life comes to an end forces us to look *upwards* to God and look *inward* at our souls to find out how our faith will help us grow and thrive.

Most of our early spiritual formation was initially shaped by the way that we experienced love and trust in our families. Many of us learned that we are loved by God from the way we were loved in our families, celebrated, and cared for by parents and other care providers. Further, we were taught and mentored by family, friends, and teachers who taught us truths about living by faith. Similarly, early formation continues to shape and spiritually nurture the faith formation of our young adult.

There comes a season when our young adult will naturally move away from the household and family. At this point, we come to realize that we naturally give space for God and our faith community to guide and shape the faith, spiritual practices, and spiritual growth of our young adult.

Growing Through Struggle



Life has a way of stretching and shaping our spiritual formation. Almost all parents can relate to the desire of wanting our children to be happy and to have a fulfilled life as they reach maturity. Following this desire, however, is usually the *anxiety* and *fear* that things will be difficult for our young adult and that he or she will encounter emotional struggles along the way. The reality is, however, that God uses life in general and difficult circumstances in particular to grow the depth of our faith to produce true and lasting virtues in his followers. *Our primary aim for our young adult is not necessarily as much about happiness and comfort as it is about growing courageously in their faith and virtue as a follower of Jesus Christ.*

As we seek guidance from the Bible, it is hard to escape the truth that most of this spiritual growth is brought about by life struggles. In fact, as we read in the Bible, life struggles for people of faith are a *guarantee* during our journey of faith.

James 1:2-3 puts it this way: “My friends, be glad, even if you have a lot of trouble. You know that you learn to endure by having your faith tested.”

All of life has this potential of growing us spiritually, but the trials in our lives have a particularly powerful way of growing our faith. Certainly, as parents, we want our children to be happy and to have a smooth and painless road in life. Yet, if we really want our emerging adults to develop spiritually, then we have to expect that various kinds of challenges and trials also bring about formation.

Encouraging Adult Spiritual Formation

One of the great truths about life is how we find encouragement, inspiration, wisdom, and companionship through sharing our stories with others. Most of what we know about Jesus and the early church we know through the storywriters of the first century. Followers of Jesus found themselves in extraordinary circumstances where they were confronted with the profound choices of believing, serving, and making sacrifices that God used to grow their faith.

In many cases, we read about characters who made decisions that moved them in the wrong direction. Paul, for instance, was absolutely convinced that he was doing the right thing for God, and his spiritual upbringing shaped his conviction and moved him to persecute the early Christians. But remarkably, God can even use these “wrong choices” and misunderstandings to expand our concept of faith and eventually build in us virtues that last. It is the narrative of these stories that helps us to connect, appreciate, and understand the growth and formation of these imperfect people who passed the faith to us.



In fact, all followers of Jesus Christ have this important narrative that gives witness to God's grace in our spiritual formation. As parents, it is common to spend much of the time speaking to our young adult about how to be responsible with money or about his or her career ambitions that we forget to tell him or her *simple stories* of the challenges, pains of life, and the remarkable choices that have shaped our identity and faith formation.

We may have the desire to help our young adult grow spiritually, but that is a process that we simply cannot force. What we can do is find the courage to authentically share our own journeys of faith and continue to trust God to work. The exercise below will offer you some guidance on how to reflect on and prepare to share your story of faith.

The Courage to Share

The Silvas go on a hike together. During the hike, an opportunity opened up for the parents to share about their journey of faith during college.

Mr. Silva: *When I was getting ready to go to college, I didn't have any desire for religion or church. Our family only went to church on Christmas and Easter, but it wasn't something that mattered that much to me growing up.*

Michael: *How did you get involved in church?*

Mr. Silva: *We went to a state school and there were a lot of parties. I'm not proud of some of the decisions I made in college, but I guess I got tired of all the parties and decided to check out other things on campus. I was invited to a Christian fellowship by a classmate who introduced me to Jesus.*

Michael: *Was she a female classmate? [As he smirks]*

Mr. Silva: *Well ... yes. As matter of fact, that girl was your mother.*

Michael: *What?! You met at a Christian club? Nice!*

Mrs. Silva: *I wasn't interested in him at first—not for a long time, actually. He had some rough edges. But over time, we got to know each other, and we were both growing more in our faith. We started to grow in our relationship too.*

Mr. Silva: Faith was confusing to me at first, but slowly it all started to make sense. I went to a Bible study group and started attending a local church near campus. I got more involved with the church.

