

# RUNNING THE RAPIDS



DR. KEVIN LEMAN



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC., WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at [www.tyndale.com](http://www.tyndale.com)

TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Tyndale's quill logo is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

*Running the Rapids*

Copyright © 2005 by Kevin Leman. All rights reserved.

Portions of this book appeared in *Adolescence Isn't Terminal*, copyright © 2002 by Kevin Leman. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2002 by Tom Spitz Photography. All rights reserved.

Front and back cover photographs copyright © 2005 by Colorado Whitewater Photography. All rights reserved.

Designed by Luke Daab.

Edited by Ramona Cramer Tucker

To protect the privacy of those who have shared their stories with the author, some details and names have been changed.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

---

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leman, Kevin.

Running the rapids : guiding teenagers through the turbulent waters of adolescence / Kevin Leman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN-10: 0-8423-7413-2 (sc)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8423-7413-2 (sc)

1. Parent and teenager. 2. Teenagers—Family relationships. 3. Adolescence. I. Title.

HQ799.15.L464 2005

649'.125—dc22

2005008441

---

Printed in the United States of America

11 10 09 08 07 06 05

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# 1

## WHAT KIND OF PLACE IS ADOLESCENCE ANYWAY?

“Can I come with you, Daddy? Can I? I could help out at the book table.”

Hannah, then thirteen years old, looked at me with those adorable, pleading eyes. How could I say no?

But inwardly I smiled to myself. You see, I knew what I was going to be speaking about at the conference; Hannah did not. She was merely anticipating an exciting evening of going out somewhere with me.

“Sure, honey, I’d love to have you come along,” I said quickly.

Too quickly, I realized, for instantly Hannah was suspicious. “What are you talking about tonight?”

I kept a deadpan expression. “Adolescence.”

Hannah gasped. “Oh, no. Please, Daddy, please, please, *please* don’t mention me. Don’t say *anything* about me.”

There was a pause, and then my daughter started laughing. She hit herself on the forehead with the palm of her hand. “Oh, no! I just gave you material for tonight, didn’t I?”

I was grinning all over. Indeed she had!

At thirteen, Hannah was just breaking into that rollicking, fun, treacherous, frustrating, meaningful, and wonderful time we call adolescence. It’s a contradictory place—where young teenagers want to be the center of the world at the same time they don’t want any attention drawn to them! They want to be

perfect in all they do and in how they look, yet they also desperately desire to be just like everyone else in their peer group. It's a time when the life rafts of so many teenagers become mired down in the mud of inferiority. Here they've been sailing through life, having a great time and enjoying the scenery on the trip when *wham!* Their craft all of a sudden gets stuck in the mud. And the harder they work at getting it out, the deeper it seems to sink in the muck.

I'm convinced that the only thing more difficult than being an adolescent is trying to parent one. I should know. My wife, Sande, and I have now walked four children through this process, and we're getting ready for child number five—Lauren—to join what I affectionately refer to as “the hormone group.”

When our kids get ready to step out onto that raft in the river of adolescence, everything changes. Most of the parenting rules that helped us for the first decade of our children's lives become suddenly outdated because our kids themselves have changed. And we need to adapt, adjust, and grow in the way we relate to our kids if we want to maintain a meaningful, healthy, and strong relationship during this transitional journey from childhood to adulthood.

Sure, adolescence is admittedly turbulent. I joked once that the primary goal of getting our children through the teenage years is actually quite simple: to get them into their twenties without having them kill someone or be killed themselves! If they can avoid jail in the process, so much the better.

Seriously, you can survive your child's adolescence. Though this season can be difficult, it can also be very rewarding.

For instance, one afternoon I received a phone call from my daughter (who was eighteen at the time). She was concerned

about some kids her age—athletes on the school team—who were smoking dope. She asked me, “Dad, what should I do?” Yes, the students were violating the school’s rules, and that concerned her. But she was *more* concerned about the fact that these kids were doing what wasn’t good for them.

I asked her a question in return. “Honey, what do *you* think you should do?”

After we talked for a while, I told her, “If you feel as strongly about this as you’re telling me you do, why don’t you go to those kids and tell them what you told me? Talk to them face-to-face. Tell them you’re concerned that they’re harming their bodies and minds by smoking dope.”

Even if she chose to do nothing, I knew that watching others make poor choices would be a lesson learned in itself. All throughout life, she would see many people do what wasn’t good for them.

And that’s why it’s so important to teach *your child* to make wise choices. So he or she won’t get swept over the rapids of peer pressure. Wise parents will encourage their children in their own age-appropriate decision making, rather than make decisions for them. Your child will learn more from, “You made that decision, and I’m proud of you” rather than, “Well, you should do . . .”

