

*The Teen Years helps parents align with key developmental needs of adolescence while guiding teens toward independence. The 8 Questions empower parents to reflect on their family story and parent in the present with the future in mind.*

## **The Teen Years: 8 Questions Every Parent Should Ask - Parenting in the Present with the Future in Mind**

By Dr. John C. Panepinto

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# The Teen Years

## 8 Questions Every Parent Should Ask

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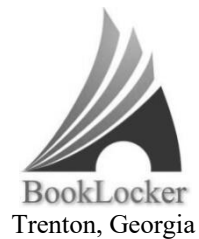
*Parenting in the Present  
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## **Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	1
A Word on Authority.....	2
Important Developmental Concepts .....	4
The Work Ahead.....	7
Question One: What do I remember about being parented as a teen?.....	8
Question Two: How does my teen explore and test limits? .....	10
Question Three: Do I know my teen’s peer group?.....	13
Question Four: How does your teen talk about the future? .....	16
Question Five: What aptitudes, strengths, and skills does your teen have? .....	19
Question Six: How does your teen handle challenge and adversity? .....	22
Question Seven: Who does your teen hold in high esteem?.....	24
Question Eight: How do you lead and manage your family vision? .....	26
Moving Firmly Forward .....	28
About the Author .....	29
Sources.....	30

## Introduction

*“Live the questions now”*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

It may seem unusual to start a book based on asking important questions with, well, another question. But this question serves to set the table for the journey ahead:

*Why are the adolescent years challenging?*

As you consider this question, you may be thinking through the role you have in parenting your teen right now within this current landscape. But if you think back, the adolescent years were challenging, albeit in a different way, for you as well. And, on the broader scale of society, lots of conflicting messages float about identity, community, work, meaning—just to name a few.

Why does this matter and why questions? Simply because if we are off path or unsure of where we are heading, there is a very good chance we may be asking the wrong questions to begin with. And end up with answers that lead to more problems.

Framing the stage and the challenges becomes an extremely important task. Adolescence represents a span of the greatest differentiation since the age of two. It is also the time of integrating and strengthening neural connections as well as cognitive pruning for efficiency. These changes represent the most restructuring in the brain since the first years of life. So much so that studies have found a temporary dip in IQ during this phase of development.

Each developmental phase is a bridge arcing over turbulent waters. We have one foot in the past stage and one foot in the next developmental stage. For the teen, that means they have one foot in adulthood and one foot in...childhood. Adult hardware with a good deal of childhood software to be upgraded. One foot in dependence and one lunging towards independence.

If that makes you pause or quiver, then you know the reason for the importance of the parental holding environment. This “holding environment” is critical to crossing the developmental gap in every stage and is the antithesis of “sink or swim.” Essentially, a parent as the holding environment says three things with his or her actions and presence:

*I love you for who you are and will nurture and support you.*

*I love you for who you are becoming and will challenge you to demand of yourself.*

*I will be here through it all.*

## A Word on Authority

A major shift happens in adolescence, one that runs parallel with increasing independence. The days of complete dependence on parents are fading, and autonomy in the teen years can be fuzzy, messy, and lacking structure and perspective. While freedom is a fundamental need, without boundaries, a connection to values, and images of a future self, the privilege brings nothing but chaos. Freedom to choose implies we are choosing something that honors the freedom.

Another question arises during this transition, sometimes below the level of explicitness: Who's in charge? But this question is incomplete. Leadership and authority are not just about the relationship between parent and child. As a parent ask, what are you in charge of? Then ask what are you leading towards, and what are you authoring in your authority? This will start the ripple effect that can be facilitated by these three words: *and then what?* You set a limit, teach, problem-solve, or praise— and then what? You build a child's capacity in the self-hyphenated categories (self-efficacy, self-discipline, self-esteem, self-confidence, etc.). And then what? They move one step along the pathway from dependence to independence.

And then what...?

A vision towards the development of character and competence matters and must be intentional. This is the “and then what...” the “something better” we reach for and intuitively know. Because of the complexity of culture, the days of “sink or swim” are fading fast. And this all or nothing approach has origins in a different time and place. Describing all the differences of each generation is beyond the scope of this work, but it's important to acknowledge that cultural evolution has advanced rapidly. So much so that many are in over their heads represented in the rise of broken relationships, anxiety, depression, and suicide.

