

RAISING SUCCESSFUL TEENS

How to Help Your Child
Honor God and Live Wisely

JEFFREY
DEAN



REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

Previously published as *The Fight of Your Life*

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MULTNOMAH

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For my wife, Amy.

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Introduction

I met fifteen-year-old Kallie several years ago. I know she loves Jesus and really wants to honor Him with her life. She is popular at her high school and with students in her church youth group. However, she found that the line between right and wrong began to blur in a new dating relationship. I heard her story from a friend who had borrowed Kallie's phone to make a call. While using Kallie's phone, the friend noticed nude pictures of Kallie. The friend also noticed that Kallie had sent some of the photos to her boyfriend.

When the friend asked Kallie about it, Kallie confessed that she sent the pictures after several requests from her boyfriend. (By the way, this is the new cool in our culture: taking off your clothes, snapping a picture, and hitting Send. If you believe your teen is immune to such choices, you are wrong.) In this instance, a Christian teenager who knows better chose to cater to her boyfriend's wishes rather than honor God. Now the images are on her boyfriend's phone and potentially could be shared with his friends or posted online. Kallie's boyfriend made a wrong choice when he encouraged her to compromise her character. Their mistakes could be costly to them in a number of ways.

Kallie is one of many young people who believe that sharing nude selfies is the equivalent of sending an innocent love letter. Her boyfriend

is one of a multitude of teenagers who believe that requesting and receiving nude pictures from a girl is just a normal part of life for Generation Z. Kallie and her boyfriend are part of a generation that has been bombarded with lies, and they are desperate for truth.

Like many teen girls I meet, Kallie longs for acceptance. Meanwhile, her boyfriend is willing to give up his integrity (and Kallie's) to satisfy his lustful desires. Many teens won't encounter this exact situation, but they *will* encounter equally consequential choices. Dealing with Satan's lies is every teenager's daily reality.

As I speak to students around the country, I hear stories you wouldn't believe. Satan is determined to destroy every teen, without exception (see John 10:10). You likely remember the challenges you faced in your teen years. Temptation always has been there, and the Enemy has always been the same destroyer he is today. It is important to note, however, that the internet and the proliferation of mobile devices intensify the battle our kids are in. Teens are overwhelmed by information, anything-goes (or lack of) ethics, and the inevitable experimentation that results. For Generation Z teens, the world moves at a pace you and I never would have dreamed was possible.

Every week teens write to me about addictions to social media, video games, and pornography. I talk to many teens and parents who tell me they have a friend, family member, or classmate who is addicted to prescription drugs. By the time students are graduating from high school, most tell me they have consumed alcohol and been offered drugs. Some states have legalized the use of recreational marijuana, and more appear to be following that lead. Most teens say marijuana is easily accessible, legal or not.

In addition, several states now offer a third legal gender option on birth certificates and other state documents. More states will follow, al-

lowing anyone eighteen or older to change their current “male” or “female” designation to “X”—meaning they choose not to be on record as male or female.

Just this week I talked with people about issues related to sexual identity, pornography, failed relationships, suicide, divorce, self-harm, depression, and sexting. Even more than with past generations, it seems there is no end to how far this generation of teens will go to address their needs, curiosity, and desires.

A parent told me, “My husband and I learned that our tenth-grade son is questioning his sexuality. He revealed his desire to dress like girls, and he thinks he is attracted to boys. Our son is a Christian, is heavily involved at church with the youth praise band, and has said for years that he wants to work in missions after college. We are questioning everything we did as parents and are wondering where to go from here.” I receive email and Facebook messages every week from parents who are overwhelmed by the reality that a son or daughter is struggling with gender-identity issues.

“These are the ways of the world: wanting to please our sinful selves, wanting the sinful things we see, and being too proud of what we have. None of these come from the Father, but all of them come from the world” (1 John 2:16, NCV). Our number one enemy works overtime to convince our kids that pleasing their sinful natures isn’t sinful. As this verse reminds us, Satan deceives them into believing that sinful things they become aware of are things they need. As a parent, you are positioned to help your teen sift through the deceptions so he can embrace truth.