Michael: So, then what happened?

Mr. Silva: It was hard at times going back home because my family didn't care that I was now attending church. I felt like a stranger in my own home once I became a Christian. To be completely honest, I didn't realize how angry and resentful I was at your grandpa for all the pain he caused me when I was growing up. It took me years to admit that I was even angry with him. I guess learning about forgiveness in church makes you look at your relationships differently. I'm still learning to forgive and manage my anger.

Michael: It sounds like it wasn't easy growing up. I'm learning more and more about you and Mom. I wonder what else it was like for you in college.

Mrs. Silva: I had doubts and questions of my own through those years, but I had a good group of friends and leaders to help me through it. I didn't realize I had so many questions about God and about life until I got away from home and the faith my family had given me. I needed to ask those questions and find faith for myself.

SESSION 6: EXERCISE 1



1. Think about one or two stories in the past where God was expanding your faith, growing your character, or using your gifts in a particular manner.



2. Within the context of the story, try to identify the trial, pain, stress, or difficulty that God presented to you. Identify the elements of your faith that were expanded and how the hard time was used for an ultimate "good."



3. Find some time to share with your emerging adult one or two of these stories, especially noting how God used these circumstances to shape your faith.

SESSION 6: EXERCISE 2



1. Consider what is going on in your life currently, especially paying attention to the challenges and things that are not going well. Look for ways that God may be growing your character through these circumstances.



2. Find some time with your young adult and tell him or her what is going on in your life from this context of faith formation. Make sure your young adult knows your struggles and feelings.



3. Be open to answering questions about your faith and how you are walking your current situation, but do not necessarily press into questions about the faith of your emerging adult. This is an opportunity to give him or her a window into your ongoing faith journey.

Session 7:

FROM STORIES TO VIRTUES

The stories that we tell about our lives and formation are not just about the events of our lives, but they are also about how those stories shaped in us certain virtues and our personalities. Leaving a healthy legacy for our families takes work and a willingness to be responsible to process through our personal struggles.

In order to leave legacies filled with virtue, it is helpful to be mindful about how God uses our daily encounters to shape and grow those virtues in us. Moreover, if we desire for our young adult to learn about what it means to grow and develop spiritually, then we need to be vulnerable and be willing to share about our daily journeys to point out what God is doing to shape us.

Issues and stressors may be painful for us to talk about. But when we model this kind of vulnerability in front of our kids in an adult-to-adult manner, we can point them in the direction of how best to learn and grow.

Helping our young adult to continue to form and be informed by faith requires that we lead with our own vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and virtue. Going back to the kite analogy, the string is used to help the kite stay connected to the person as it soars to new heights. If given too much slack too fast or too soon, the kite might lose control to the winds. Yet, if we keep it too close, the kite will never be able to launch. Leading with vulnerability creates the opportunity for us to stay connected emotionally, while allowing our young adult more freedom to explore new heights.

Use the next set of exercises to identify some of the virtues that you see being shaped and share these with your young adult.

The Fruit of Vulnerability

Mr. Silva: *After all these years, I've been more and more aware of how my resentment from my childhood has impacted my life and relationship with you and your sister.*

Michael: *What do you mean, Dad?*

Mr. Silva: *I carried a lot of resentment for a long time because I thought I would never be good enough with anything I did. After walking with Jesus all these years, I've been slowly learning that forgiveness is really difficult, but it's been a powerful thing that has helped me to start to let go of my anger. I'm learning and trying to be more patient and less critical of everything in my life. Especially with you and Stefany. I realize that I don't have to prove myself to anyone and that I'm good enough. I'm doing my best and taking more responsibility for my reactions. I am proud of you, Michael. I hope you know that.*

Michael: *I do. It's okay, Dad.*

Mr. Silva: *Thanks for being patient with me.*

Michael: *Thanks for being so real, Dad.*

SESSION 7: EXERCISES



1. Read through the following list of virtues. In the context of the story of your life recently, what is God trying to develop in you? Circle two to four virtues that apply.

