

What Elementary-Age Boys Need Most From Their Parents

I love my teen boys, and the glimpses of manhood mixed with occasional remnants of boyhood that I see in them. The teen years are what I call my reward for all of the hard work that came in the younger years.

So, what about those younger years? Many people have commented and emailed asking, “What are some things you suggest we do **BEFORE** they are teens?” *A good question indeed.* Because really, if you haven’t built a relationship of love and respect with your son when he is young, everything will be much harder when they hit their teenage years.

The Elementary years can be such a sweet season, full of imagination, laughter, snuggles, and questions . . . a lot of questions. Major bonding occurs during the Elementary years, and most of us will miss these innocent childhood years when they are gone.

However, as far as our role as Mom and Dad go during the Elementary years . . . **It’s a big job.**
Hold on tight:

Because if parenting in the *teenage years* bring to my mind thoughts of *mutual respect, shared humor, and expanding freedoms*, I would have to define parenting in the elementary years with things like *teaching respect, training in character, and not giving a whole heck of a lot of freedom.*

But the point I want to make is: **the reason parenting in the teenage years CAN BE so much fun, is because we have trained up boys in the younger years who are now truly pleasant to live with.**

We have done the work. Sure, there are personalities to take into consideration, and there is never a guarantee with kids, but I think as a general rule: *If you put in the work when they are young, you’ll reap the rewards as they grow up.*

It’s not that the Elementary years can’t be fun . . . every stage can and should be fun! But the elementary years are the most important years to focus on discipline, character, and instruction.

Lots of instruction. In fact, instruction seems to be woven into everything we do when our kids are young. We give instruction on how to speak, how to listen, how to look a person in the eyes, how to answer the phone. It’s all of the stuff of daily life, but if we teach it when they’re young, it will stick.

So, here is a list of things that come to mind . . .

A quick note: This list may very well apply to girls as well as boys. As a mom of four boys (and no girls,) I have kept it boy-focused, but if you find this helpful for your daughters—I am thrilled!

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1. Teach him restraint:

One of the most important skills you can teach your son is to accept a “no” with a submissive and content heart. Sometimes it’s just “no” to a momentary want, and sometimes it is “no” to something that most of the other kids have, and you don’t believe they need. (Cell phones, video games, etc.) When kids are allowed to have things that are more age-appropriate for teenagers, then they have very little to look forward to as teens. In turn, they grow into teenagers who think they need the “next thing,” and you can see the dangerous pattern here. There is a season for everything, and when they are young, we say no to a LOT.

2. Keep him close.

Not in a dysfunctional or self-serving way, but in a healthy family-first way. Time with friends is great, especially if they are good kids who will have a good influence on your child, but there is no better place for your kids to spend the majority of their time than with their own family. From a young age make the home a positive place, and when you are there, have fun and talk about everything. This forms a very natural mentorship which will mold and shape your son’s values and attitude for the rest of his life.

3. Help him choose good friends.

Help guide your son to choose the kinds of friends that he will spend time with. Too often, out of insecurity or shyness, a child will be drawn to the most accepting crowd. And we all know that sometimes the most accepting crowd is not a good one. Teach your son how to pick friends, and what a good friend is, and is not. Talk to him about their friends, and get to know his friends. Let him know that sometimes it takes patience to find a really good friend, and hanging out with mom and dad is not all bad either.

4. Help him develop interests/hobbies.

Some kids are naturally inquisitive and will want to learn everything about everything. They do sports, want to play a musical instrument (or three,) and could entertain themselves for hours studying insects, or building a Lego universe. Other kids seem to find almost nothing interesting, and give a mere nod to the things the other kids find fascinating. (These kids might be most drawn to video games, etc.) I have found that if you continue to introduce your son to new things, something will eventually click. Don’t give up. Besides sports and musical instruments, my boys have hobbies that range from studying rocks and minerals, to birding, to graphic design. With the internet at your fingertips, kids have the whole universe to discover. Let them dive in. *(with appropriate supervision/filters, of course.)*

Side note: Though I am not totally anti-video games, I do think that there ought to be serious limits, and having interests and hobbies can make this a lot easier!

5. Stretch him:

Boys need to be stretched. They need to overcome fears, accomplish goals, and yes...fall down and scratch some knees. (or in our case, break some bones.) This is good. This is also a great

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role for dad or another male figure to play in your boy's life. I remember a time when my oldest was just getting into surfing, and as much as he loved it, he would confide in me that he was scared when he went surfing in some of the waves his dad was taking him to. After checking with my husband who assured me they were absolutely safe, and talking to a few friends who would give me objective advice, I decided not to intervene. I had to trust my husband, and believe that this "stretching" would develop my boy into a stronger man.

Encourage your boys to try things. To jump off high places. Let them fail. Let them try out for teams, and *not get chosen*. Let them tremble, and teach them how to handle their feelings when they are afraid.

6. Give him work:

Boys need to work. They need responsibilities, and accountability. They need to realize that they are depended on by the family for things that simply will not get done if they neglect to do them. At some point it is a good idea to offer them work that they will be paid for. This is how they will learn to manage money, and will also help them transition into their teen years realizing that an hour of their day could be wasted carelessly, or used to work and save for things that they really want.

If your boys grows up embracing a good work ethic, they will go into their teenage years with more self-confidence, and greater usefulness wherever they are. My teenagers would *never ever* admit to being "bored" at home because they know that will only get them a new chore to do.

7. Teach and Model Communication:

Young boys can talk. A lot. And about all kinds of things - from ridiculous made up stories, to the cartoon they just watched, to whatever fleeting thought just went through their head. They want to share ALL OF THE THOUGHTS. It's so easy to tune them out when they do this, but now and then stop, and really listen. Engage. Ask questions. Make it a habit now and they will trust you and be comfortable sharing with you as they grow up.

A good friend taught me to "Talk about issues before they are issues." Bring things up early on, and make it open for conversation. Then when they actually face it, it will be familiar territory. You might talk to them about expectations, prepare them for disappointments, and bring up change before they face the change. (It's a lot easier prepare them to be a teen when they are 11 than when they are 14. Better to discuss sexual purity before they are actually drowning in hormones.) Open that communication door wide and it will likely stay open well into their teenage years. And far beyond. I could go on and on, but the list has to stop somewhere.

Finally, I will add that our faith affects everything we do, including (and especially!) our parenting. We teach our boys about God's love and grace from a young age, and we keep an open environment for them to ask questions as they work out their own faith. This post could not cover everything, so I stuck with the practical side of parenting.

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