Countless students have been lost in the madness. However, I know many who have risen above life’s struggles and temptations and chosen the way that is right and good and God honoring. Read what Claire, the mom of a high school junior, told me:

My son Kendell has been through it and back again! If it's out there, he has probably tried it a time or two, or two hundred. He's been in jail, been kicked out of two schools, already has a daughter, and is only a junior in high school. Through it all, my husband, Craig, and I have never given up on him. A year ago, we specifically began to pray Proverbs 16:3: "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans." We prayed this prayer all the time. And God did a miracle in Kendell's life. Kendell began to change. I can't explain it, but he did.

We are now on the other side of his former lifestyle, and he is a new young man! He's had to face some pretty steep consequences, some of which will remain for a lifetime. But a new set of friends, a new school, and Kendell's new commitment to give God (and his family) another try has made all the difference. We are living proof that you can never give up on your kids!

The psalmist wrote, "Guide me in your truth, and teach me" (Psalm 25:5, NCV). This is the rally cry of your teen's heart. What a privilege you have as a parent to guide your child to truth.

The Privilege of Parenting

My wife, Amy, and I received a phone call from a neighbor who told us his baby son had died at delivery. Our neighbors finally had conceived a child after trying for several years, but during the baby's delivery, something went horribly wrong. A year has passed since this tragedy. The parents are still devastated.

Many people such as my neighbors would give almost anything to be a parent. I can't explain why God chooses to give children to some and not to others. But knowing that He has chosen me, I do not take the call to parenting lightly. You shouldn't either.

God never would have given you the privilege of being a parent if He didn't have an awesome plan for you. He has given you everything you need to be the exact parent your teen needs. This book will help you become the parent you were made to be.

I will first discuss what it means to study the culture in which your teen lives. That will prepare you to keep your eyes open so you can be armed and alert. I will talk about your greatest strategy, which is to use God's Word. And I will call you to pray. James 5:16 reminds parents that "the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

I will also talk about what your role does not include. It's not your responsibility to prop up your teen or to save your son or daughter. Rather, you are to teach discernment and provide a solid foundation from which your teen will learn to live from a biblical perspective.

Last, I will discuss the incredible privilege you have been given to encourage your teen to live wholeheartedly for our lord and savior, Jesus Christ, the one who is greater than anything this world can throw her way.

Here are five critical foundational truths:

1. You are the most influential person in your teen's life—more so than any friend, coach, teacher, pastor, boyfriend, girlfriend, or celebrity. I hear this regularly from teenagers. So consider this: How are you influencing your child?
2. Your teen wants you to be involved in his life. Contrary to the lie of Satan and regardless of the many times your teen rolls his eyes before storming out of the room, he wants you to be an involved parent.

3. No matter what is culturally accepted, nothing is more authoritative than the truth of God's Word. It is up to you to communicate His truths to your family. Don't allow yourself to be swayed by rules, values, and assumptions that come from any source other than the Bible.
4. You are a parent, not a pal. Teenagers don't need their parents to be their friends; they need them to be parents.
5. You have to be willing to enter into discussions that make you uncomfortable. No matter the fallout, you have to go there when it comes to difficult, risky, or potentially awkward topics. You need to be the constant voice of reason and truth, the adult who is willing to talk about anything and will compromise nothing.

Parenting is likely the toughest job you will ever have. On some level, all teens will encounter every issue we'll discuss in the chapters that follow. You need to be equipped. I want to help you become the parent God has called you to be.

Over the past twenty-six years, I have counseled many parents, including expecting parents, single parents, parents of one teen, parents of multiple teens, parents of girls, parents of boys, and parents of both girls and boys. Though each story differs, I have had the privilege of meeting so many parents who desperately want the best for their children. I have included many of their stories in this book, and I know you will be encouraged and challenged as you read.