Acceptance	Flexibility	Humility	Peace
Assertiveness	Forgiveness	Justice	Perseverance
Caring	Generosity	Joy	Purity
Compassion	Gentleness	Love	Reliability
Connection	Goodness	Loyalty	Reverence
Courage	Gratitude	Mercy	Self-control
Devotion	Helpfulness	Moderation	
Discernment	Honesty	Nurture	
Faith	Hope	Patience	



2. Take the opportunity to talk with your young adult about how the virtues you circled above are being shaped in you. Ask your young adult about what reactions he or she would have to you if you were able to display more of the virtues you listed.



3. Take the opportunity to express something positive and affirming that has to do with the virtues that you see developed or developing in your young adult.

Session 8:

ORGANIZING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ADULT LIFE

Adult responsibilities can be overwhelming. The fact is that it is hard to grow up. Think for a few minutes about all of the things that you have had to learn about, take care of, and eventually master in your adult life. Consider the times when you still feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood, despite navigating them for a while.

It is totally understandable, then, that your adolescent heading towards adulthood may be a bit overwhelmed, resistant, hesitant, avoidant, frightened, depressed, anxious, excited, challenged, frustrated, defensive, self-doubting, negative, and angry (just to name a few emotions!) about his or her future responsibilities as an adult. Sure, there are plenty of exciting things to look forward to in terms of expressing gifts and talents, as well as experiencing new freedoms and relationships that your adolescent will have in adulthood, but the fact remains that most of the responsibilities demanded by maturity are more work than fun.

Unhelpful Approaches



We live in a day and age where there is a real temptation to do too much for our kids throughout childhood and adolescence, and even into emerging adulthood. Much has been made in popular culture over the idea of “*helicopter parenting*.” These kinds of parents usually like to “hover” around their children to ensure that they are handling

things okay. While it is certainly good to be attached to your child in a loving and strong way and to be available to help, many experts have recently pointed out that this type of parenting tends to produce a *lack of responsibility* in adolescents as the growing child gets used to his or her parent stepping in. There is simply no way that a young person can learn the requirements of commitment and responsibility without having to deal with the reality and consequences of mistakes and disappointments.

When a parent hovers too much and ends up protecting the child from these consequences (e.g., reminding or doing homework, working out issues with teachers or friends, solving problems for the child by allowing him or her to withdraw, etc.), it trains the growing child that he or she does not have to personally face the consequences and realities of life. A friend who serves as the head of a university counseling center recently commented on the increase of anxiety among young college students. She stated that there has been a tremendous increase in the amount of students who seek help due to stress and anxiety. When we asked for her opinion on why this was happening, she did not hesitate, saying, “Today’s young adults simply did not grow up learning how to handle stress and problem-solving. We live in an age of helicopter parenting, where parents solve most of the issues facing adolescents. When they come to college and have to face these stresses without parents, they are overwhelmed because they have no skills to handle real life and responsibility.”

In short, loving our kids is not the same as solving all of their problems.

A more recent phenomenon has also been noted: “bulldozer” parents. These parents have similar characteristics to helicopter parents, but instead of hovering to make sure the child is okay, the bulldozer parent anticipates all obstacles that might possibly cause the child anxiety or problems and simply removes those obstacles before the child encounters them.

Challenges and pain in adulthood are inevitable, and most of us would acknowledge that the most valuable life lessons are often learned through painful circumstances. It is very difficult to watch a child whom we love and cherish go through hard and discouraging times. It is harder still when that child asks or even begs us to solve the problem for him or her in order to relieve the emotional pain.



Trials and pain, while not fun, are to be embraced and managed because they produce endurance and maturity. And this endurance and maturity is much more valuable than any particular solution to a problem. *Endurance* and *maturity* are lasting virtues that, if developed, become the foundation of healthy adulthood.

Instead Offer Mentoring and Apprenticeship

If we do not want to make the mistakes of being a helicopter or bulldozer parent, what do we want to be? We suggest that the picture of a mentor or apprentice relationship is appropriate in teaching your growing young adult.

In times past, it would be common for an adolescent to be apprenticed by an adult to learn a particular set of skills. For instance, Terry was once apprenticed by a glazer (glass cutter) while working his way through college. He shadowed the glazer to all of the job sites and did the lifting, holding, and assisting as the glazer did the skilled work of making glass panes fit perfectly, cutting complicated patterns in mirrors, and crafting exquisite and artistic engraving on glass insets. He was a master craftsman. Terry was not. But as he did the more menial work around the glazer, Terry began to learn and eventually master some of the techniques.

