



The preteen years are hard for parents *and* kids! Learn how to navigate these years with grace and love.

This book shares five real-life discipleship building blocks for raising preteens. The book's key areas—prayer, Bible reading, family relationships, conversation, and service—provide a clear roadmap for parents of preteens!

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## Chapter One

# BEYOND MOOD SWINGS

### *Preteen Identity in Crisis*

Imagine standing in a room full of mirrors, each reflecting a different version of yourself—this is what preteens experience as they start to question their identity: *Who am I? What makes me unique? Am I defined by my talents, looks, or popularity?* These questions are a normal part of their development. They look to their gifts, talents, appearance, and social standing for answers. The allure of name-brand clothes, the desire to emulate a favorite singer or social media influencer, and the need to be liked by peers all play into their search for significance and value.

One thing I (Leslie) learned from my youngest daughter, Lila, is the importance of grounding one's identity in an enduring foundation and not just in achievements. An excellent volleyball player by seventh grade, the game had become an idol for her. Then, during a mid-season warmup, a freak accident and a broken finger ended her season. She was devastated, mostly because this changed her identity.

Lila has spoken about how God used that injury to help her realize that if volleyball were to go away forever, she would still have value as

a child of God. *He* had a plan for her. That's a pretty valuable life lesson to learn when you're young!

## A PRETEEN'S REALITY

*Leslie*

What do you remember about your preteen years? I hadn't thought about mine for years until I started working on this project. My family moved three times before my teen years. I went to three schools in three different states, constantly making new friends and having to adjust. I often felt lost and out of place.

I also felt uncomfortable with how I looked. I have very curly hair and, at my request, my mom allowed me to cut my hair short and layered. I looked like a poodle. Add both of those things with the insecurity and all the emotions that come with being a preteen, and I struggled.

Once a guy I liked came and sat beside me at a revival meeting we were both attending. I was pleased that he wanted to be by me. His presence made my heart skip a beat . . . until he pulled out his wallet and asked me if I wanted to see a picture of his girlfriend.

### ***Start with Empathy***

As I was reminiscing about being a preteen, it dawned on me that as I was raising my kids, I didn't consider my struggles at that age. I wish I had. It would have made it a lot easier to understand my kids' challenges better. Empathy bridges the gap between our past and our children's present. When we remember how awkward or confused *we* felt, we are more likely to have compassion with our kids.

Take a minute and think back to your reality as a preteen. That will give you more empathy and insight as you look at ways to love your kiddos well through this time. Empathy will guide you as you disciple your children and shepherd their hearts.

The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 3 that husbands must dwell (or be fully present) with their wives with knowledge and understanding. Husbands should take the time to learn what blesses or distresses their wives and keep those things in mind as they dwell together. As parents, we must do the same regarding our children. We can take the time to understand them better so we can parent them well. Being fully present means learning to see the world through their eyes. Of course it's easier said than done, especially with all the high emotions that come with the preteen years.

### ***It's the Brain!***

We've heard about the hormonal rushes and changes taking place inside our children during their preteen years and the havoc that wreaks on them—and us! But it's not just the hormones that are rapidly changing. Many of the changes that happen during these years are linked to the brain. Researchers are learning that although hormone levels are high at the beginning of puberty, it's the brain changes that play an even greater role in mood swings.

During the preteen years and throughout adolescence, the brain undergoes significant reorganization and maturation, especially in areas related to social relationships, emotion processing, risk-taking, and experiencing rewards. The limbic system, which processes emotions, causes adolescents to be more emotional and reactive, leading to more pronounced ups and downs. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for reasoning, decision-making, and impulse control, continues to mature into the twenties. As the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system improve, adolescents become

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are sprouting up  
physically, they're also  
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better at controlling emotions and making rational decisions.<sup>1</sup> What does this mean? There are a lot of years when our children's brains are changing. We often wonder why they're doing what they're doing, and they might not even know!

While a person's brain is not fully developed until their twenties, some of the biggest changes are happening during the preteen years. Around age eleven, a child's brain function is in hyperdrive as they are developing more complex thinking abilities.

