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Adolescence Isn't Terminal

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What Planet Am I On?



“CAN I COME WITH you, Daddy? Can I? I could help out at the book table.”

Hannah, then thirteen years old, looked at me with those adorable, pleading eyes. How could I say no? But inwardly I smiled to myself, fully aware of what I was speaking about at the conference Hannah was asking to attend with me—information that Hannah lacked.

“Sure, honey, I’d love to have you come along,” I said.

Instantly Hannah got suspicious. “What are you talking about tonight?”

“Adolescence,” I said.

“Oh no,” Hannah said. “Please, Daddy, please, please, *please* don’t mention me. Don’t say *anything* about me.”

Suddenly my daughter started laughing. She hit herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand and said, “Oh no! I just gave you material for tonight, didn’t I?”

Indeed she had!

At thirteen, Hannah was just breaking into that rollicking, fun, treacherous, frustrating, meaningful, and wonderful time we call adolescence. It’s a contradictory period, when young teens want

to be the center of the world at the same time that they don't want any attention drawn to them! They want to be perfect in all they do and in how they look, yet they also desperately desire to be just like everyone else in their peer group.

The only thing more difficult than being an adolescent is trying to parent one. I know. My wife, Sande, and I have walked three children through this process, are taking our fourth—Hannah—through it even as I write, and are getting ready for child number five—Lauren—to join what I affectionately refer to as “the hormone group.”

When our kids hit that magical moment of adolescence, most of the parenting rules that helped us for the first decade of their lives become outdated. Everything changes, even as our kids change. We need to adapt, adjust, and grow in the way we relate to our kids if we want to maintain a meaningful, healthy, and strong relationship during this admittedly turbulent time.

Perhaps it would surprise you to know Sande would agree with me that our favorite stage in parenting our kids has been their time in adolescence. Though this season can be difficult, it can also be very rewarding.

I'd like to invite you on a journey of exploring what is going on inside your children's minds, bodies, and souls during the ten to twelve years that mark adolescence. Although I'm a trained psychologist and counselor, I think my best training has come at home—as I'll explain in just a moment!

The Family Counselor

I came home in a great mood but soon walked into a tornado. The group I had just spoken to was unusually responsive. They laughed in all the right places, whipped out the hankies just when I hoped they would, nodded their heads when I dropped in the insights—to be honest, it couldn't have gone better. I had an opportunity to talk with several couples afterward and really felt that I had made a difference in their lives. As a psychologist and

speaker, I couldn't ask for more. That's why I came home feeling so great.

Now let me explain the tornado.

I live in Tucson, Arizona, the only place in the world where water costs more than gasoline. On my way back from the airport, I reached the outskirts of our development, where I was greeted by a little stream of water running down the street.

What idiot has this much money to burn? I thought to myself.

So imagine my, uh, pleasure when I followed that stream all the way to its source—the Leman outside faucet.

Obviously the kids had been playing with the hose. When they had finished, instead of turning off the faucet, they dropped the hose and thereby proceeded to water half the desert.

What sweet, sweet kids I have, and what tender, paternal thoughts I carried through the front door.

Actually my first words upon entering our hallway resembled a waterfall's roar: *"Who left the water running in front of the house?"*

There was a sudden dead silence, finally broken by my precious wife's voice: "Oh, he's home. The family counselor."

Man, was I slammed! And rightfully so. I put down my bags and did what I should have done in the first place: I went back outside, turned off the hose, came back inside, and hugged my family.

I share this story to illustrate that all families have their moments of tension, and anyone can have his times of imperfection and shortcoming, no matter how many letters appear after his name. I have learned as much from being wrong as I have learned from being right. I don't speak as a perfect authority but as one who has been on the journey of parenting adolescents for quite a while. I've learned I am just as capable as the next guy of saying exactly the wrong thing and hurting tender, budding teenage feelings by suggesting that a certain boy is special when my daughter would rather not talk about that just then.