This model of being with and learning from a skilled adult has been used for centuries, but it has been lost in more recent decades when we are training growing adolescents to become adults.

Helping to apprentice our young adults into adulthood means that we *disciple them to accompany us when we take on some of the challenging aspects of adult life*. For instance, we have them observe us when we go to purchase a car or negotiate a loan. We have them at our side when we struggle with our budget and try to make too few dollars meet too many demands. We are vulnerable in telling them about our struggles, hurts, and joys that accompany friendships. We give them a front row seat when we face heartache through the care and loss of our own parents. As we allow the adolescent to assist and shadow us along the way, he or she learns how to master adult skills. This is true whether or not we handle the situations absolutely correctly. Each situation—even when we make mistakes—becomes a valuable learning opportunity for our emerging adult.

But this is not the only place where this apprentice relationship becomes valuable. It is helpful if we *go along* beside our growing young adult as he or she encounters those challenging situations and responsibilities. Sometimes this will mean that we actually are physically present, such as when the adolescent is going to court to pay a traffic fine. Other times, it will mean being emotionally present like when an adolescent is on the side of the road figuring out the solution to an empty gas tank.



Being there as a resource *not to solve the problem*, but to help the adolescent choose a reasonable solution that will produce learning—this is also our job in a good apprentice/mentor relationship. Note that when we act as a resource, it does not mean that our young adult adolescent or we will avoid mistakes. All experiences, successes and failures, yield valuable learning as we all head toward maturity.

SESSION 8: EXERCISES



1. Think about one or two of the biggest mistakes that you have made as an adult. These mistakes may have been financial or relational and may have had a variety of consequences. Now think about the valuable life lessons that you learned from those mistakes. Find some time to share these stories and outcomes with your growing young adult.



2. Take the opportunity to talk with your young adult about the idea of the apprentice/mentor relationship that you would like to develop. What are some of the practical responsibilities that he or she could observe you handling? What are some of the practical responsibilities that you could observe him or her handling from a position of being a resource? Find out from your young adult how best to be an encouragement in the process.



3. Take time in a discussion with your growing young adult to identify some of the major areas where he or she needs some adult-type coaching and apprenticing. Some examples of this could be:

Applying for loans	Making decisions	Repairing relationships
Budgeting	Managing money	Setting life goals
Buying insurance	Managing time	Taking on unfamiliar tasks
Finding employment	Organizing items	Self-care
Managing dreams	Relating to friends	Working

Session 9:

MOVING THE BOUNDARIES

There is much discussion about boundaries today, particularly with regard to what we say “yes” in our lives and, equally as important, to what we say “no.” For instance, we are very familiar with the idea that we sometimes get overcommitted from doing too many good things in life. At times, we become so busy doing good that we burn ourselves out and do not have the rest necessary to maintain a strong and dynamic relationship with God and others close to us. Often, we have far too many good things that can take up our time rather than the focus to discern and evaluate how to spend our time doing the best things.



This is a worthy conversation, but it is not the focus of what we mean by boundaries here. In the context of preparing your emerging young adult to launch, we are talking about how much we as parents take control and manage the lives of our teenager versus how much he or she manages his or her own life. In essence, *boundaries mean how much your child decides in his or her life and how much power you maintain as a parent.*

Decision-Making: Authoritarian vs. Authoritative

There are traditionally two factors that go into this idea of decision-making and power. The first is that of *hierarchy*. Generally, it makes sense to us that as a parent you are above your children in the hierarchy and, thus, have more responsibilities for outcomes. You naturally have more power in making decisions. For instance, if the head of a company or department has the ultimate responsibility to provide service for others, then it makes sense that he or she has more power than any other person when deciding what the company or department should do or how it should perform. He or she is in charge hierarchically and will reap the most rewards (and suffer the most consequences) for the failure of the company or department.

Most good and effective leaders, however, will tell you that being in power and utilizing power wisely are not the same thing. This is where the second concept of boundaries is most helpful in deciding what kind of power the person with ultimate responsibility will exercise. The wise leader who is in charge usually does not keep a *rigid* boundary between him or herself and others.