Our “toys” and technology have changed as well. Many protective factors that surrounded youth and families like fish in water have dried up and dissipated. Oddly, while we've become more connected via technology, media, and interdependent economies, the inner circle of those closest to us has become more isolated to the whole. And the relationships within this sacred inner circle have been built in a different manner—and sometimes on shaky grounds. Including the relationships we have with ourselves.

Further, *connection* as a primary need has been diluted. Social media boasts of a platform enabling *relationships* far and wide. We are a social species, but our brain still does not have the capacity to manage hundreds of relationships. “Following” is the perfect term for the numbers below social media posts. For it *can't* be “relating.” Some researchers state that we have the capacity to best function in a community of 150 people or less. Such is the charm and allure of the small towns, the neighborhood school, the church congregation, social clubs, and family reunions. Maybe that's why walking the streets of a major city feels so anonymous, why so many refuse to make eye contact, why outside our inner connections, “stranger danger” lurks.

This evolution driven by technological advances occurred so rapidly that, today, many individuals exist without the frame of reference of pre-webbed times, for they have lived and matured with cell phones and the internet. Before this technology, children played outside with other children without an adult around. Children



walked home from school alone. Yes, even rode public transportation without adults. Once upon a time, like the internet, carpool did not exist. Helicopters were a form of transportation and not a parenting style.

So much has changed. We have evolved as individuals, families, communities and beyond. But on some level, development has not kept up—or, maybe, we have not been centered on the principles of development. Maybe we have been trying to run while still trying to master the ability to crawl. This tension between developing and cultural evolution means the environment—on all the levels we reside in, matters.

Purposely, this book draws on research (see Resources) but stays within the practical realm of the day to day. But know that the data on parenting style, parent-child relationship, and parent involvement all point to the potency of an authoritative parenting style, one that balances high levels in support/nurturing and challenge/demand. In other words, warm and responsive, and able to discipline (set limits firmly and deliver consequences in a way that teaches and builds qualities and skills— versus doling out punishment).

This parenting style may look different with teens, but the principles stand. And there is no room for permissive, wishy-washy, or authoritarian parenting. Research has also shown these styles (which are lacking on one side of the support-challenge balance) do not prepare children for independence in the most essential qualities, such as self-regulation, cooperation, and problem-solving. Children raised this way become teens who don't know what to do when they don't know what to do.

While this work stands alone and focuses on parenting adolescents, I highly recommend going through original text, *Eight Questions Every Parent Should Ask*. The first book offers fundamental ideas that this work builds on. Some of the themes in the original work are within this book as well. But the experience of parenting children who are completely dependent upon you versus parenting teens who *think* they are completely independent of you, creates a narrative that is years in the making. Themes emerge and weave through the present, sometimes unnoticed, and create more stress and tension. The role of parenting is difficult enough. No need to add extra layers. Even a brief tour of the original *Eight Questions* would offer insight, a significant sense of family history, and a foundation to the questions ahead.

## Important Developmental Concepts

Before we start on the questions, here is a summary of some of the most important developmental concepts related to the teen years. These concepts are important as they represent developmental tasks that mature your teen's interpersonal skills and intrapersonal capacities. Just as important, these developmental tasks also point to skills that are *beyond* your teen's capacity and can be a source of tension. For example, they might be able to tell you what to do in a situation, but still not be able to carry out the task (just like crawling precedes walking).

**Autonomy.** The closed door and the widening space between parent and teen are symbolic of a teen's need to establish choice, independence, and identity. Privacy is paramount. And as they walk ahead as not to be seen side-by-side with us, it is important to remember that this stage is very much like the toddler stage. Toddlers run ahead and proclaim independence, "I do!" But they turn around to see if the secure home base we provide is still close and within their sight. The same is true with teens, only the turn to home base to "feel" our presence is psychological—and, day to day, in tacit form.