Consider someone who's had a growth spurt. They are clumsy and awkward because they haven't quite grown into their limbs or adapted to their new height. We can see those challenges and accept them for what they are. But just as our children are sprouting up physically, they're also sprouting up mentally. They're just as awkward in growing into their new way of thinking. Too often, though, instead of reacting to *them* in an understanding way, we react to the awkwardness, anger, or frustration, which reinforces the insecurity they already feel. It is imperative that, as parents, we understand what is going on physiologically with them, so we can be careful to react appropriately and not make faulty assumptions as we parent them.

Understanding our children begins with remembering our own journey. And being fully present means learning to see the world through their eyes. It's remembering that they're still trying to discover their identity. It's knowing that most preteens feel awkward and out of place.

How would the way you engage with your preteen change if you were assuming that their behavior and emotional outbursts were related to brain changes rather than rebellion or hormones?

The brain changes during this time are profound, leading to out-sized emotions and intense feelings. Puberty can make preteens more emotionally sensitive than ever before. As a mom, I was prepared for this with my girls, but my boys' emotional swings during puberty caught me off guard! (I had never been a preteen boy, after all.)

Preteens experience new emotions and often don't know how to handle them. Rash behavior, angry outbursts, unexpected crying, and heightened sensitivity to others' emotions are not uncommon. Your response as a parent matters. Don't let fear, frustration, or anger lead your reactions, as your child will feel these more acutely during this time.

Preteens often express anger when they are frustrated or angry with themselves. It's easy to think they're becoming angry people, which feeds our parenting fear of losing them. Instead, give them time to settle down. This may be a few minutes or a few hours. Engaging with them calmly afterward can lead to more constructive conversations than pushing hard in the heat of the moment.

On the flip side, you may find your preteen becoming more funny, creative, curious, and sweet. You get glimpses of the young adult they're becoming, even as you see traces of the child they were. It's a delightful time!

They're also very sensitive about their mistakes. Many parents have shared how their preteens struggle with guilt. But this is an opportunity to teach them about grace and forgiveness. If they haven't accepted Christ's salvation, introduce them to His grace. If they're already believers, help them understand the depth of His forgiveness. Parenting through the preteen years can be emotionally intense, but as a parent who is intentional in reaching your children's hearts, building strong relationships with them, and pointing them to Jesus, you can offer stability and love. What a wonderful gift that is!

### ***Sensitive Discipline***

Preteens are often self-conscious and overly aware of their own shortcomings. David and I found that even the way we disciplined our children had to change from our approach when they were younger. It's important not to embarrass them, especially in front of their peers or siblings. We can do this by talking down to them or speaking to them

harshly in front of others. Preteens are very sensitive to these actions. This can put a wedge between you and your child, leading to bitterness. Rather than leading to reconciliation, this approach could harden their hearts, damaging their self-esteem and your relationship with them. Our mission as parents is to reach the heart of our child and instill a lasting faith. This means constantly adapting our methods and tools.

### ***You're Not Living with a Stranger***

Ever feel like your preteen is a stranger in your house? In addition to growth in brain development, children at this age are on a quest for identity. They're eager to figure out who they are, what they like, and how they fit into the world. This often results in them "trying on" different personalities and looks. As their brain develops, they're exploring who they are outside of just being part of your family, which can mean new hobbies, music, and even the way they talk. It's all part of growing up.

To us parents, this "trying on personas" can seem fake, frustrating, and even scary. We fear they'll experiment their way into trouble. But like the creative process (where you work through many bad ideas before landing on a good one), this experimentation is normal and necessary. As parents, we can lovingly guide them through these phases. We can see these "rough drafts" of their personality as opportunities to guide them.

**Asking questions that help preteens process their beliefs and manage new relationships is a crucial and rewarding part of parenting during this stage.**

This is a prime time to help them think biblically about their identity and build a deeper relationship as you explore their interests together. You'll also be there to comfort your preteens when their peers don't react well to some of their experiments. Asking questions that help them process their beliefs and manage new relationships is a crucial and rewarding part of parenting during this stage.

