



# Faith at Home

Welcome to Faith at Home, our monthly resource for those seeking to develop children's faith at home. We know that raising the next generation of Jesus-followers isn't easy, but hopefully the ideas and stories inside these pages can help us all along the way. You could tear out these pages to give to parents you work with or point them in the direction of [youthandchildrens.work/faithathome](http://youthandchildrens.work/faithathome), where it's available to download for free (and won't hurt your beautiful magazine).

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# The adolescent brain

*THRIVING*  
surviving through the teenage years



**L**ike toddlers, teenagers often get a bad press when it comes to their behaviour. Sweeping generalisations can be made about the adolescent years, and many unsuspecting teenagers find themselves at the receiving end of unfavourable statements. For parents, the transformation that occurs in their children can have a significant impact. While for some the changes are barely noticeable, others may endure extreme ‘personality transplants’ in their children, and the rollercoaster of emotional adjustment to this new season can be daunting for parents and teenagers alike.

In our society, this stage of life has long been categorised. Attempting to understand teenagers is not a new phenomenon, but understanding what is going on in their brains – as well as in their ever-changing world – may well be. So what can we learn about their world, and how do we navigate the myriad of changes in order to help them (and us, as parents) survive, and even thrive, during the teenage years?

### Changes

Regardless of the external circumstances or the behaviour being exhibited, one thing that is inevitable for teenagers is change. It is happening in and around them, and it’s impossible for them to escape it. Everyone embraces and experiences change in their own unique way, but for some teenagers the extent of change can feel overwhelming.

The teenage years constitute one of the most significant periods of change, regardless of whether or not this change is welcomed. Scientists have discovered that striking changes take place during the teen years, with much of the research focusing on brain development. The National Institute for Mental Health released fascinating findings in 2011, highlighting how the teenage brain is still under construction. More recently it summarised this in a helpful factsheet called *The Teen Brain: Six things to know*:

1. Your brain does not keep getting bigger as you get older.
2. But that doesn’t mean your brain is done maturing.
3. The teen brain is ready to learn and adapt.
4. Many mental disorders appear during adolescence.
5. The teen brain is resilient.
6. Teens need more sleep than children and adults.

Gaining insight into the physiological changes taking place during the teenage years can better place us to understand the behaviours and attitudes that often surface without taking them so personally. For my family it was helpful to learn about sleep patterns as my daughters approached their teenage years. Understanding that melatonin levels rise and fall later in the day during the teenage years helped us make allowances for their needs rather than just assuming they were being lazy or irresponsible. We couldn’t change school start times but we could block out Saturday mornings for them to sleep in without us getting irritated with them for doing so. This is probably one of the best things we did (and continue to do) during their teenage years, and I’m convinced it has saved thousands of potential arguments that lack of sleep or understanding might have generated.

### Brain maturation

Different parts of the brain develop at different rates. Areas involved in the more basic functions develop first, for example ‘processing information for senses’ or ‘controlling movement’, whereas parts of the brain such as ‘planning ahead’ and ‘controlling impulses’ are among the last to mature. This helps us understand why risk-taking seems to supersede logic for some teenagers. Having this insight doesn’t always make it easy to accept some of the choices our teens make, and it doesn’t negate our desire to help them make good ones, but it does help us understand that they aren’t simply being rebellious or inconsiderate. To some extent their brains may be working against them. With this in mind, it makes the idea of remaining connected to our teenagers and a positive influence on them during these crucial years even more compelling.

The more we look at the research, the more we understand that the teenage years are a significant period in brain development, as further ‘pruning’ of synapses takes place during this stage. The brain has a higher plasticity during these years and is most able to make changes. Genes, childhood experience and the environment in which a young person reaches adolescence are all believed to shape behaviour. Additionally, research has modified our understanding of brain maturation, essentially extending the formative teenage years into the early 20s.