A rigid boundary tends to isolate the leader from the rest of the team. The isolation further complicates good decision-making because it likely cuts off much-needed information that could be utilized in the decision-making process that makes service of goals more successful. But most devastating, *rigid boundaries* and *isolation* from the leader robs others of motivation and responsibility. If the leader is set on making power decisions based only on his or her thoughts and desires, then others will simply carry out the leader's wishes with little passion and regard for the consequences. This kind of rigidity of power around decision-making is called an *authoritarian* style.



When put into the context of parenting, *authoritarian parents* see themselves as the ultimate power with regards to their children. “If you live under my roof, you will do things my way!” is a common refrain here. You can easily imagine how a child would feel in such an environment: powerless to affect change, resentful toward the authoritarian parent, and unmotivated to take responsibility. The child may do what the parent says, but he or she learns very little about being an adult because he or she can only think of escaping such an environment.

There is, however, another kind of decision that a wise leader can make with regard to power. Even though the power is vested in the leader, he or she can decide to have a *permeable* boundary that allows him or her to gather and integrate other information from other individuals. This gives the leader important information about how others see the problems and also provides the benefit of proposing solutions that the leader does not see for him or herself.

Most importantly, this kind of decision-making input from all of those involved transforms those being led from spectators to participants. Members of such a group are much more likely to feel that they are “stakeholders” in the outcomes and are willing to take greater responsibility in that kind of atmosphere. Although the leader is clearly still the most powerful and most responsible in the group, he or she receives input and guides the team more effectively. In families, we call this kind of wise leadership an *authoritative* style.



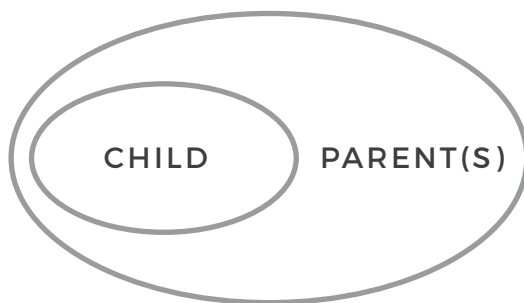
Authoritative parents know how to use their power and influence in such a way as to engage their growing children, empowering them to contribute and be more responsible, both now and in the future. This style fits with the framework of an apprentice or mentor relationship.

As parents, we certainly have the power and responsibility of that role. But the way that we model our power and responsibility should be one in which we help our children grow by our mentorship where they learn to make decisions and become more responsible with less assistance. It is no accident that Paul himself, just before he writes about the responsibility of parents toward children, says this:

“God loves you and has chosen you as his own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek, and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. Love is more important than anything else. It is what ties everything completely together.” —Colossians 3:12-14

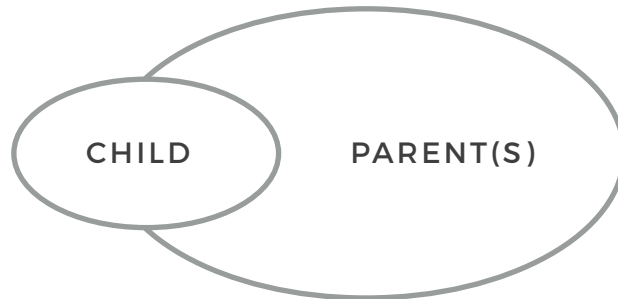
These kinds of virtues and relationships do not and cannot come from an *authoritarian style* of wielding power, demanding that growing children follow our rules. Instead, this kind of relationship comes from wise and patient parents who are willing to *teach* and *guide* growing children to take more responsibility over time. The wise parent uses this process to help his or her child learn from mistakes while staying emotionally connected and supportive.

It is fair to ask, “How do I make that transition where my emerging adult learns responsibility in an effective manner?” When your child was very young, it was right to think about the boundary between you and your child to look something like the following illustration:



You and your child functioned, for the most part, as *one unit*. Because your child was totally dependent upon you, decisions about all aspects of daily life were left up to you. This kind of boundary between you and your child is “enmeshed” because it needs to be very close and the parent needs all the knowledge, transparency, and power to be able to care for and nurture the child.

However, as the child begins to grow and starts moving into school and peer circles, it becomes very clear that the child is showing those early signs of independence and individual thought. He or she is still very much dependent and the parent certainly is the larger and more dominant figure, but the child starts operating with thoughts, secrets, and actions that are *more independent*.