## THE WORLD'S MESSAGES

*Tricia*

In a world where identity is shaped by a whirlwind of external influences, the preteen years are particularly vulnerable to confusion and uncertainty. The voices of media, influencers, and peers are louder than ever, often leaving our children feeling torn between authenticity and conformity. As their guides, it's our privilege—and our responsibility—to help them find clarity amidst the noise, grounding them in truth while encouraging their God-given uniqueness to shine through.

In today's world, answers to questions about identity are often dictated by powerful external voices. Media, advertisements, celebrities, influencers, and peer groups bombard our preteens with messages about what they should look like, how they should behave, and who they should be. These messages can be conflicting and overwhelming. One moment, they are told to embrace their individuality, and the next, they are shown images of an ideal they must conform to.

On top of conflicting messages about appearance and behavior, there are also complex discussions about gender, identity, and self-worth that can further confuse their developing minds. The digital age brings a constant stream of information and opinions, making it difficult for preteens to discern truth from fiction. Since these are issues that parents ask us about most, we will talk more about them in chapter 2.

As parents, our first response might be to shield our children from these influences. And while we can try, it's impossible to shield our preteens from all the messages completely—they're everywhere. A more effective approach is to walk alongside them with empathy and understanding. Recognize that your preteen is not just acting out or being difficult—they are genuinely trying to make sense of the overwhelming noise coming at them from every direction. Their brain is still developing and is capable of incredible growth and adaptation, but it is also particularly vulnerable.

Imagine being bombarded with constant messages about your worth and identity while trying to figure out the basics of who you are. It's like trying to build a house in the middle of a hurricane. Your preteen needs your empathy, not your frustration.

### ***Grounding Them in Truth***

Preteens often face additional emotional challenges from outside influences, such as friends experiencing parental divorce, or bullying on social media. These issues can be overwhelming for them, as they aren't equipped to handle such heavy emotions at their age. This is why the relationship with your child is so important. Investing time, listening, and having meaningful conversations are critical.

The realities our preteens face today are vastly different from what we experienced at their age. Even within a single family, younger siblings might experience more intense peer pressure and all-hours access to others via cellphones. Protecting them from too much access to influences apart from the home is one of the best gifts we can give. Setting boundaries around family time can protect them from the stress of constant peer interaction. For example, you might choose not to allow cellphones at this age. We can't create a bubble around them, so it's important to prepare them for these encounters. Discussing potential situations ahead of time and providing guidance can help them navigate these interactions more effectively.

This is where our role as parents becomes crucial. We need to be the stable, loving presence that helps ground them in truth. Remind them that their value does not come from their talents, looks, or popularity. Their worth is inherent because they are created in the image of God.

Encourage them to explore their interests and talents but help them understand that these are not the ultimate source of their identity. Their gifts and abilities are given by God for a purpose, but they do not define who they are. While it's natural for preteens to want to be liked and fit in, their value is not dependent on the approval of others.

### ***Addressing the Noise***

Help your preteen navigate the noise by teaching them to filter the messages they receive. Equip them to evaluate the media they consume critically. Discuss openly the pressures they feel from social media, peers, and even from within. Validate their feelings and provide a safe space for them to express their doubts and fears.

Introduce them to biblical truths about identity and worth. Help them see themselves through God's eyes—loved, valued, and purposeful. Share stories from the Bible where God used unlikely people for great purposes, not because of their outward appearance or societal status, but because of their hearts and willingness to follow Him.

Use this time to build a deeper relationship with your preteen. Engage in activities they enjoy and show genuine interest in their world. Ask open-ended questions that encourage them to think about their beliefs and values. Be the one who comforts them when they feel rejected or misunderstood by their peers.

Remember, your preteen is looking for a safe place to land in the midst of their identity storm. Be that refuge for them. Offer them the stability and love they need to navigate this challenging yet exciting time in their lives.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY**

*Tricia*

As we explore the preteen years and the quest for identity, it's essential to understand the pivotal role certain events play in shaping who we become with our talents and in our faith. Concerning my talents, one major marker for me was our move to a new house, which was just a mile away from the library, while I was in elementary school. As a struggling reader placed in special reading classes, the proximity to the library opened up a whole new world for me. I began reading voraciously,

devouring books, and eventually developed a deep love for reading. This passion later inspired my dream of becoming an author. Looking back, I realize this was part of discovering who God created me to be.