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**WHEN PARENTING TEENAGERS,  
CONNECTION IS MORE IMPORTANT  
THAN CORRECTION**”

As well as the significant changes happening in the brain, it’s worth noting that the physical, intellectual, emotional and social (PIES) changes occurring at this stage are substantial.

**Physically:** Most noticeably, development of the sex organs is prevalent, along with the lengthening of limbs, changes in appearance, changes in hair growth and body odour.

**Intellectually:** Significant growth in understanding happens during the teenage years, with the intellectual power of an adolescent brain matching that of an adult. In this generation of digital natives, technical understanding can quickly exceed that of many adults.

**Emotionally:** The ability to self-regulate emotional thermostats can be challenging, and the adolescent years can sometimes appear to be a repetition of the toddler years in terms of our teens’ ability to have extreme emotional reactions and their sensitivity to specific scenarios.

**Socially:** Puberty increases susceptibility to stress, and there can be an awkwardness in adapting to changing social circumstances. Peer influence increases, along with an increased awareness of social injustice, among other things. This is a season in which the practice of challenging authority and cultural norms can dominate.

All of these changes result in a leaning toward acting on impulse, with an appetite for novelty and what may appear to be selfishness.



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### The impact

During the formative years in our children's lives we get to influence their attitudes and behaviour, and sometimes even their friendships. For those of us who have a faith, this will influence what we teach our children and the way we bring them up. Then the teenage years arrive and we often feel ill-prepared. It can feel devastating if the changes in our children start to impact the way they behave and relate to us.

Often accompanying these changes is an increase in their questioning of what they have known to be truth. With current societal culture suggesting that truth is whatever we want it to be, our teenagers are likely to experience an internal war to some extent as they try to reason the faith they may have been taught with the culture to which they are now being exposed. During these teenage years of deepening knowledge and increasing independence, exposure to other world views is inevitable, and exploration of faith often comes with that.

This can trigger a series of questions and challenges from them, and because of the effects of brain development there may be a distinct lack of sophistication in the way these challenges are presented. Interestingly, our own emotive responses when our Christian faith is subjected to scrutiny can cause fallout. Questioning is an essential part of faith development and greater insight into the changes our teenagers are going through can help us respond calmly when behaviours and attitudes prove frustrating.

This is a sensitive season for many families to adapt to, not least in the exploration of spiritual identity, where exposure to intellectual, emotional and social changes can influence beliefs. Shifting from parenting children to parenting teens may feel daunting, but there are some simple things we can do to help us navigate our way through these years.

### Growing our understanding

Regardless of how 'in touch' you are with current culture, it is important to recognise that a huge cultural shift currently exists. 'Normal' in this generation looks very different from the way it did even just a decade ago. As a society we have seen large shifts in the way we communicate. This generation of teenagers has grown up with smartphones and social media. Understanding what we don't know about what it is like to be a teenager in this generation of digital natives is just as helpful as growing our understanding of all the changes they are going through.

In her research, *Losing My Religion: millennials and faith loss*, Dr Ruth Perrin helpfully summarises the quantitative and qualitative data, highlighting that 71 per cent of people who change their faith do so between the ages of 18 and 29. She says: "People don't suddenly go from a profound commitment to Jesus to not believing at all. It takes weeks, months, even years. Over a period of time, their faith just becomes less and less convincing. Something may trigger a decision to renounce belief but typically this is a final straw in an already long-term process."

It isn't usually a specific event that causes a loss of faith; more likely it is the questioning and observations that happen during the teenage years that shape and influence this decision. It is imperative, therefore, that we understand the cultural pressures our teenagers are facing and help create an environment that encourages them to ask questions and explore these issues.

Try to engage with their world and the cultural experiences they are encountering. There is plenty of available information about 'Generation Z' that explains how this generation views the world and each other. Find opportunities to understand things from their perspective and give them a platform from which to voice their opinions.