For the purposes of clarity, consistency, and simplicity, I have chosen to write this book in terms of a singular teen and have expressed my ideas from both a male and a female perspective. Though I can't present a scenario for every situation parents may encounter, I trust you will find hope and encouragement for your personal parenting journey.

What Success Looks Like

What does it look like to raise successful teens? Your goal isn't to have a perfect teen. Instead, it is to be a guide toward truth as she navigates an ever-changing world. I want my daughters to live in obedience to the standards set in Scripture. I want them to know the difference between right and wrong and choose to do what honors God. I want them to become everything they desire and everything God desires for them.

Jesus said in Matthew 22:37 that the greatest commandment is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind” (NCV). So as it relates to success for my kids and yours, shouldn't our goal be to raise children who, above all, aspire to love Jesus Christ with every facet of their lives? Pause now to pray with me for yourself and your family:

Father, I thank You for my family. I also thank You for the call You have placed on my life to be the parent my child needs at this moment. I know You have a special plan for my teen and for me in this journey. Please guide me as I work to be the parent You already know I can be. I am thankful that You are here with me every step of the way. Amen.

God Matched You with Your Child

Years ago a father and mother were forced to abandon their child. They were convinced it would be the only way to protect their son's life from a ruthless dictator. At first they kept their baby nearby. But after three months they placed him in a small watertight vessel and set him afloat in a river. You can read the story in Exodus 2:1–10:

A man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch. Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

Then Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him. "This is one of the Hebrew babies," she said.

Then his sister asked Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"

“Yes, go,” she answered. So the girl went and got the baby’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.” So the woman took the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh’s daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, “I drew him out of the water.”

We don’t know much about Moses’s Egyptian stepmother. We don’t even know her name. But we do know she was fearless. She violated a pronouncement of her father, a murderous tyrant who had ordered the execution of every Hebrew-born male (see Exodus 1:8–16). Moses’s stepmother knew the risk involved in bringing a Hebrew infant into the palace to live, but she did it anyway.

It wasn’t as if Pharaoh’s daughter came home and said, “Dad, I accidentally ran a chariot into the side of one of your pyramids.” No, she came home knowing full well that Dad hated the Hebrews and wanted their baby sons dead. Then she introduced Dad the tyrant to his newest step-grandson, a Hebrew.

Did it just so happen that on the same day Moses’s parents placed him in the Nile River, he was found by someone who had the power and resources to protect him? Is it a fluke that the one who found a baby boy and chose to keep him was the daughter of the dictator who ordered the murder of all Hebrew male babies? There is nothing coincidental about this story. God chose the daughter of Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the planet, to be the stepmother of a son. The son, a Hebrew, would do great things for God and eventually lead His people out of the land of the Egyptian king.

Pharaoh’s daughter seemingly is one of the most important people in the Old Testament. Though she isn’t known for ascending to the throne, she forever will be known as one chosen by God to fulfill a critical role.

She was the daughter of an Egyptian king, and she became a mother to Moses. God chose her for this purpose.

Likewise, God could have chosen anyone to be the parent of your teen. But He didn't choose just anyone; he chose you. This is no coincidence. No other parent is capable of doing the job He created you to do.

If anyone else had rescued Moses, he would not have received the type of education and upbringing he needed to fulfill the call God placed on his life. The same is true for your teen. The unique plan God has for your child is founded on the reality that God chose you to be his parent. Even before your teen drew a breath, God was preparing you to be the parent to lead him every step of the way.

Growing Up Is Inevitable

Words can't describe the joy I felt as I stood in the delivery room holding Bailey, our first daughter. It was instant love. A nurse showed up to take Bailey to the hospital nursery for her first nap outside the womb. I walked to the nursery, where, gazing through the window with tear-blurred eyes, I watched my daughter sleep.

I repeated much the same experience two years later with the birth of our second daughter, Brynna. After each of our daughters was born, I wanted to take her into my arms and never let go.

I had visions of being Super Dad, never messing up, doing everything I could to ensure they would have perfect lives. I took a deep breath and said, "I'm a dad. We'll have so much fun!" And almost as quickly I thought, *I'm a dad. Help!*

Do you remember the hopes and dreams you had for your baby? Do you remember *your* instant love? It's no wonder God describes Himself as our "Everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6). There is no love on earth that is more unconditional than that of parents for their children.