Throughout this book, I want to be a kind friend who shares some of his stories about surviving the adolescence of his own children. Whatever you've lived through, I've probably experienced it myself. Because of my experience, however, I won't put you off with easy answers or a know-it-all attitude. One thing I *can* say, however, is that adolescence isn't terminal (it just feels like it). I've seen three kids come out on the other side, and if you go through this stage in the right way, believe me, there are tremendous rewards awaiting you as you relate to your adult children.

My goals are realistic. I jokingly told one group that the primary goal of getting our children through the teenage years is actually quite simple: to get them into their twenties without having them kill someone or being killed themselves! If they can avoid jail in the process, so much the better.

But seriously, the reason for this new book is simple: The kids we're raising now are from a different generation; old rules no longer apply. Let's look at "Planet Adolescence" in the new millennium.

Planet Adolescence 2001

When exactly do children enter that stage we call adolescence? I've got a good test for you. You know your sons or daughters are embarking on this period when you see them sink down into the car seat as you drive past some kids on the corner. As soon as you see this near universal moment, you know your children are entering that period in life when they desire to be free from parental restraint. It could begin when your children are as young as ten, and almost always strikes by the time they are twelve or thirteen. And when it happens, you know that for the next decade, you're going to be orbiting around Planet Adolescence.

While adolescence is something we've all experienced ourselves, we make a big mistake if we assume our children's experi-

ence will be just like our own. I'm probably not the only person who feels as if my kids turned thirteen on a planet different from the one I was born on.

During a four-year period, CBS conducted scientific polls of more than 2,300 students (from various high schools) scheduled to graduate in the year 2000; CBS also followed and interviewed 200 students more closely. The results were interesting—and sobering.

In 1997 a surprisingly large 43 percent knew of someone who had tried to commit suicide, a number that got even worse by graduation, with 70 percent of them knowing people who had tried to kill themselves.

As freshmen, less than 25 percent knew someone who was openly gay. As seniors, 66 percent did.

There were also some encouraging signs, including the fact that 46 percent of the students felt that their relationship with their parents had improved to excellent (up from 34 percent).¹ Unfortunately that still means more than half were not satisfied at home.

Another study found that illicit drug use doubles during the adolescent years. While 28.3 percent of surveyed teens admitted to using illegal drugs as eighth graders, over half—54.7 percent—of the students in the twelfth grade made the same admission.² Yet another study found that 39 percent of students surveyed had used tobacco at least once by the end of seventh grade.³

In spite of these troubling statistics, today's teens are almost comically optimistic about their financial future. According to an Ernst and Young survey, 30 percent of college students polled expect to be millionaires in their forties. More than one in five expect to retire in their forties or earlier! More than 60 percent plan on retiring at a younger age than their parents did. If you can believe it, only 25 percent believe they will never be millionaires.⁴

Not only are today's kids a little more adventurous and a lot more optimistic than we were, but the things that would have made us blush as adolescents are second nature to them. While I served as assistant dean of students at the University of Arizona in the seventies, I saw my share of provocative girlie posters—but now women have posters of men striking roughly the same poses, something you never saw back then. I read with interest an Ann Landers column in which a mom complained that her fourteen-year-old son's girlfriend gave him a collage of pictures of naked women—including cutout photos of side, front, and rear views. Call me old, but fourteen-year-old girls didn't do that sort of thing when I was in junior high!

This can create almost humorous misunderstandings between the generations. I got a chuckle when professional tennis player Anna Kournikova—who at the time of this writing had yet to win a professional tournament but whose knockout looks have given her great fame—complained during a press conference organized to promote some undergarments that she endorses, “I'm not here to talk about my personal life. I'm here to talk about bras.”

In the world many of us grew up in, husbands and wives couldn't be seen in the same bed on television, so producers created the marital double-bed set. Most of today's kids have already seen everything that goes on in bed—and the scenes on TV many times are not even between husbands and wives.