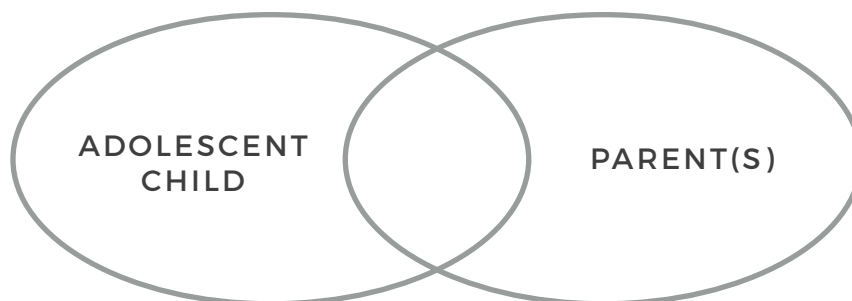


In adolescence, this goes one step further, and we see the type of picture that you are most likely seeing as your emerging adult moves toward leaving home. The truth is that he or she is just as capable as you are in many ways; you cannot *make* him or her do anything anymore. “Obeying” your wishes is more dependent upon the adolescent cooperating with you.



The wise parent, as illustrated below, begins to realize that this is the time where the young adult needs to exercise more *independent decision-making* and *control* in his or her life. It is helpful at this junction to relinquish some decision-making over to your emerging adult, and as a parent, play more of a *supportive* role for him or her.

Your young adult will make both good decisions and bad decisions, and both will have consequences. If, as a parent, you resist the temptation to comment on the decisions or try to prevent unpleasant consequences, but instead are supportive when help is needed, then the young adult will likely stay close and feel more freedom to follow your advice without resentment.



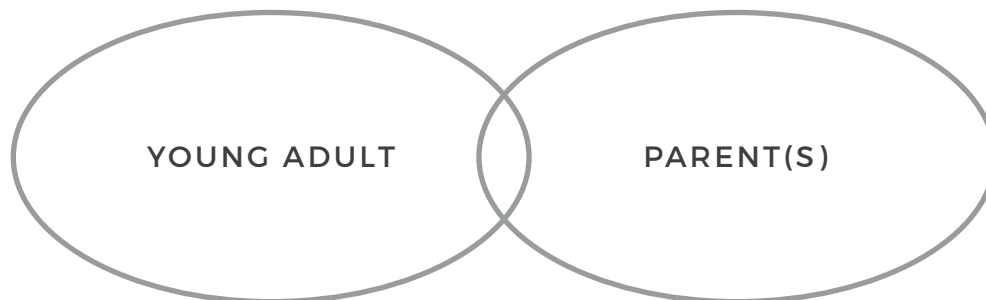
This is not to say that there will not be times where the parent exercises more control. For instance, if the adolescent is making a decision about attending an unsafe party where there will be drinking and lack of supervision, the parent would want to step in and make a safe decision. If, however, the teenager is trying to make a decision concerning how to spend his or her money on a game or sports equipment, the parent is wise to let the teenager make the decision and live with the consequences of doing one or the other.



The bottom line here is that you want your adolescent not to experience a rigid boundary where he or she feels controlled and is still subject to all of your decisions. Instead, consider viewing your teenager growing in competence and capable of making good decisions. He or she needs to feel as if you are present as a safety net of support, without being subservient to your power. This type of boundary is *flexible* and empowers the young adult to launch well into adulthood.

Ready for Launching

At the time of launching, however, there still is an important transition for the parent to make in helping his or her young adult claim adulthood. As illustrated below, *it is important for the parent to let the young adult fully stand on his or her own two feet*. This involves recognizing that not only will the young adult make almost all of his or her own decisions, but also that he or she will likely have closer relationships with peers, coworkers, friends, and perhaps romantic partners than with you as a parent.



It may or may not mean that the young adult is closer to those new relationships than he or she is to you, but it does mean that in the transition to adulthood he or she will likely stand much more independently and secure. It means that *you as a parent make room for the strength, authority, and resources that exist in the young adult*.



Most parents still tend to think of their young adult as a more evolved version of an adolescent—meaning that the child is still a “kid” and that the parent still has the ultimate authority. While the young adult will continue to grow and mature for many years to come (as you do as a parent), *it is much more helpful to think of the young adult as another adult who brings resources to the family that you do not possess.*



Often, when young adults go to college and then return home for summer break, both parties revert back to the adolescent stage where the child has no responsibilities and the parent tries to exercise full decision-making power. This also often occurs when a young adult begins working or searching for work and returns home to live for a period of time while he or she establishes some financial stability. However, both the parent and young adult can work to embrace the transition toward recognizing another functioning adult in the household.