Yet change happens fast for our kids. One minute they rely on us for everything. Then, in a blink, they are heading off to prom. Whatever the age of your teen, she faces a world that is always changing. And not only is the world constantly changing, but so is your kid.

Greg, a father of two sons, told me, “My boys are entering the teen years, and I’ll admit that I’m uneasy. I remember the things I struggled with and the thoughts I had as a middle school boy. I can’t believe I have two boys who are going to be dealing with similar challenges. And I’m not sure I’m prepared to help lead them through it all.” Can you relate? I’ve counseled countless parents who feel the same.

Growing up is inevitable. It is your teen’s God-given path to becoming the person he was created to be. Your child is exploring who he is and what really matters most. However, your teen was not created to set out alone on the journey to adulthood. He needs you. But Satan wants your teen (and you) to believe otherwise. He works overtime to convince you *and* your teenager that a strong parent-child relationship is no longer necessary. In the chapters that follow, I’ll show you how to combat his lies.

Your Influence as a Parent

For over twenty-five years I have spoken in front of more than four million people in churches, schools, detention centers, conferences, music festivals, and other venues. I have had numerous conversations with tweens, teens, and college students on almost every topic imaginable. We talk about God, eternity, heaven, hell, social media, sex, pornography, cutting, addictions, divorce, homosexuality, friendships, dating, witnessing, college, and more.

I also have had many conversations with pastors, parents, school administrators, law-enforcement officials, and social workers who ask about

teen culture. Though their questions vary and many of the people asking aren't people of faith, I can summarize their questions as "How do we protect our kids from the onslaught of lies they hear as we guide them in making the choices that will influence the rest of their lives?"

My answer in every instance is "Mom and Dad!" Of course, not all kids are growing up in a two-parent family. I meet single-parent moms and dads all the time. If you are a single parent, thanks for reading! You're pulling double duty often, and I know there are days this can be challenging. You've been given the unique privilege of being the parent who is involved daily with your child, and I am cheering for you as you read. Your situation is not a surprise to God, and He is in it with you every step of the way.

I can say that parents are the answer every time because it's true and because I'm a parent too. I see firsthand the influence I have over my daughters as they learn to live by watching how my wife and I live. Bailey and Brynнан watch my life more than they realize.

Even the angry, dismissive, disrespectful teenagers are busy developing their worldviews on life, God, love, sex, friends, money, church, politics, marriage, and entertainment. Much of what they look to for direction is what they see in their parents' lives.

Parents are given a task that is the hardest and most rewarding of all. God didn't haphazardly choose you and me for this job. Bailey and Brynнан are my kids because God chose Amy and me to be the earthly parents to *His* children. Bailey and Brynнан are gifts from God. The same is true for you and your children. "Children are a gift from the LORD; babies are a reward" (Psalm 127:3, NCV).

Satan knows that God has big stuff in store for your teen, and Satan will do everything he can to crash the party. It is critical that you understand that Satan hates your teen. No matter what stands out about

him—star athlete, honor-roll student, musician, volunteer working with the homeless—Satan hates your child because he doesn't want God to win.

Who gave Pharaoh the idea in 1526 BC to kill all the Hebrew boys? Satan knew what God had promised Abraham: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perrizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites" (Genesis 15:18–21). Satan also knew what God had promised Abraham's son Isaac: "Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham" (26:3).

And Satan knew exactly what God had promised Abraham's grandson Jacob: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying" (28:13). Satan knew that God was working toward something big, and he wanted to do everything he could to stop God's plan. He continues to work against God's plan and promise. If anything, he has upped his game.

Why do you think so many teens feel the pressure to give it all away sexually, even when so many parents raise them to live otherwise? Who do you think is behind every tear that runs down the faces of teen girls who fall for these lies?