Planet Adolescence 2001 is in a different galaxy from the one we grew up in. Parenting rules that worked for your toddlers and preadolescents won't serve you well in this new age. For instance, when your kids were toddlers, you were able to control their environment so that many of the negative influences we just mentioned could be minimized. You could control what they watched on television and the friends with whom they played.

With adolescents, unfortunately, those days are gone. As we will see later, the days of controlling are over. You can still influence your children, but you can't control them.

You're also going to have to accept that your children may develop a different agenda for their lives than the one you've laid out for them. Adolescence is all about trying on independence—and that means your children will develop their own concerns.

Different Concerns

Along about age twelve—but perhaps as early as age ten—your children will start to grow away from you. They'll become more dependent on their peers, and in reaching toward adulthood, they may even act as if they regret ever having any association with such “uncool” parents.

This is a normal developmental stage that the wise parent will have fun with rather than resent. One time one of my daughters wanted to thank me for something, so she said, “I'll do anything you want!”

“Great!” I said. “Let's go walk around the mall together while I wear Bermuda shorts, black socks, and white tennis shoes!”

I soon found out that no teenage daughter's love extends *that* far! And to be honest, I didn't expect it to.

Also, about this age your teenagers' concerns will be different from your own. One recent study found that while parents and teens share the same top concern, other concerns diverge widely.⁵ The following table illustrates the differing concerns. Each number represents how each group ranked their concerns. For example, both teens and parents ranked HIV and STDs as their number one concern. Teens then ranked drinking and driving as their number two concern, but parents listed it as their number nine concern, with car accidents as their number two concern.

Top Concerns	Teens	Parents
HIV and STDs (sexually transmitted diseases)	1	1
Drinking and driving	2	9
Pregnancy	3	4
Guns, knives, and other weapons	4	3
Suicide	5	17
Car accidents	7	2
Casual sex	12	5

Two things strike me about this poll. First, most parents are unaware of how much a topic suicide is among today's teens. That's a dangerous omission, which we'll thoroughly deal with later in this book. Second, notice that casual sex isn't even among the top ten concerns of today's youth. They don't see it as a problem—they view it as an opportunity! Once again, we're going to have to do some work here to help parents and teens come together.

The Girls Scouts of America commissioned a poll of girls ages eight to twelve—preadolescents—to determine their top concerns. Unfortunately the study revealed that most young girls today are preoccupied with body image and relationships. One respondent, a fifth grader, told researchers, "I've been counting calories. I'm doing 1,000 to 2,000 calories a day."

Just as sobering, the study found that while preteens want to talk to their parents about these issues, they often refrain from doing so because they believe "our parents do not want to hear about these issues." One fifth grader said, "All [my parents] say is I'm too young and I shouldn't even think about stuff like that until I am sixteen."⁶

This is what I'm talking about when I say you'll make a terrible mistake if you assume that the concerns you had as an adolescent will mirror the concerns weighing on your children's minds today. We're living in a different age and a different world. If you

already have a great relationship with your preadolescent—fantastic! But you still will want to pay close attention to the advice in this book. I've seen so many relationships go sour within twelve months or less of a child's hitting puberty.

If your relationship has already been rocky, take heart! As a father I've steered several children through this tumultuous stage, and as a counselor I've worked with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of adolescent children. While I can't guarantee you smooth sailing, I can guarantee that adolescence isn't terminal—eventually those self-centered, insecure, independent-minded teens grow up into productive, caring, and balanced adults.

If in the midst of the struggle to raise your kid right, you wonder whether it's worth the effort, let me assure you that it is. Your son or daughter may grow up to affect millions of other lives—and the way you raise them could have a major impact on whether that influence is for good or for ill.

Let's look at the wildly divergent tales of two adults who have just recently passed through adolescence and are having an impact on their world.