There was also an awakening of my faith during these years, and it was—in a large part—due to the community of believers who wrapped around our family when I was a preteen. I vividly remember when my mom and grandma became Christians. It was when I was in second or third grade, and we started going to church for the first time. Prior to this, I hadn't grown up in a church environment, and my stepdad wasn't a Christian, so it was all new to me. This shift brought significant changes in my life.

Our church community played such a critical role during these formative years. The church body embraced us wholeheartedly. I still remember my Sunday school teacher, Margo, who was a constant presence as her students navigated those awkward preteen years. She encouraged us to memorize Scripture, rewarding us with stickers, prizes, and even special outings. Margo saw me, recognized my awkwardness, and valued me for who I was. She made a lasting impact by helping me feel seen and loved in a time when I felt most awkward and uncertain about myself.

The church community wasn't just about Sunday school and Scripture memorization. The adults in the congregation talked to me, showed interest in my life, and provided a sense of belonging and stability. These interactions were foundational, shaping my identity and faith more deeply than I realized at the time.

As preteens, we often search for a mirror that reflects something familiar, something reassuring. For me, that mirror was the church community. It became a place where I could step away from the pressures of fitting in and simply be myself. In a world where I was constantly measuring my worth by external standards—whether it was what I wore or how popular I was—my church family saw beyond that. They reminded me that my identity wasn't found in the shifting opinions of others but in something far more steadfast: my relationship with Christ.

My Sunday school teacher and so many others reflected back to me a version of myself rooted in love and grace, reminding me that my worth was already secure, regardless of what I wore or how many friends I had.

Years later, at seventeen, I found myself pregnant, engulfed in depression and isolation. Despite drifting away from the church during my teenage years, the seeds of truth planted in my heart began to stir. Those Scriptures, a legacy from my mother's dedication to church and Margo's Sunday school lessons, became a beacon of hope during my darkest times.

One particularly low day, feeling forsaken by my boyfriend and friends, I reflected on the joy I had once felt in Sunday school. Recalling John 3:16, the first Scripture I had memorized, reminded me of God's love and sacrifice. It was then that I realized prayer was not just about seeking change in circumstances but in seeking a transformation within myself.

In my despair, I dared to believe God hadn't forsaken me either. A simple, heartfelt prayer marked the turning point toward peace and light in my heart, reaffirming God's love and the promise of eternal life through belief in Him.

Even though I faced challenges during my teenage years, the foundation laid during my preteen years brought me back to my faith as a pregnant teen. Those seeds of faith took root even after years of being trampled on and neglected!

## **THE INFLUENCE OF FAITH AT HOME**

*Leslie*

I can also chime in for the importance of a strong faith foundation. Amidst all the changes and upheaval in my life, my family remained a constant source of stability. As I've said, we moved frequently, constantly starting over in new places, with new schools and new churches. Despite this impermanence, my mom and dad ensured that my sister and I had

a firm faith foundation. They consistently pointed us to Jesus, helping us understand why they believed what they believed.

Much like those mirrors that reflected so many different versions of myself, each new move presented a chance to see life from a new angle, to reimagine who I was in unfamiliar surroundings. Yet, in the midst of those constant changes, my parents' faithfulness provided the one unchanging reflection I needed—who I was in Christ. No matter how many schools or churches we attended, no matter how different the people or the environments, my parents' unwavering commitment to God remained my compass. They helped me see beyond the temporary—new friendships, new challenges—and focus on the eternal truths that anchored my identity. Through their example, I learned to embrace the many facets of my life while holding fast to the one mirror that never changes: my reflection in God's eyes.

And you can do the same for your preteens. Your unwavering support and guidance during these years are crucial. Even amidst the chaos, you can provide a sense of security and stability that will anchor your children. As a parent, you can help transition your preteen from a little child who simply follows, to someone who can think independently and develop his or her own beliefs and identity in Christ.



Let's embrace our evolving role with empathy and wisdom, recognizing the incredible opportunity we have to shape their future. By walking alongside them, we can help them become confident, grounded individuals who know their worth in Christ. What a privilege it is to be part of this journey, guiding our children as they discover who God created them to be.

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