### **Finding opportunities to connect**

When parenting teenagers, connection is more important than correction. This is a challenging concept to adopt as a parent, as there will be times when our teenagers seem to have superpowers when it comes to going against all that we have previously taught them. However, if we focus our attention on correcting them we may enter endless power struggles, and before long there can be a chasm between us that is hard to bridge.

Instead, it helps to find ways to connect with our teens, taking an interest in the things they find intriguing and generally looking for excuses to ‘waste time’ with them. Ask yourself some basic questions about your teenager. Who are their friends? What music do they like? How do they like to interact with people? Who do they admire? Challenge yourself to find out more about what makes them tick and find ways to connect with their world. Forget about what needs doing, and seize opportunities to connect with them as often as possible. With the change in sleep patterns, these opportunities often present themselves late at night.

### **Cultivating acceptance**

The teenage years represent a season of discovery, and if ever there was a time of needing to be accepted this is it. The search for identity and the need to belong are prevalent through this season of change. Transitioning from childhood into adulthood is a significant challenge, with internal and external influences evoking exploration, insecurity, searching and possible chaos.

Identity issues are further compelled by the cultural emphasis of our time. Although our teenagers may not directly express it, they are desperate to belong to something worthwhile; to a place of safety where they feel accepted. Inadvertently, our

teenagers crave the knowledge that boundaries exist. They will often seek to engage with theories, statements and questions in a search to find out where these boundaries lie. This may not present itself in a well-thought-through manner, and sometimes it appears as though the motivation is antagonism. However, if you can learn not to react to this surface behaviour, instead expressing understanding, finding connections and offering acceptance, your teenagers are more likely to allow you a say in their lives and choices.

Make it your mission to develop an environment in which any topic can be discussed. If they don’t feel accepted and safe to explore subjects with you they will explore them elsewhere. Create an environment that is the best place for radical, controversial and embarrassing topics to be discussed, and where opinions can be worked out rather than reacted to.

Finally, learn what the pressure points are – both yours and theirs, intentionally finding new ways of communicating that can support this awareness – but don’t be scared to share your opinion, your faith and the Bible with your teenagers. Adopt a perspective that is committed to calling out the good qualities in them, seeing their potential and offering a secure home environment for them to navigate their way through the teenage years. After all, true acceptance is rooted in our identity in Christ. It is our Christian faith that gives us a radical basis for forgiveness and hope to be practised.

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### **KAREN TODD**

is managing director of Simplicite, a concept development digital agency based in Dorset. Karen also helps run the marketing department at Moorlands College and is a regular guest lecturer.

# Faith at home at Christmas



**Advent and Christmas are notoriously busy; so much so that there could be a case for not bothering to do anything faith-focused at home and just starting again in the new year. However, I believe it's such a wonderful season that we would be crazy not to take advantage of the opportunities.**

One way to do this is to protect family time by saying no to things we're invited to. Christmas events are not compulsory! Just because they are fun, good or local doesn't mean we have to go. I know this is hard, but wouldn't it be amazing to plan in advance the faith focus you would like to have as a family this Christmas, and choose to say yes only to events that contribute to this goal?

If this sounds like a crazy idea, you could come at it from the opposite direction. Knowing that your calendar is already filling up, mark out some blocks of time in December to do faith-building activities together. This might be a ten-minute space in the morning, in the evening after dinner, or on a Saturday afternoon early in December.

However you do it, you are more likely to achieve what you are aiming for if you are intentional about it. Write down your goals, prioritise them, share them together and review them. You could call a family meeting to discuss what you would like to do during Advent, what you would like to keep the same or change from last year and how you would like to purposefully celebrate Jesus.

As well as things I'm planning intentionally, I also have a list of 'things we could do'. Most of these fall into the 'happy holidays' tradition; things that are not faith-focused but give us time as a family to have fun and do things together, which in itself is good for growing faith. Just creating space to be together and do things together allows us to share our faith together. I try to collect the things together that we will need for these activities (often baking or craft for us), which means that if we have a slot we can just choose an activity and then off we go. But it's also fine if these things don't happen. This gives me space to enjoy Christmas activities without feeling guilty about not getting things done.



