

# Help Your Teen Make the Right Choice<sup>1</sup>

By Josh McDowell with Bob Hostetler

I once received a letter from a Christian father who said he and his wife had done their best to be good parents. They were members of a good church, and they had always been proud of their children. But what they had just discovered about their oldest daughter had brought their world crashing down.

He described his daughter as pretty, but not real popular with boys – that is, until recently. She had dated a boy on the football team, and early in the relationship she had sex with him. Then she went from him to another football player. Before long, she had slept with the whole team! This tortured parent wrote, “Josh, they were passing my little girl around as some sort of ‘team girl!’”.

By the time they learned of their daughter’s behavior, it had been going on for months. They sat down with her, told her that they knew, and cried with her. Then they asked her “Why? Her only explanation was “I just wanted to feel loved. For a few fleeting moments, I felt like someone loved me”.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard similar stories. Thousands of parents have asked me in person or by letter, “Josh, I’ve tried to teach my child right from wrong, but it seems he (or she) still makes wrong choices. What can we do?”

## Some Answers

Early in 1994, we surveyed 3,795 kids (ages 11-18) and asked them 193 questions. More than 80 percent of those surveyed attended an evangelical church weekly, and 86 percent said they had made a commitment to trust Christ as their Savior and Lord.

What the survey told us is that many of our kids are not adopting our value system at all. In addition:

- 66 percent said they had lied to their parents or another adult in the last three months. Almost that many (59 percent) had lied to their peers.
- 45 percent watched MTV at least once a week.
- 55 percent said they are confused.
- 50 percent said they are stressed out.
- 46 percent said they are always tired.

According to the survey, many others are cheating, smoking, gambling, watching X-rated movies and engaging in premarital sex.

What is happening to our kids? Why aren’t they adopting our values? And what can we do about it?



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I believe there are at least three reasons for the loss of values among our young people. One is the condition of our culture, another is the need for a defense of truth, and the third is the need to spotlight the benefits of right choices.

## **What Has Changed?**

In past decades, children grew up in an atmosphere that communicated absolute standards for behavior: certain things were right and certain things were wrong. A child's parents, teachers, ministers, youth workers and other adults all upheld these standards. At one time, our society explained the universe of life from the Judeo-Christian tradition: a belief that truth existed, and everyone could know and understand it.

A clear standard of right and wrong gave society a moral compass to measure crime and punishment, business ethics, community values, character and social conduct. It became the lens through which society viewed law, science, art, and politics – the whole of culture.

Yet in the 1990's our children are being raised in a society that rejects a standard of truth and morality, of right and wrong. Truth has become a matter of taste; morality a matter of preference.

Today's culture reflects the philosophies of "if it feels good, do it" and "if it works for you, why not?" Instead of hearing words "right and wrong" from Hollywood, Nashville and Madison Avenue, our children get bombarded with hours of images and sounds that glamorize immorality and mock biblical values.

Our public schools proffer "value free, morally neutral" education. "We cannot tell you," the teachers and textbooks say, "what is wrong and what is right. You must decide for yourselves. We can only make you aware of all the options"

The effects on our children are profound. In our study of church youth, we included seven statements about objective standards of truth and morality. Their responses indicate that, for the most part, our children echo the world's view.

For example, 57 percent of our young people say that no objective standard of truth exist. Only 15 percent disagree with the statement: "What is right for one person in a given situation might not be right for another person who encounters the same situation." In other words, 85 percent of our kids are liable to reason, "Just because it's wrong for you doesn't mean it's wrong for me."

Forty-five percent agreed with the statement "Everything in life is negotiable." Their distinction between right and wrong is fluid, subject to change: it is relative and personal. Consequently, they are making conditional decisions, choosing what seems to be the best alternative at the time, without reference to any fundamental principles to guide their choices.

