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## . . . ABOUT LIFE LINES . . .

The Life Lines series is designed for *real* people in *real life* situations. Written by published authors who are experts in their field, each book covers a different topic and includes:

- information you need, in a quick and easy-to-read format
- practical advice and encouragement from someone who's been there
- "life support"—hands-on tips to give you immediate help for the problems you're facing
- "healthy habits"—long-term strategies that will enrich your life
- inspiring Bible verses
- lists of additional resources—books, Web sites, videos, and seminars to keep you headed on the right path

Life Lines is a joint effort from Marriage Alive International and Smalley Relationship Center. Marriage Alive founders and directors David and Claudia Arp serve as general editors.

Whether you need assistance for an everyday situation, a life transition, or a crisis period, or you're just looking for a friend to come alongside you, Life Lines offers wise, compassionate counsel from someone who can help. This series will connect with you, inspire you, and give you tools that will change your life—for the better!

### ***Titles in the series:***

*Life Lines: Connecting with Your Husband*—Gary Smalley

*Life Lines: Connecting with Your Wife*—Barbara Rosberg

*Life Lines: New Baby Stress*—David and Claudia Arp

*Life Lines: Survival Tips for Parents of Preschoolers*—Becky  
Freeman

*Life Lines: Communicating with Your Teen*—Greg and Michael  
Smalley

*Life Lines: Making Wise Life Choices*—John Trent

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## . . . INTRODUCTION . . .

### *A Relationship in Transition*

*Do you ever wonder . . .*

- how that sweet, baby-powdered bundle of joy who couldn't stand to be apart from you has turned into a tall stranger who wants to hide out in his room rather than be anywhere near you?
- how you have suddenly changed from the parent who can comfort or fix anything into that person who "doesn't understand anything"?
- if all those early lessons in please-and-thank-you left any impression whatsoever?
- if you'll ever be able to fall asleep while your teenager is away from home—or behind the wheel?
- if you and your teenager will ever again have a normal, loving relationship?

If any of these ideas have crossed your mind or you ever lie awake at night worrying or praying over the decisions your teenager is making, welcome to the launch years!

The years when a teenager is approaching the age at which he'll leave home—whether to go away for

more education, for a job, or just to move out on his own—are a time when both parents and teens struggle to find their way. Communication can be tough. Not only are your teens developing independence and

logical thinking, they're also going through a major change in the way they see themselves. And you may be going through changes or stresses at the same time. There are many reasons why this time is so often fraught with conflict and miscommunication—and many of these reasons are quite natural! But there are also many ways to get ready for these years and to survive them with good grace, leaving the relationship between you and your young adult intact.

**These are tumultuous times for any family, but your family can ride out the storm with comfort and peace. Wisdom is available that you can wear like a good rain slicker, and positive actions can fit your lifestyle like good waterproof boots.**

If ever there was a season when parents need to tap into every available source of wisdom, this is it! We have distilled some of the best advice out

there for parents, and we're offering it here to you. As our foundation, we're depending on the ultimate source of wisdom, God's message to humankind—the Bible.

These are tumultuous times for any family, but in the same way you stay warm and dry within your

home while wind and rain beat outside, your family can ride out the emotional storms in comfort and peace. Wisdom is available that you can wear like a good rain slicker, and positive actions can fit your lifestyle like good waterproof boots. Talking to your teen doesn't have to be painful. You *can* learn to solve conflicts and communicate with openness and respect. How do we know? First, because we both survived our teenage years—with a good relationship with our parents intact. And second, because we both now counsel families and speak at conferences through the Smalley Relationship Center. We've seen these strategies work for family after family, and they can work for you too! We believe that with God's help, you can keep a calm mind and spirit as you launch your teen into the adult world.

### **WARNING: ROUGH WATERS AHEAD**

All our parents wanted was some quality family time. But as teens, Michael and I wanted something different . . . *independence!* Which is what started the major conflict that fateful day on the island of Catalina. . . .