Being there for them and providing the structure they need may be different and, at times difficult, but they need this mix of support and challenge just as much as when they were toddlers. Importantly, in this stage teens do not have a full sense of reciprocal relationships and the future can look bountiful and idealistic—but without the clear and well-thought-out connection of how to get there. Meaning, they don't fully understand the knowledge, skills, effort, and time required to reach these visions. And they can take ideals literally, even though they represent a process and not an outcome. The world will always be perfectly imperfect.

Also, they have only a superficial sense of how much they rely on you for all their basic needs in the present to even have such goals. Simply put, if they did not have food, shelter, safety, and loving parents, the future would be nowhere in sight. They would be thinking no further than their next meal. But even when primary needs are met, adolescents are unable to hold their version of a bright future and the support you provide in the same mental space. While they know both exist (your support and their version of the future) they can only work with one of these ideas at a time. Their cognitive structure centers on their needs and forming new boundaries beyond this perspective takes time. Lots.

**Identity.** Teens are negotiating the crisis of identity development, asking the important question: "Who Am I?" They learn this through relationships and in the activities that bring out their sense of competence. This stage centers on *differentiation* so that in the future, teens can more fully *integrate* a developed sense of self into relationships. Importantly, "Who I am" also means "Who I'm not" is part of the process. The latter mostly includes other life stages (children, adults, older adults).

Teens learn who they are as they make the difficult transition of being centered on their own needs, to being in the give and take of relationships. This transition into reciprocal relationships takes time and having parents to count on and be there matters.

Importantly, peers often look, sound, and think like them. And they often have similar interests. This is important because developing a differentiated identity can be...scary. We can't know who we are without boundaries. So having peers that are alike helps manage the confusion, fear, and risks of exploring and

redefining these boundaries of self. In developing an identity, boundaries fall and are rebuilt to include new dimensions—but they can be fragile and need time to solidify. (A good example would be “falling” in love, which is front and center during adolescence. Self-boundaries fall, and in the rubble, new boundaries are formed to include their love-interest. In forming these new boundaries, time takes a different form and the relationship “will last forever.” So, good luck talking about pragmatic issues when this is happening!)

**Peers:** For teens, the bedroom door may close, but the world is becoming bigger. Their peer groups become more central to how they spend time and how they experience a sense of self. The transition to a diverse and widening world challenges the mindset. As mentioned, teens tend to pick friends who think, look, and act like themselves. Typically, teens would rather be around peers than us—and that is developmentally driven (“Well \_\_\_ is doing it! Why can’t I?”).

Our relationships with them can become challenging during these times, so it’s important to remain composed and steady. Their requests and ideas typically do not come from a point of view having depth and breadth. Developmentally, they are very much centered on their own needs (Instead of a greeting such as “Hello, how are you” you may hear “Did you put money in my account?”).

But this is an important stage because they learn that others have needs. And to have meaningful relationships, you must develop the reciprocity of receiving *and* giving. This is a work in progress with the balance in the relationship tilted towards the receiving end. This is the reason that teens may seem self-centered and at extremes, oblivious to the needs of others and family. And even when they act for the good of others, the feeling is centered on self (“I’m a good person because I...”) rather than the more developed perspective of doing what’s right or giving to others in the name of *relationships*.

A brief word on teen rebellion. Questioning values is a part of their first real peek at the larger world. Ideals light the way and very often the idea of “changing the world” enters the frame. But teens are still negotiating their way from dichotomous thinking. They are still figuring out how relationships and the world works through their current lens of *Me-Not Me*.

While *Me-Not Me* certainly oversimplifies this complex stage, it’s important to remember that parents fall into the *Not Me* category. This thought process lies below the self-awareness of the teen mind for their identity is not fully formed and the boundaries are fuzzy. Hence, they push against you. But know that teen rebellion does not mean that the stage has to be hostile (it most certainly can be passionate). Most of their demands can be good talking points of how relationships and the world work. Research points to the nature of volatile rebellions emerging from parent-child relationships that have been strained for a significant time *prior* to adolescence.

**Pruning and Myelination.** While teens change on the outside, even greater changes are occurring on the inside. Not since the age of two have their brains gone through such a major overhaul. New neural connections are formed while some are being pruned for efficiency. As mentioned, some research indicates that IQ temporarily drops during this time of fine tuning. Parents may experience this as, “What were they thinking?” or a total disregard for consequences.