For instance, the young adult may take on responsibility for house maintenance, cooking, budgeting, and car maintenance in the same way that parents have those responsibilities. Instead of working within the old hierarchy, a cooperative process develops where adults in the household can fully embrace one another as adults.

Parents can and do offer wonderful support to their young adults who launch, and that is also a part of family legacy and functioning. But it is clear that as the emerging adult launches, we must *think about the person differently*. The parent must transition into thinking about the new adult as a peer who will bring new contributions to the family. In short, the parent gradually transitions to seeing the young adult no longer as a child, but rather as a fully functioning equal with resources to contribute to the family legacy.

Preparing to Launch

Mrs. Silva is now talking with Michael about how to finance college and share responsibility to pay for his schooling.

Mrs. Silva: *We still have a couple more years to think about you going to college and we have put away some money to help cover expenses, but we'd like to get your thoughts about going to college.*

Michael: Well, right now I'm still interested in going to school out of state, but that will cost more. I dunno, I was thinking about taking out some loans and finding a part-time job to make it work.

Mrs. Silva: Sounds like a good start. How about other expenses? Like rent, room and board, books, food?

Michael: I haven't worked out all the details yet, but I'm sure things will work out.

Mrs. Silva: You're smart, Michael. What do you think about finding a summer job to make some money this year?

Michael: Yeah, I'm open to working a part-time job and making some extra cash.

Mrs. Silva: Where would you like to look? How can your dad and I help you?

Michael: I'm not sure at the moment. Can you ask around people at church to see if they have any opportunities available?

Mrs. Silva: Sure, we could ask around. You are also good with searching online. See if there is anything there that you can find. You can also call around locally to see if places are hiring or have any summer internships.

Michael: Yeah, okay.

SESSION 9: EXERCISES



1. Think about the type of parent you have been over the course of the life of your child. Do you believe that you have been more *authoritarian* or *authoritative* in the use of your parental power? Think of an example in the last few years that illustrates your approach.



2. Find an opportunity to talk with your young adult about how you have made decisions in the past. Talk with one another and get some ideas on what has been helpful to the family and what could be improved upon, especially when it comes to making decisions and providing support.



3. Take some time to identify the resources that your young adult brings to the process of launching that will make him or her a mature and fully functioning adult person. Find an opportunity to share your thoughts with your young adult.

Session 10:

HANDLING ROUGH SPOTS

We cannot kid ourselves: helping young adults to launch is a process where we regularly get on our knees and ask God for grace and wisdom. If anything, it is absolutely essential to cut yourself some slack and recognize that things will not go perfectly and that mistakes will be made along the way. As mentioned before, a major element of adulthood is learning to grow both emotionally and spiritually when things go wrong. It is completely normal to make mistakes by saying too much, giving too many opinions, not offering enough support, or losing control of your own emotions. The important thing is to have the grace necessary to learn from your mistakes, stay connected emotionally, and seek solutions together.



You will encounter rough spots. There might not be a smooth road in the transition for your young adult. One of the common bumps along the road toward adult independence is returning home to live for a season after having moved away. This is neither a disaster nor a failure, and is actually very common in today's economy. It does not mean that your young adult has to go back to being an adolescent. It does mean that you and your young adult have to work together to facilitate a re-launch. This includes maintaining a working plan and providing a safe harbor.

Maintain a Working Plan



Many of the issues with learning how to manage the problems that come up during launching can be handled by working with *clear goals* and *planning*. We live in a postmodern age in which adolescents and young adults like to keep all options open so they have a high level of ambiguity when it comes to making commitments and decisions. While older generations remember a time when making a commitment to a vocation,

relationship, or even a congregation meant that you were closing off both opportunities and commitments to other directions, today's emerging adults experience adulthood differently. Their tendency to see numerous viable options for the immediate and long-term future may cause them to reject planning or commitment to any particular pathway.



This is one area where you can be helpful in the mentor/apprentice relationship. From the position of seeing your young adult more as an equal adult with resources, have discussions concerning the future and the plans that your young adult is considering. Be cautious about offering unsolicited advice, but carefully listen and respond thoughtfully when asked for your opinion. You can make clear your expectation that the young adult will come up with goals and a plan, but you cannot force a particular plan or execute it.