A Tale of Two Teens

Marshall Mathers's father left home when Marshall was just six months old. Once Marshall became a teenager, he tried to contact his father, but his dad never replied. That left Marshall to make do with a mom who was filled with a lot of anger. A friend of Marshall's recalls how Marshall's mom came home from shopping one time, and after the boys helped unload the groceries, she told Marshall to get out, using plenty of expletives in the process.

According to the friend, "He'd get kicked out every week. There has not been a day in that house when there's not some kind of chaos."

You wouldn't expect much out of Marshall, would you? One magazine described him as a "scrawny white mullet-head from a

broken home in a dead-end suburb of Detroit.” Unfortunately Marshall Mathers, a.k.a. “Eminem” (as in “M and M”—*Marshall Mathers*), has become one of the most influential and successful rap singers of our day, described by one reporter as “the foul-mouthed prince of hate and fury.”⁷

Eminem boldly and proudly proclaims that God sent him to make people angry. His manager, Paul Rosenberg, says that the rap star is getting angrier by the day: “He never lets water run off his back.”⁸

The rapper deals with his anger toward his father in a public fashion. One of his rhymes goes like this: “When you see my dad, tell him I slit his throat in this dream I had.”

I can’t repeat the lyrics Marshall uses regarding his mom. They are too offensive even to report, some of the most vile things a son could say about his mother.

Marshall’s wife, Kim, has had to endure this wealthy young star’s anger as well. Eminem has a tattoo on his stomach with his wife’s name, but it’s hardly flattering: KIM: ROT IN PIECES. In several of his songs, Marshall talks about beating up and even killing his wife. After a performance in Detroit, in which Eminem was particularly vile, Kim left the hall, went home, and slit her wrists. Fortunately she was discovered and rescued by her mother and Marshall’s half brother.⁹

Not surprisingly, Marshall’s life is a mess. His mother has sued him, and at the time of this writing, Marshall and Kim are headed for a divorce.

Shockingly, Eminem is an award-winning performer who garnered three MTV awards in 2000. His *Marshall Mathers LP* is one of the best-selling hip-hop albums of all time, remaining on the *Billboard* Top Ten list for months. His hate-filled lyrics have found a raucous welcome from young adolescents all over this country. Eminem is leading our kids into a verbal filth unknown to previous generations.

What happened here? Without a dad and with a mom who

faced her own share of problems, Marshall grew up largely on his own, and the results speak for themselves. Adolescents don't "naturally" grow up into productive, law-abiding, respectful people.

Does that mean that every adolescent from a single-parent home is headed for trouble? By no means. Let's look at adolescent number two.

As a twentysomething superstar baseball player, shortstop Alex Rodriguez has a lot of things going for him—more money than he can spend, plenty of fame, people clamoring after his autograph, crowds yelling out his name, and little boys putting his poster on their bedroom walls.

But the world's adulation can never completely fill a cup left empty by a parent. That's why I was caught short when I heard Alex talking about one of the most significant events in his life. You see, until recently Alex hadn't seen his dad since the fourth grade. Though Alex's career was going well (he was chosen as the all-star shortstop during the 2000 season), he still felt a sense of loss because he was alienated from his dad.

I'll let Alex explain it in his own words, which he posted on his Web site.

My father left our family when I was in the fourth grade. I always thought he would come back, but he never did. It broke my young heart. I spoke with him over the phone a handful of times until my teen years. Then I closed my heart to him.

My family has pleaded with me over the years to reconcile. I constantly refused. Dad had tried in his own way to reach out to me as an adult. He approached me before a winter game just after I turned pro. I shook hands with him but couldn't say anything. I made it clear I didn't want to talk with him. It just hurt too much. The pain was too deep.

As I've grown as a professional baseball player, I've dealt

with the pressures of expectations, the pressures of performing in front of thousands, the pressures of a game on the line. But when it came to my dad, I couldn't deal with the pressure of seeing him face-to-face. . . .