"Let's all go to the beach today!" our parents said excitedly. They were ready for some time with just the family—all of us together.

Being typical teenagers, we had no desire to hang out with the family. We wanted to explore some caves

we'd seen the previous day. "We don't want to hang out with you; it's too boring anyway!"

"It's too boring hanging out with you"—ever heard that one before? That's pretty much what started the Great Catalina Island Smalley Family Fight. We went round and round until our parents finally figured they would enjoy the day a lot more without two whining teenagers around. So we stormed off, little knowing that the day would hold not only basic family conflict but an actual struggle to survive!

We were snorkeling around the cliffs by the shore when we found a cave about the size of a large family room. At one end of the cave was an opening in the floor (about the size of a Jacuzzi) filled with water. We decided to explore the water hole with our underwater flashlights. The farther we went down the wider the hole got, branching off into several other smaller holes—one of which had light shining through. We figured that this hole must lead out into the ocean, which was on the other side of the cave.

I (Greg) took a big breath of air and swam down toward the small hole. As I maneuvered through the opening, I encountered a strong current. I could feel the tide pulling me as it went out and pushing me as it came back in. This should have been my first clue that it might not be such a good idea to go through this hole.

Nevertheless I pushed on. About ten yards into the hole, I came to a fork. Both tunnels looked alike and had the same amount of light shining through, so I quickly chose one. This tunnel headed straight up; I thought I was home free. I had already been in the cave for over a minute, and my lungs were starting to burn from a lack of oxygen. As I made my way up through the tunnel, a strong current pulled me along.

I had gone only a few yards in this direction when the area around me began to shrink. Quickly I realized that I wasn't going to fit through. I tried to back my way out, but the current was too strong—and it was pulling me toward the top. I had to wait until the tide started to come in before I could get out.

I was now starting to gasp violently for air, but when I got out of the tunnel I couldn't decide if I should try the other tunnel or go back the way I had come. Either way it looked about the same distance. However, when the tide went back out, the decision was out of my hands—I was sucked into the other tunnel. Panic took over my mind as I realized that if this tunnel did not lead to the surface, I would drown before I could make it back to the cave.

The speed at which I was now going through the tunnel caused me to scrape hard against the sides. I could feel deep gashes caused by the sharp coral, but being cut was the least of my worries. I now had to

fight my way through the returning tide. I imagined that this was what a salmon must feel like as he fights his way upstream. As hard as I was kicking my legs, it seemed as if I was making no progress. Struggling through the tunnel toward the light, all I could think about was that I didn't want to die like this. Finally, as the tide went out again, the water shot me through the tunnel and up to the surface. The noise of my inhaling must have sounded like the mating call of some strange mammal. But I was alive!

When I found my brother, still in the cave, he was crying. He thought I had died while trying to get through the cave. As I told him about the experience, my brother became amused. When I asked him what was so funny, he pointed out a big sign that was posted near the front of the entrance. The sign basically explained about the danger of trying to swim through the tunnels. It ended with "Under No Circumstances Is Anyone Allowed to Swim through the Tunnels!" How Michael and I didn't noticed the sign as we entered the cave I'll never understand.

That pushing-pulling, panicked state I experienced down in that tunnel is something like the experience of many parents who have teens. Sometimes the conflicts with these young adults leave both parent and child with emotional cuts and bruises (like the physical gouges I received from that coral!). Many par-

ents—and sometimes the teens too—are feeling exhausted by swimming hard against the current but seeing little progress.

Our hope is that we can put up a few red-flag warning signs for you, as parents, as you move through these years of launching your adolescent into adulthood. We want to give you direction so you can maneuver through the parent-and-teen conflicts, which often feel like a maze. We'll show you some practical communication solutions in these pages so that when you reach the end of this adolescent period in your family you won't be gasping for air, or nursing cuts and bruises. It's our goal to help your family emerge in a healthier condition.