In other words, teens can tell you what would happen if they made a certain choice (Parent asks: “What could happen if you drive too fast?” Teen answers: “You could crash.”). But the sense of future consequences is, literally, *lost* in the moment (one of the reasons teens have the highest rates for car insurance). The ability to time time-travel and keep this information in mind as a guide for actions and choices is still a work in progress.

A long one! And for teens, the area of the brain responsible for functions of truly independent and responsible individuals will not fully develop until midway through the next decade.

Further, the resulting change in brain architecture honors “use it or lose it” but it is also a time of vulnerability for teens. This time of rewiring, connection, and pruning may be behind the onset of psychiatric disorders during this stage. Therefore, stress and its management play a major role in overall well-being.

**Constructing reality.** An adolescent with adult hardware acting in the moment with childlike software can be a challenge for parents to digest. Cognitively, teens are learning to think about their thinking, but they are still subjectively centered on meeting their own needs and barely beyond being able to efficiently manage impulses or think of consequences. It’s worth repeating that the area of the brain responsible for this level of self-regulation is not fully formed until the third decade of life. The shift from constructing a reality of a self-centered universe, to one also inhabited by the needs and wants of others is a work in progress.

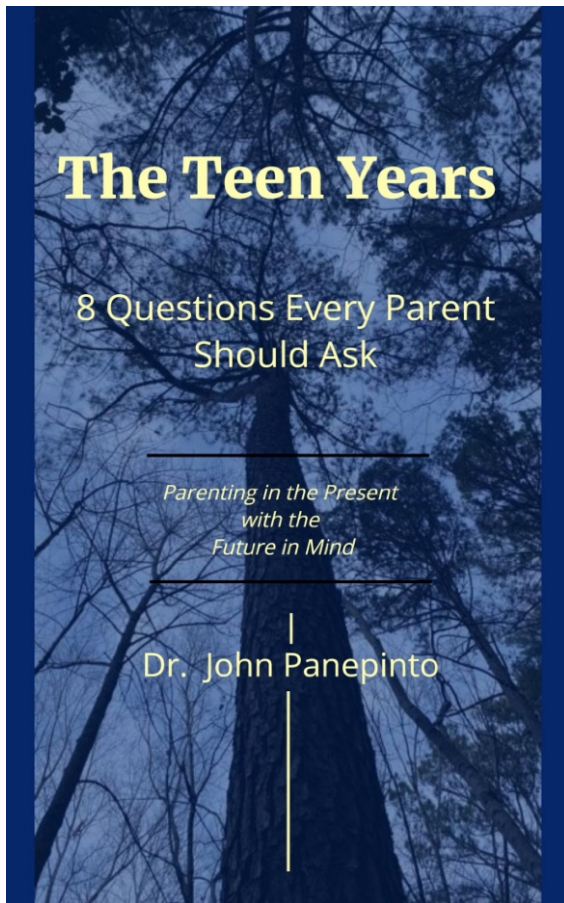
Cooperation and perspective-taking requires lots of practice. Teens need consistent coaching and reminders that the world is a big and diverse space.

Importantly, their requests and ideas may come from a point of view that has not been fully thought through. When parents say, “no” and thwart these bids, their response can often seem like the end of the world. But this is an important stage because they learn that others have needs as well, which is central to developing mutually meaningful relationships.

Finally, authors have pointed to the stage of adolescence lengthening, expanding on into the third decade of life. Children are exposed to matters and content beyond their capability much earlier in life. And while they seem to *act* older, they are staying “younger” longer. Authors have also suggested that teens are less likely to take on some of the activities and actions of previous generations. They are going out less, dating later, getting driver’s licenses later, and living at home longer. Some are in no hurry for the responsibilities of young adulthood.

While rushing development typically does not turn out well, there comes a point when you can’t avoid growing up. Psychologically, the choice becomes optional in early adulthood. Maturity is a lived quality and not the result of lengthening bones and rising hormone levels. Unfortunately, we all know individuals who’ve extended adolescence to middle-age.

Growing up and maturing requires a look into the future with a vision based on deep values. That’s the point of these *Eight Questions*. The future may be uncertain, but it need not be based on the past—especially a past full of what you don’t want or has become irrelevant.



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