- "You'll never be as pretty as she is."
- "You're so fat. No one will ever love you looking like that!"
- "If you don't go all the way with him, he's going to move on to someone who will."

And what about the lies that tear down the confidence, self-image, and faith of teenage boys?

- “Porn is no big deal. Everyone’s looking at it, but no one talks about it. So keep quiet.”
- “You’ll never get accepted to college with your grades. You better look for a way to cheat without getting caught or you’ll never make the grade.”
- “Just drop a little of that into your date’s drink and she won’t remember anything that happens tonight.”

Maybe your teen hasn’t fallen for such lies. Or maybe she has. Most likely, you don’t know. But no matter how the situation appears to you, your teen is only one choice away from hurt, addiction, and heartbreak.

When a young person tells me about his worst fears and mounting failures, I usually can connect the dots backward from that teen’s hurt to his home. Teens ask questions such as “Why is my mom too busy to spend time with me?” or “Why does my dad spend more time with my brother than with me?” I have cried along with many girls and boys who can’t understand why their parents don’t communicate with them.

It would be foolish of me to tell you, “Be a good parent and all will be well with your child.” We know that’s not the secret to success. It would be equally foolish for me to ignore all I have learned from listening to teens who long for help, hope, and hugs from a parent. Teens wonder why their parents choose instead to check out.

My Aha Moment as a Dad

When someone gives you a gift, what is your immediate response?

“I’d really rather have been given something else.”

“This is going straight to the regift pile!”

“I hope there’s a gift receipt here somewhere.”

What *should* be your immediate response? My mama taught me to

say thank you no matter how I felt about the gift. As I mentioned earlier, Psalm 127:3 insists that “children are a gift from the LORD; they are a reward from him” (NLT). With that truth in mind, my response to God will always be “Thank You for my children.”

How do you parent as a thankful mom or dad? Ask God, “How can I honor You as I parent my teen?” Imagine if every parent paused to ask God’s direction on *all* things involved in parenting. What if each of us asked questions such as these:

- “How can I honor God by what our family watches on television and in movies?”
- “How can I honor God by what I teach my teen about sex, love, and dating?”
- “How can I honor God by teaching appropriate use of cell phones?”
- “How can I honor God by ensuring my family is in the Word consistently?”
- “How can I honor God by what I teach my teen about music, the world, evangelism, politics, friendships, helping the poor, finances, and choosing a career?”

In the following chapters, we will look at practical wisdom and approaches to these issues and more.

This Book Is for You

Maybe you think your teen appears to be doing well, so you aren’t sure why you should read a book about parenting. Or maybe the choices she has made so far have left your family at the breaking point. You feel hopeless, ready to throw in the towel. Wherever your teen is at the moment, this book is for you.

First, it’s irrelevant whether your teen is in a good or bad place right

now. Satan hates young people who are conscientious, responsible, and compassionate just as much as he hates teens who are bullies, refuse to accept responsibility, and remain on probation after breaking the law. He doesn't base his disdain for your child on whether he makes the honor roll or does meth. Satan wants every teen, including *your* teen, to fail.

Second, no matter how it looks on the surface, every teen is trying to answer questions such as “Who am I?”; “What am I going to do with my life?”; and “Who will give me the answers I need about life, love, college, finances, sex, and gender identity?” Every teen has to consider our culture's fluid definitions of right and wrong. The disregard for moral absolutes and the roller-coaster definitions of truth and falsehood create a toxic environment through which your teen must find her way mentally and spiritually.

Third, social media is ever present. Snapchat and Instagram are a way of life for most teens. Posting to Snapchat is the first thing they do in the morning and often the last thing in the evening—like a ritual of life. Cell phones are vital appendages. Social media platforms rule the world, in part because they cater to our increasingly brief attention spans.

Social media, along with all other forms of media, delivers a constant flow of images, video, and content that is of questionable value. A mom told me that her son found himself in the middle of a social media nightmare via Snapchat. After meeting a girl at a party, the mom's teenage son “friended” the girl. What began as an innocent streak (that's Snapchat lingo for a photo conversation between two people) eventually spiraled out of control a few months later. It ended with the issuance of a restraining order against the girl to protect the boy from a neurotic, self-destructive girl looking for attention and willing to do just about anything to feel secure.