In your relationship with your teenager, some conflict is a given—that's the bottom line! The good news is that you can use the conflict to build a better relationship, and not let it tear apart the love you share with your child.

In these pages we'll explain why conflict is a part of the relationship with your teen and help you see conflict as an opportunity to develop a strong and lasting relationship. We'll provide both immediate life support and then long-term help for creating healthier habits of dealing with anger and conflict with your adolescent, and of communicating with him or her.

Let's get started!

# . . . 1 . . .

## **SPARKS ARE GONNA FLY!**

### *The Reasons behind Parent-Teen Conflict*

One mother we know is so resigned to the teenage argumentative response, she actually met her son at the door one day when she returned home from work and told him: “We’re invited to the Stevens’ for dinner. You’ve got thirty minutes to clean up and argue about it.”

Conflict is inevitable in any relationship, but especially in the relationship between parents and teens. Since it’s nearly impossible to avoid conflict in this stage, the wisest response is to learn to recognize why it occurs and seek to manage it positively. Take a look at some of the factors we’ve found that cause the most disagreements among parents and teens.

## TEEN ISSUES

### *Developmental changes*

Sometimes it feels as if teens actually enjoy arguing with authority! It's important for parents to recognize that it's natural for conflict to increase during adolescence. As your child hits the teenage years, a very important developmental change occurs involving his or her intellectual abilities. Before your son reached adolescence, there were times when he thought you, his parents, knew everything. He was amazed at the seemingly endless amount of knowledge you possessed, and he assumed you could handle any situation. This is because younger children have difficulty looking at the bigger picture; instead, they focus on literal or concrete ideas. They also have limited experience with the world and find it difficult to judge logical consistency. This is why it's easy for most young kids to believe in Santa Claus. Even though it's clearly not logical to believe that one man could visit every house in the world in one night, traveling in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer, young children believe that he does. Why? They have concrete proof that he exists—presents!

When kids reach adolescence, however, parents say good-bye to the days of literal meaning and difficulty with logic. A teen's ability to reason and grapple with abstract ideas pushes him to think and create solutions and resolutions independently. Does it ever feel

like your teenage daughter thinks she knows everything? At this age, most teenagers feel the need to challenge authority or established experts. They don't want to take anyone's word for it; they want to find answers for themselves. The result? Your child no longer believes every word you say just because you said it.

Yet just because your teen is developing the ability to think and reason in the abstract doesn't mean he or she is always going to exercise high logical ability. In fact, most parents find it pretty frustrating if they try to use logic when arguing with their teens. Jean Piaget, a pioneer and expert in the area of cognitive development, discovered that a teenager's thoughts

#### **THE TOP TEN CONFLICTS BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEENAGERS**

We interviewed 2,000 parents to ascertain the conflicts they most often experienced with their teens. The following are the top ten trigger points that set off sparks:

- TV/video games
- Talking/communicating
- Chores
- Cleaning
- Taking care of family property
- Discipline: setting limits, enforcing rules, being too lenient
- Spending time with family
- Siblings
- The way the teenager speaks to parents
- Teenager not telling parents how he feels or thinks

are usually quite idealistic. She may be able to think about the future and its endless possibilities, but she still has trouble thinking in practical terms. Sometimes a teen's overly optimistic outlook on the future causes trouble because he or she doesn't yet understand the many obstacles or difficulties that must be

overcome to reach these future goals. In an attempt to help their teen be more realistic, parents sometimes go overboard with caution, and teens perceive this concern as criticism.

In addition to idealistic thinking, teens are beginning to develop the mental capacity for problem solving. They're learning to detect the logical consistency or inconsistency in a set of statements, especially statements made by

authority figures. In other words, you can no longer expect your child to accept that "there are starving children in Africa who would love it" as a reasonable reason for eating his broccoli.

