

NO LONGER LITTLE: KEY CONCERNS OF YOUNG ADULTS

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Chaperoning a high school class trip with my husband a few years ago gave me valuable insights into the young adult. One particular eighteen-year-old boy hovered around us during periods of unstructured free time. He'd make a comment or two, linger awhile, and then join his buddies. On the last day, I turned to find Nathan directly behind me, holding a large bag. "Looks like you had some luck shopping, Nathan?" I asked.

"I think so. I mean...I never bought anything like this before."

"Can I see it?"

Nathan tentatively reached into the bag and pulled out a classy wool jacket.

"That's nice Nathan...I bet it looks great on you."

"I'm not sure it fits me right."

"Is it the right size?"

Nathan pulled off his gray hooded sweatshirt, with the name of his high school emblazoned across the front. He put on the new wool jacket.

My husband adjusted the shoulders and tugged on the front. "You still got some room there, but it looks like a good fit, Nate. Don't throw it in the washer though....I did that once to a wool sweater. Not a good idea."

Nathan shyly caught my eye. "So you think I should keep it?"

Transition. Change. Growing up. Literally and symbolically, young adults try on new "clothes": new ideas, new behaviors, and new roles in family and in society. They are moving from a familiar, dependent role in family and society to an unfamiliar, more independent role. Based on a recent interview with a 23-year-old woman, and my own joys and challenges as mother, pastor's wife, and family therapist, the following are three concerns in the hearts of young adults, and three effective parental responses:

Concern: "Do I measure up?"

Young adults desperately want others to think well of them. They spend immense amounts of emotional energy on "What do others think about me?" and "How do I compare?" Young women often worry about *saying* the right thing to gain approval from others. Young men can be more performance-driven in seeking acceptance: "I need to

do this to be cool, to be included.” If young men and women feel unaccepted, they often try *whatever it takes* to be noticed, prove their worth, feel important, or get attention and attachment.

Effective Response: Convey through attitude, words, and behavior that you not only love them, but that you also *like them, and they are pretty darn fun to be around*. Young adults sometimes feel that their parents’ love is obligatory, i.e.: “they have to love me, because they’re my parents.” But if young adults sense that their parents simply enjoy who they are as persons, and that any of their accomplishments are secondary in importance to their innate like-ability, their self-confidence is bolstered.

Concern for young women: “Am I beautiful?”

Effective Response: In spite of societal emphasis on gender equality (career choices, employment wages, etc.), young women still need to feel that their physical self is thought well of. In particular, a father’s blessing, whether it is genuine words, respectful admiring looks, or approving attitudes toward his daughter, are especially needed. Often fathers truly believe and think that their daughters are pretty. But to be more overt in communicating this to your daughter will help your daughter’s positive perception of herself. It will influence her overall confidence. It also influences her choices in male relationships.

Concern for young men: “Are they proud of me?”

Effective Response: Young men need to know that the passions of their hearts, whether that be fixing cars, playing piano, painting pictures, or heading up a Canadian hunting expedition, are accepted *and not thought less of if different from their parent’s own dreams for them*. Young men need unconditional acceptance of their dreams and passions, regardless of how they match up with parental expectations. Validating the personhood of the young man, regardless of how smoothly he is navigating the logistics of life, is a confidence builder for him.

Whether male or female, if your young adults are making poor choices, separating their behaviors from who they are as persons of worth and dignity can be helpful. Giving verbal and non-verbal messages of, “I know you’ll figure it out,” “I believe in you” and “You already have what it takes,” can help the young person in decision-making. The handing over of age-appropriate responsibility coupled with love and respect can be challenging. The following books on teenagers also include helpful chapters on the young adult: *Boundaries with Teenagers* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend and *Love and Logic for Teens* by Foster Cline and Jim Fay.

“Anybody can find character defects and performance flaws in another.
But it takes the grace of God to look beyond an impulsive Peter to see in him
the rock of the Jerusalem church.”

(Neil T. Anderson, *Victory Over Darkness*).

As parents, God's grace will also not fail us, as we seek His best for our young adults. As for Nathan? The following spring I saw him sitting with his buddies at his last track meet.

He sure looked sharp in that new wool jacket.

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