Just before the turn of the millennium, a friend suggested I seek out my father to start the new century with an open heart. I brushed it off. Then the father of one of my former coaches passed away. He had given me some words of encouragement to reach out to my father. So when he passed away, it hit home. Recently I've felt stronger. I've made some strides personally. So I figured, what the heck, I'll go for it.

So, I called my dad and invited him to our series in Minnesota. He showed up! And we spent a few days together. It was the first time he'd seen me play in the Major Leagues in person. It was great. . . . Father's Day was perfect. My on-field gift to him was going four-for-five with a home run.

We met for the first time in a very private fashion. I was nervous. And I could tell he was nervous. We shook hands and then hugged. And then we talked about a lot of things.¹⁰

As a wealthy, successful baseball player, Alex has the world at his feet. He is adored, cheered, and catered to, but none of that could completely still the sense of loss represented by an absent father. Many boys dream about making it to the big leagues, but "Arod" is one big leaguer who spent his time dreaming about making it back to being with his dad.

Here's my point: During adolescence your children may act as if you are the least significant person on the face of the planet. They may treat you as if you are nothing more than a nuisance, a bother, and a big pain—but in their hearts, they are crying out for your attention, your love, your concern, and even your guidance.

The trick is learning to provide that attention, love, concern, and guidance in a way that your kids can receive them.

Marshall Mathers and Alex Rodriguez are good reminders that today's kids become tomorrow's headlines. Some will work for good causes, raise families of their own, and be productive members of our society. Others will attack, assault, and create havoc wherever they go.

A number of self-help books have stressed how important it is, in the words of Steven Covey, to "begin with the end in mind." That is, we should start a project with a view toward the intended outcome. I think that's pretty good advice for raising kids. What kind of kids do you want to have? Do you want to raise selfish kids who whine and moan and get by in life doing as little as they can? Or do you want to raise kids who contribute to society, live out their faith, and leave behind a proud legacy?

If you think ahead of time about who you want your kids to be when they reach adulthood, you stand a much better chance of making it through the murky atmosphere of Planet Adolescence.

Our Road Map

Here's where we're headed on this journey through today's adolescence. We'll begin our exploration running. I know that some of you are desperate, so I'm putting the most basic and concise information right up front. Chapter 2 gives you twenty rules for surviving your children's adolescence.

In chapters 3 and 4 we'll explore the power of peer pressure, talking first about how peer pressure percolates (hint: the process starts when your children are still babies!) and then about how to steer your adolescent through it. In chapter 5 I challenge you to provide the most stable home life possible, giving your children what some now refer to as "the fairy-tale lifestyle." Chapter 6 looks at how to pass on the values we believe in, and chapter 7 will help you navigate those everyday hassles of living with adolescents.

In chapter 8 I'll talk about how raising adolescents is a risky business. This chapter might make some of you a little anxious—but you need to hear what I have to say. In chapter 9 I take on the topic of toxic parents, exploring parenting styles that are guaranteed to blow up in your face once your children reach their teens. After reading this chapter, you'll be aptly warned.

From there chapter 10 provides some of my most unorthodox advice, followed by chapter 11, which deals with love and dating. Since many parents tell me they need help dealing with their adolescents' sexual issues, I have included two chapters about sex and the adolescent. Chapter 12 helps you talk to your teens about sex, especially about sexual abstinence, and chapter 13 discusses some of the more delicate aspects of teen sexual expression. The final chapter looks at the troublesome issues that all parents want their teens to avoid: suicide, substance abuse, eating disorders, hate groups, and the like.

We've got a lot of ground to cover, so let's get started.

Remember:

- Adolescence is a much different experience for our kids from what it was for us.
- "Good" kids and "bad" kids both share the same deep desire: They want a real, deep, and meaningful relationship with their parents.
- The best way to steer our kids through the stage of adolescence is to know ahead of time what type of children we want to raise.