These physiological changes in your teen's brain will affect your disagreements with him. If it seems like every time you bring up a topic, your teen wants to argue about it, it's probably because of these developmental changes. Arguing with you doesn't necessarily mean that your teen loves to terrorize you or

**Teens have new abilities and gifts and can't wait to try them out. There probably isn't a better "practice field" for experimental arguing than at home with you.**

that you two have a shaky relationship. Instead of being discouraged, try thinking of your adolescent's new mental abilities as a Christmas present. When you first unwrap a present, you're filled with excitement and want to use your new gift all the time. It's the same for teenagers. They have new abilities and gifts and can't wait to try them out. They probably won't find a better "practice field" for experimental arguing than at home with the family. Teenagers need to be able to utilize these new idealistic and logical abilities.

### ***Social changes***

Teen-parent fights have a lot of common triggers. Take a look at the sidebar on page 3 for some specific ones. But a number of underlying social and behavioral issues can also be factors in conflict:

- **Privacy.** Teenagers usually develop an intense desire for privacy. Sometimes young people who were never overly shy as children become reluctant to reveal themselves, their feelings, and their ideas once they reach the teen years. This change, which necessarily creates distance in the teen-parent relationship, is often difficult for both parents and adolescents to negotiate. You may feel hurt that your child no longer confides in you; your teen may feel upset by the



distance even as she insists upon it. This results in—what else?—conflict.

- **Risky behavior.** Another source of friction may develop as teens begin to engage in rebellious, show-offy, or risk-taking behaviors—and that drives the concerned parent completely crazy! Perhaps the teen drives fast or recklessly. Perhaps he stops studying or experiments with alcohol, drugs, or premarital sex. Teens often have an unrealistic “it can’t happen to me” attitude that rejects the notion of danger or resists the long-term view of these often self-destructive activities.
- **Friendships.** It’s common for teens to value their friends—and the advice and input they receive from friends—more than their parents during adolescence. Parents and family, who are forced to take a backseat to these favored relationships, may feel rejected. Peer pressure becomes an issue, as “the group” exerts an almost irresistible influence on your child.
- **Dating.** Young people also begin to pull away from their families more as they begin to date, finding friends of the opposite sex in whom to confide and on whom to depend.
- **Working.** The potential for conflict increases when your young person steps out into the world of employment—a world complete with a busy

schedule that can be difficult to merge with the family or school schedule and an income that may not necessarily be spent wisely or well.

- **Fads and fashions.** As young people express their individuality by making fashion or being “in style” a priority, new areas of conflict often emerge. Parents may disagree with teens spending money on fad clothing or styles that are disagreeable to them. Sometimes teens want to dress in a way that’s sexy without understanding the dangers associated with that choice. They also tend to be excessively focused on their looks, and they may give this aspect of their personhood too much importance—either capitalizing on good looks or despairing over average ones. Both girls and guys may struggle with body image and eating disorders.

In short, teens are experiencing more choices than they ever have before, and the newfound freedom can be both exhilarating and frightening.

Most tension between parents and teens grows out of the young person’s movement toward becoming an individual separate from the family group. Generally, the young person’s longing for more autonomy—“I’m in charge of me”—smacks up against what you, the parents, know he or she is really ready for. As you

struggle to find the balance between how much responsibility can be shifted to the teen and which areas of authority need to remain in your domain, you may begin to feel as if you're always arguing with your child. But take heart. There is a way to navigate these choppy waters and reach a solution everyone can live with.

## **PARENTS' ISSUES**

While teens are changing, so are you, Mom and Dad. You may find that the atmosphere of conflict in the home is taking its toll on your marriage too. It's typical for marital satisfaction to dip during these years of parenting teens.