What happens if your young adult does not come up with a plan? You need to think about how you would respond if this adult were not your child. In other words, you likely would be willing to help and give some support to another adult who asked for help, but you likely would be unwilling to foot the bill for someone to freeload from you while taking zero responsibility. You do want to support and enable your young adult to develop, implement, and reach goals. This support, however, is not unlimited.

After your young adult indicates a goal and direction, work with him or her on specifying measurable objectives, consequences, and options should the objective prove to be unattainable, as well as how much help, support, and money you can provide for the plan. This will vary from situation to situation, but it will be at least a fair conclusion that any effective plan for a young adult moving toward independence should include more work on the young adult's part with you adding helpful, yet supplemental support and guidance. You should be suspicious of any plan where you as a parent are working harder or providing more than your young adult.

Providing a Safe Harbor

Often, when there seems to be repeated failure on the part of the young adult for taking responsibility and growing up, it can become both depressing and emotionally taxing on parents. Too often, we get messages from others—or give them to ourselves—that there is something wrong with our child or that we have failed as a parent. While it may be helpful to look at ourselves and face our shortcomings head on, blame is unhelpful at this point.

It is essential, therefore, that both you and your young adult keep your eyes on two primary things.

First, you both should work in an adult-to-adult fashion to solve problems. There is little profit in shaming, accusation, or over-analysis of the past. Providing a safe place for

your growing young adult and yourself means that you must focus on the issues to be resolved without attacking mistakes or character flaws of the past. In this way, you not only will assist your young adult to learn and grow, but you will be growing yourself.

Second, always remember to be committed to the relationship as the most important thing you possess. Little is accomplished when a parent and child cut each other off either emotionally or physically. There is no doubt that at times the work of growing up will be rough. Yet the emerging adult must have the confidence that he or she will always have a *safe harbor* to return to in order to work out the issues and problems of life. Above all, your young adult is your child, an essential part of your family. There may be limits to how much support you can provide or how long you can assist and help, but it needs to be clear that emotionally you are always available to your young adult and that you will be an ongoing resource.

SESSION 10: EXERCISES



1. Think about some of the difficult times that you have had as an adult and the people who provided resources and help to you in those times. How did you eventually find your way out, and what did you learn from the process?



2. Find an opportunity to talk about one or two of these difficult times with your young adult. Expand this conversation about some of the things that seem difficult or daunting to your young adult such as college choices, career opportunities, or relationship decisions.



3. If your emerging adult has some goals in mind in terms of direction, try to have a conversation with him or her about some of the specific ways that you can be a resource. What would be the potential consequences of the change in direction? How would you like to be of support or resource during a difficult time?



4. Take time now and reassure your young adult of the emotional connection and commitment that you have to one another. Reassure him or her that he or she will always have a “safe harbor” with you, even when there may be practical limits on the amount of financial or physical help that you can provide.

Help your kids

CULTIVATE LASTING FAITH

Want more resources like this as you journey with your growing kids?

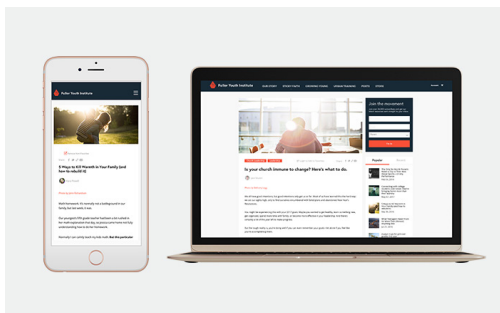
The following resources feature research-driven insights and advice for helping your teenager or young adult make faith their own.



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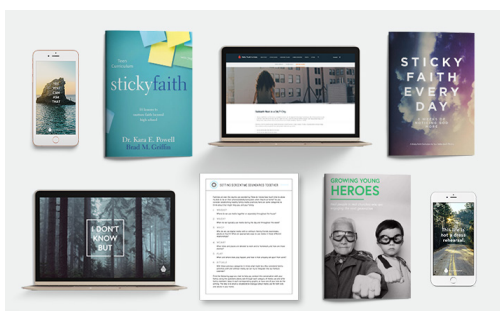
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