# Just creating space to be together allows us to share our faith

## What could you do?

Whenever families ask me what they could do at home to boost faith formation at home, I encourage them to do things that suit their family, adding a faith element into activities they already do and strategically choosing one or two new things to add a faith element they want to build.

## Do things that suit your family

It's easy to try to live out someone else's faith or to do what we imagine others are doing. Faith at home becomes a way that we live when we do things that suit our family. I have friends who use a family devotional at Christmas, which I really like the sound of. However, this continues a pattern that they follow most weeks throughout the year, so it totally fits with the rhythm they've created in their home. Our home is more suited to stories, so we read a chapter of a Christmas story each night.

We need to bear in mind the season our families are currently in. When my children were under 5 I didn't read them chapter books. Instead, I wrapped up 24 Christmas-linked picture books, then we opened one each day and read it together. When my children are teenagers, maybe we will listen to a podcast together (or whatever exists in that future world!).

When they were very small, I bought a simple Nativity set they could play with, throw and chew. Now they are older we have a lovely hand-carved wooden one and a Playmobil one. (Who am I kidding? We have about ten! But that's for me to discuss at my next Nativity Sets Anonymous meeting!)

Our lifestyles change how we do things. Are you usually very busy at the weekend? If so, don't plan big events at those times. Or are you busier during the week? If that's the case, plan your extra thing at the weekend. Do you always have music on at home? If so, create a Christmas playlist, or a different one for each week of December, and enjoy some glorious worship, carols and silly Christmas songs together. Do you love ritual, quiet and candlelight? If that's the case, stock up on candles and pick a great prayer you can use together during Advent.

## Bring a faith element into existing activities

Often the easiest way to bring faith to the forefront is to include Jesus in something we already do. Obviously, he's already there, but this is about us consciously doing things to enrich our faith.

This might be decorating your Christmas tree as usual, then all pausing for a minute before you put the star or angel on the top. Reflect on the year, give thanks for your three favourite things in 2019 or ask God to help you put him at the top of your list this season.

It could be decorating your house as usual, but adding some decorations that specifically relate to the Christmas story, such

as angels or stars. We love making angel bunting, using A3 paper to make giant angel paper dolls. We have also done angel-topped jam tarts and angel-stamped homemade wrapping paper using a cookie cutter and red paint on lining paper.

It could be making a gingerbread house into a gingerbread stable. The IKEA one converts really well by leaving off one side and turning the chimney into a manger (see [godventure.co.uk/news/gingerbread-nativity-scene-using-an-ikea-kit](http://godventure.co.uk/news/gingerbread-nativity-scene-using-an-ikea-kit) for details).

## Strategically include things to add a faith element

What you want to build into your faith at home is likely to be influenced by your spiritual style. You may not have thought a lot about your faith style, because it's likely that many of your Christian friends will share a similar one. But ask yourself whether you prefer to learn scripture or sing worship songs. Would you rather get involved in social justice activities or invite friends to events? Do you like looking at Christian art or studying the cultural background to Bible stories?

All of these are great, but some will appeal more than others. Whichever you are drawn to, find a way to do them in a special way during Advent. You could learn the Magnificat by heart, find a new Christmas worship album, sign up to help a social outreach project in your area, pray about which of your friends to invite to various Christmas events at your church, collect some beautiful Christmas art to use as a reflection or collect some great non-fiction books to explore the cultural backdrop of the Nativity story. Don't do all of them; just pick one!

Another way to think about adding elements to your faith at home life is to think about what your family does without thinking, and which elements might need a bit of a boost. What do you find works most easily in your routine: Bible reading or serving others? Worshiping God together or sitting quietly with him individually? The Bridger model of faith talks about faith as understanding, faith as imagining, faith as trusting and faith as doing. Which of these is your family great at? Which could you work on a bit this Advent?