### ***Midlife issues***

Adolescence arrives at a rather inconvenient time for some parents. It comes when many middle-aged parents are asking themselves: *Who am I, what have I accomplished, where am I now, and what does the future hold for me?* In some ways, midlife parallels adolescence.<sup>1</sup>

Some women look toward the empty-nest future and realize they may want to pursue more education or a different job—especially if they've put careers on hold in order to spend years raising their families. Other parents find themselves doing work in a field

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that hasn't brought them much personal satisfaction, yet they may feel trapped by financial obligations to their family. Many people in the midlife years look for drastic changes—in education, hobbies, cars, and so on. If this sounds like you, consider talking to a

#### **PARENTING ON YOUR OWN**

If you're a single parent of a teenager, you don't need anyone to tell you that you're facing some extra challenges. Here are a few tips to encourage you in your task:

- **Look for support.** Every parent needs a sounding board—someone with whom he or she can discuss tough issues like discipline, homework, and TV limits. Cultivate relationships with other parents who can fill this void in your life. Maybe it's a couple at church who has children about the same age as yours, or possibly it's an older man or woman who has been there and can share wisdom. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- **Create new traditions.** It's inevitable that kids will compare the way things are now to the way things used to be. While some old traditions are worth maintaining, sometimes it's best to make a break from the past. Sit down with your kids and brainstorm some creative new ideas. Maybe you'll want to implement Saturday-morning breakfast in bed, or a special family movie night once a month.
- **Be honest but reassuring.** If you've gone through a divorce or the death of a spouse, your kids need to know that some things are different now. Maybe they'll have to move to a different neighborhood or quit piano lessons. Maybe they won't be able to have Saturday-morning breakfast with Dad. Talk to them about these changes, but be upfront about the things that will stay the same: your love for them, their identity as your children, God's care.

counselor and looking for a way to make positive changes. If you're interested in a new career, check out the career section of your library or local bookstore. Several books are available that will help you evaluate your interests and skills.

**Not only is life dramatically changing for the adolescent, but there are important adjustments for the parents and the family as well.**

Furthermore, many parents experience an “authority crisis.” They feel their authority is being threatened as the teen questions their values and rules, which is part of the process of individuation. Parents may also begin to question themselves.<sup>2</sup> If they made mistakes in their own adolescence, such as experimenting with drugs and alcohol or having a child out of wedlock, they may become increasingly frightened and try to control their teen’s behavior to make sure history doesn’t repeat itself.

Another stress affecting parents at this time is the increase in the family’s financial burden. Teens have more expensive activities and pastimes, and car insurance for teen drivers is costly. College is now in the not so distant future, and many parents may be forced to do some fast figuring—and sometimes some take on side jobs—in order to make college a possibility for their children. In families where teens are required to contribute to car-insurance payments or college sav-

ings funds, parents may find that motivating their teens is another source of stress.

Other personal stresses may affect the adults. Perhaps their own physical attractiveness is in decline, which can be hard on some people. What's worse, they may be dealing with more health and physical concerns. Many parents are extraordinarily busy, driving their teens to and from activities while trying to work at home or on the road. Some parents must join the "sandwich generation" and care for their own elderly parents as well as their children.

### ***A matter of style***

No matter what your parenting style, these teen years can be tough. Adults who struggle with low self-esteem, or parents who have until now enjoyed a good relationship with their children, may be hurt by their adolescent's preference for outside input and friendships. Parents who have been more controlling or authoritarian will find that trying to exert control at this stage of the game usually leads to more conflict with their teens, who struggle even harder for independence. And parents with rigid or unrealistic expectations for their kids will find these years especially difficult. Teens who are struggling to discover who they are and what they want out of life may revolt against having to measure up to anyone else's standards.

## **FAMILY ISSUES**

Family styles and the changes that take place during these tumultuous years can also contribute to the background causes of conflict. Family relationships undergo a transformation when children reach adolescence. Parents and teens spend less time together during adolescence than earlier in life.<sup>3</sup> Many of the interaction patterns that were appropriate for parents and their preschool- or elementary-school-age children are no longer appropriate for interactions between parents and soon-to-be-adult offspring.<sup>4</sup> A teen who is bent on autonomy will likely spot these patterns and rebel against them before the parent—who can't quite believe his or her child is growing up—does.