Social media has changed the way the world communicates. It demands that you, as a parent, understand how it is shaping your teen—

and you! In a later chapter we'll consider practical tips on how to keep your family safe.

Last, your teen wants and needs an involved, engaged, all-in parent. Numerous conversations with teens who speak with me at my events begin with heart-wrenching statements such as these:

- “My dad lives at home, but he really ‘left’ us years ago.”
- “I never read the Bible with members of my family, much less pray with them.”
- “I can’t remember the last time my mom told me ‘I love you.’”
- “We never eat dinner together as a family unless we are watching Netflix.”
- “I wish my parents would let me talk about what’s really going on. They never seem to listen, but they’re good at screaming.”
- “I’m pretty sure my parents wouldn’t care if I just disappeared forever.”

Teens tell me, even when their words may not say it, “I need Mom and Dad in it with me every day.” The fact that you are reading this book indicates you have big dreams for your teen and want to be the parent he needs. Although we often don’t know what our kids are thinking or feeling, we are called to dream big, pray like mad, and never give up hope.

Commitment Time

I’d like to ask you to make a commitment to stay the course and not get frustrated as we talk about life, God, culture, and parenting as they relate to your son or daughter. On the following pages, you will likely read some things you will not want to believe. It is also possible you will read some

things you won't think you need to believe. But I guarantee that everything I write in this book is critical for you as a parent. In addition, your teen is counting on your commitment to stick it out and have patience. Here are three critical commitments you need to make.

1. I'm all in!

Maybe you are thinking, *This book isn't for me. My teen is doing great! She's plugged in at church, goes to summer camp, and is excelling at school.* Or maybe you are at the other end of the spectrum. Your teen is about to graduate. She has made choices that have pushed your family to the brink. You are feeling hopeless, ready to give up on it all.

Wherever your teen is on her journey, this book is for you. Your child needs you to be all in. You have a lot to look forward to and get ready for, and it's never too soon or too late to be all in.

2. I'm all ears!

No matter what it looks like on the surface, every teen struggles with temptations, fears, and challenges. Every teen has to navigate the confusing waters of today's culture. It's important you realize this before moving forward.

Even a Jesus-loving, church-attending teen who is a straight-A student will deal with extreme challenges during the journey from child to adult. Remember, Satan doesn't care if your teen is on the honor roll. No matter his grades, talent, or looks, the devil hates him.

I'm going to challenge you to implement some steps that, at the moment, may seem unnecessary or unrealistic. But I urge you to resist the desire to move quickly past these topics and instead take these issues to God, asking Him to reveal what He would have you hear and implement as it pertains to your son or daughter. Proverbs 1:5 says, "Let the wise

listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.” As you read this book, make it your prayer to listen to what God would have you hear, and then do what He would have you do.

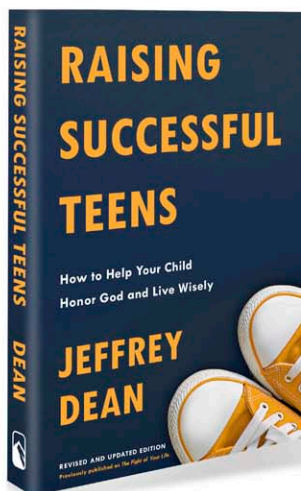
3. *I’m all His!*

Just because you read this book and apply its advice does not mean that your child will choose to embrace a God-focused life. No matter how hard you work at being the best mom or dad, your teen is a human being with free will. She can and will mess it all up—more than once.

You and I need all the help we can get. Parenting is tough. We need God at the center of our lives. I want to challenge you to surrender your will, your wants, your theories, and your priorities to God every day. Ask Him (and mean it) to lead every area of your life. Remember, God could have chosen anyone to be the parent of your teen. But He didn’t choose just anyone; He chose you!

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