## **The Need for a Defense of Truth**

The word "no" was probably one of the earliest communications between you and your children. When your infant son grabbed your glasses, you removed his hand

and said, “No”. When your 1-year-old daughter reached toward a hot stove, you quickly pulled her hand back and said, “No”. At these times you were teaching safe and acceptable behavior by issuing clear commands.

As your children grew, you began stating boundaries in more detail: “Don’t play with your food.” “Brush your teeth after meals” and “Don’t go near the street.”

Many parents, however, fail to progress beyond communicating right and wrong commands with their children. They fail to explain why the commands are right or wrong. They stop short of providing a defense of truth.

No longer is right and wrong as defined by a parent sufficient for an adolescent. In a society without moral boundaries, where personal choice sets the standard for what is right – we need a truth apologetic, a ready defense of truth. We need to help our children understand that there are absolutes – that, which is right for all people, for all times, for all places.

You may say, “Come on, Josh, all this talk about absolutes seems so abstract. Do you really think my children’s views about truth will really make a difference in their behavior?” Yes! Our study indicates that when our children do not accept an objective standard of truth, they become:

- 48 percent more likely to cheat on an exam
- Two times more likely to watch a pornographic film
- Three times more likely to use illegal drugs
- Six times more likely to attempt suicide
- Two times more likely to be angry with life
- Two times more likely to be lacking purpose
- Two times more likely to be resentful

How youth understand truth affects their behavior, the attitudes they adopt, and the choices they make. The research is clear – if kids develop solid convictions about truth, it will double, triple, even quadruple their chances of making moral choices in an immoral world.

### **The Benefits of Right Choices**

We live in an “instant” society. We have become conditioned to “fast food,” “Quick-Print,” and “Express Mail.” Our teens expect instant results as well.

But this “right now” mentality can be dangerous. Sin is appealing in our culture and it promises instant gratification. That’s why so many choose sin. Right choices, on the other hand, often require waiting for better long-term results.

Think of it. When a boy’s or girl’s hormones are raging and emotional and sexual feelings are running high, which choice offers immediate satisfaction, “Wait for marriage” or “Enjoy sex now.” Unfortunately instant gratification too often wins out.

And what about lying, cheating or stealing? Lying to a parent usually provides an immediate “benefit” — it creates a way out of a jam. Cheating offers an instant way to “get ahead” without studying. Stealing provides what they want without paying for it. In short, wrong choices promise appealing “benefits”. Couple that with a society that

says “you are the judge,” and we have a generation that believes wrong choices are the “right” ones.

As parents we can counter those deceptive immediate “benefits” by providing a defense of truth about honesty.

For example, we can teach our children that:

- Being honest protects from guilt and provides for a clear conscience and unbroken fellowship with God.
- Being honest protects from shame and provides a sense of accomplishment.
- Being honest protects from the cycle of deceit and builds a reputation of integrity and a “good name” (see Proverbs 22:1)
- Being honest protects from ruined relationships and provides for trusting relationships.



### **Equip Your Youngster**

We can give our children a defense of truth about marriage, family, love, justice, etc., in the same manner. The more we demonstrate the long-term rewards and benefits of God’s standard of truth, the more likely our children will be to make right choices.

I do not want to imply that providing a defense of truth is a guarantee that our kids will always make right choices, but the research shows that defense of truth will deepen our children’s convictions. A defense of truth will help our kids counter the perverse culture and help them make choices that are right, based upon the absolute truth of God’s Word. A defense of truth will equip our young people with the “full armor of God,” which includes “the belt of truth. “Then they will be ready so that when the day of evil comes, (they) may be able to stand (their) ground, and after (they) have done everything, to stand” (Eph. 6:13).

### **What to Tell Your Teen About Chastity**

Many of our young people who are caught in the snare of premarital sex need to hear the defense of truth about chastity. They need to understand that:

- Chastity protects from unplanned pregnancy and provides for optimum child-rearing.
- Chastity protects from sexually transmitted diseases and provides for peace of mind.
- Chastity protects from sexual insecurity and provides for truth.
- Chastity protects from emotional distress and provides for true intimacy.