The organization of the family also plays a part. Has there been a divorce, resulting in single-parent home life or stepfamily situations? Split families can have more financial pressure and less geographic mobility, and it is more likely that the mother will have to work outside the home. Families recovering from divorce or adjusting to a blended situation must deal with complex issues, such as trying to merge parenting styles, deal with new sibling relationships, and cope with loss and change. All of these add to tension in the home. (For help with these tough issues, check out the titles listed in the resource section at the back of this book.)

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Differences in the personality types in the family members often become more noticeable and pronounced as teens “come into their own.” Differences that used to be easily managed or accepted may shift into more marked opposition. A picky eater may

#### **THE BRADY BUNCH?**

Okay, so life as a blended family may not be quite as harmonious and fun as it used to look on *The Brady Bunch*—especially if you have teenagers. Melding two families together takes time, careful planning, and lots of effort. How do you do it?

- **Don't compete.** Most kids in a blended family have two sets of parents—and that can set the stage for lots of competition. Just say no! Focus on the relationship with your children, not on how you compare with the “other” mom or dad.
- **Set clear rules—and stick to them.** No two families are exactly alike, so it's inevitable that you'll encounter different expectations. Sit down together as a *new* family and hash out some rules: for household chores, for curfew, for homework, for conflict resolution, for discipline. Teens who suspect favoritism will be less likely to wail “It's not fair!” if it's clear that *all* the kids follow the same rules.
- **Back each other up.** How many times have you heard that parents shouldn't disagree on discipline in front of the kids? That can become a lot harder when you're watching your spouse punish *your* child. But be careful. When you side with your kids over your spouse, you're undermining his or her authority and setting the stage for more conflict down the road.
- **Be patient.** Putting two separate families into one household is a major change. Recognize that you *and* your kids need time to adjust. Expect that things won't always go smoothly, and take the time to celebrate all the little milestones you pass.

become a strict vegetarian when she becomes a teenager and turn every family meal into a diatribe against meat eaters. A child who has always been quiet by nature may become even more quiet and withdrawn during the teen years, especially if his parents or siblings are more extroverted. Sibling rivalry often intensifies as one child or another gets more attention, even if that attention is negative.

These years change the family's emotional connections. Parents and teens are more emotionally distant, often separated by conflicts of morals and values. As your teen attempts to find his own set of values, it will often seem as if he's rejecting everything you've taught him about right and wrong. Don't worry. This is normal. In order to build a strong moral foundation for his life, your child needs to understand *why* he believes what he believes. Most parents find that their children do return to what they've been taught as they move into adulthood.

### **KNOWLEDGE IS POWER**

With the teen's developmental and social changes, parents' midlife issues, and questions about the family's style, it's no wonder this period can be fraught with tension! Not only is life dramatically changing for the adolescent, but there are important adjustments for the parents and the family as well.

Is there any help for this situation? Of course. Once you understand some of the reasons behind the conflicts you experience with your teen, you'll be better equipped to handle the problems. It's not that your teenage son or daughter actually enjoys arguing with you, or that your family is dysfunctional or unhealthy because conflict exists. Instead, you need to realize that you're all going through significant changes.

As a parent, you might be feeling somewhat hopeless and helpless in response to this challenging and adjustment-filled period called adolescence. However, before you get too discouraged, remember that conflict is normal and natural in close relationships. Conflict is a part of both breaking down barriers and sharing feelings and needs. But the best news of all is that conflict is loaded with opportunity. *Conflict as opportunity . . . impossible!* you might be thinking. But in the next chapter we'll show you that great opportunity exists if you learn how to better manage conflict with your teens.

***May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other—each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.***

ROMANS 15:5-6