Whatever you choose, do it strategically and intentionally. Be realistic and have fun with it! Making a faith at home plan isn't another chance to compare yourself with others or beat yourself up about not doing it well. It's a chance to move further along in the faith you have, and this is a lifelong journey. And as I have to tell myself when I'm tempted to plan too much, there will be another Christmas next year!

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## VICTORIA BEECH

runs GodVenture to inspire family faith at home. You can find lots more ideas for using different media in your faith at home activities on her website ([GodVenture.co.uk](http://GodVenture.co.uk)) as well as on her Facebook and Instagram pages: @GodVenture.



Here is a story for you to tell at home, perhaps at bedtime or as part of a God time during the day. You could also use it as part of a children's session. To read some of Bob's other stories, download our **FREE** ebook at [youthandchildrens.work/stories](http://youthandchildrens.work/stories).

# Rahab

As you tell the story, you could encourage the children who are listening to respond like a narrator's mate: to be quiet, to sit very still, to sigh, to hand over a pretend cord and to tremble at the thought of climbing down the wall. They can do as much or as little as they like.



Shhhh. Be as quiet as you can. Be as still as you can, too. I can hear them searching for us downstairs.

Don't cough. Don't sneeze. And don't move a muscle. If they find us we're dead!

Yes, I know the stalks of flax that Rahab laid on this roof to cover us with are itchy, and all you want to do is to scratch your nose. But don't do it! Not until we get the all-clear. Otherwise the king's men will catch us. And we'll be done for, trust me.

Now, listen! Do you hear that? She's telling them she saw us but that we sneaked out of the city gate just before it shut. Just before dark. She's telling them they'd better get a move on if they want to catch us.

So they're leaving, do you hear? Heavy feet on the floor. The door slamming shut behind them.

And now, breathe. Go on. A great big sigh of relief. We're not safe yet. Not by a long shot. But we're safe for now.

It's tough being a spy, isn't it? But when Joshua asked us to creep into Jericho and check it out we both put our hands up, didn't we? Yeah, just like that!

And this woman, Rahab. What a find she turned out to be. She not only gave us a place to stay, but she hid us when she heard that the king's men were looking for us.

Yes, you're right. She did it for a reason, no doubt. What did she say? That's right! She'd heard that our army was coming. She'd heard how our God had split the Red Sea so we could all walk across on dry land. She'd heard what our armies had done to the cities we'd already defeated. So she wanted to do a deal with us.

"I'll hide you," she said, "if you promise to save me and my family when you conquer Jericho."

I don't know what you think, but that seems more than fair to

me. And, hey, I've got an idea for how we can do it. Give me that scarlet cord you wear around your waist.

Yeah, I know your mum gave it to you. And, yeah, I have one, too. But mine's brown. It doesn't stand out like yours. If she ties your cord onto her window, we'll be able to see it when we attack the city. And that's the point, surely. We'll see it. We'll know where her family is hiding. And we'll be able to rescue them. Just like she's rescuing us.

Yes, I know that! We're not completely rescued yet, but Rahab has a plan; a way to get us out of the city so that no one notices.

Don't look so grumpy. I didn't tell her your plan because I didn't want you to worry. After all, I know how you feel about heights.

See, you're trembling. I knew this would happen. But it's the only way. Her window is in the city wall, right? So if she lowers us out of the window and down the wall on a rope, no one will see us.

Stop shaking your head. You're going to do this. You have to do this or we'll be stuck here! And eventually they'll find us. And we'll die.

Pray? Yes, I think that's an excellent idea. And yes, I'm happy to go first if you think that will help.

Now listen, can you hear? Someone is climbing up on the roof. Someone is making their way across the rows of flax. Someone is pulling up the flax that covers us.

"Hello, Rahab!"

Come on, my friend, it's time for us to go!

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## BOB HARTMAN

is an author and performance storyteller, who has spent many years writing and telling stories.