Here’s another example. My son, Kevin, phoned one night. “Dad, can I talk to you about this chick?”

“What about her?” I fired back, suddenly suspicious.

“Dad, it’s nothing like that,” Kevin said quickly. (I could just see the eye roll on the other side of the phone) “This chick asked me why I was always happy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What did you tell her?”

“That I came from a really neat family and that I loved God.”

I smiled. It was great to hear that my son's classmates perceived him as always happy. But what made me even happier was when I heard: a) Kevin thought we were a "really neat family" and b) he was confident enough of his faith to tell a peer that he loved God. *Wow*, I thought. *We are blessed with a great kid. Maybe we did something right.*

The interesting thing about both of these examples is that both occurred when our children had left the nest and were at college.

## STEPPING INTO THE RAFT

When exactly do children enter that stage we call adolescence?

I've got a good test for you. You know your sons or daughters are embarking on this period when you see them slink down into the car seat as you drive past some kids on the corner. After all, who wants to be seen with an old fogey like you? Or when they want to walk across the aisle from you at the mall, rather than by your side, and they pretend they don't know you (until the time comes to pay for their purchases, of course).

As soon as you see this near-universal moment, you know your children are entering that period in life when they desire to be free from parental restraint. It could begin when your children are as young as ten, but it almost always strikes by the time they are twelve or thirteen. And when it happens, you know that for the next decade, your kids will consider you an "outsider" to their "real life" and circle of friends. Accept it as a fact, then move on.

Your children will become more dependent on their peers, and in reaching toward adulthood, they may even act as if they regret ever having any association with such "uncool" parents.

## WHAT KIND OF PLACE IS ADOLESCENCE ANYWAY?

This is a normal developmental stage that the wise parent will have fun with rather than resent. One time one of my daughters wanted to thank me for something, so she said, “I’ll do anything you want!”

FOR THE NEXT  
DECADE, YOUR KIDS  
WILL CONSIDER YOU  
AN OUTSIDER.  
ACCEPT IT AS A FACT,  
THEN MOVE ON.

“Great!” I said. “Let’s go walk around the mall together while I wear Bermuda shorts, black socks, and white tennis shoes!”

I soon found out that no teenage daughter’s love extends *that* far! And to be honest, I didn’t expect it to.

Should you be offended? Not if you have a firm grasp of the “big picture” of the complexities of the adolescent years—including all the stresses, temptations, styles, insecurities, trends, influences, etc., that compete for your kids’ minds. After all, do you really want your son or daughter to stay a child forever? Weren’t you glad to get past the diaper stage?

Think back a few more years, to your own teenage years. How much did you want *your* mother or father hanging around with you and your friends on a Friday night?

However, while adolescence is something all parents have experienced (even if it does feel like we did so way back in the dim recesses of memory), we make a big mistake if we assume our children’s experience will be just like our own.

## STARTLING STATISTICS

What is the world like for today’s teenagers? Consider these startling facts.

During a four-year period, CBS conducted scientific polls of more than 2,300 students (from various high schools) scheduled to graduate in the year 2000; CBS also followed and interviewed two hundred students more closely. The results were interesting—and sobering.

In 1997 a surprisingly large 43 percent of students knew someone who had tried to commit suicide. That number got even worse by graduation, when 70 percent of students knew people who had tried to kill themselves.

As freshmen, less than 25 percent knew someone who was openly gay. As seniors, 66 percent did.

One encouraging sign was that 46 percent of the students felt their relationship with their parents had improved to excellent (up from 34 percent).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, that still means more than half were not satisfied at home.

Another study found that illicit drug use doubles during the adolescent years. While 28.3 percent of surveyed teenagers admitted to using illegal drugs as eighth graders, over half—54.7 percent—of the students in the twelfth grade made the same admission.<sup>2</sup> Yet another study found that 39 percent of students surveyed had used tobacco at least once by the end of seventh grade.<sup>3</sup>

However, in spite of these troubling statistics, today's teenagers are almost comically optimistic about their financial future. According to an Ernst and Young survey, 30 percent of college students polled expect to be millionaires in their forties. More than one in five expect to retire in their forties or earlier! More than 60 percent plan on retiring at a younger age than their parents did. If you can believe it, only 25 percent believe they will never be millionaires.<sup>4</sup>



## WHAT KIND OF PLACE IS ADOLESCENCE ANYWAY?

Not only are today's kids a little more adventurous and a lot more optimistic than we were, but the things that would have made us blush as adolescents are second nature to them. While I served as assistant dean of students at the University of Arizona in the seventies, I saw my share of provocative girlie posters. But now young women have posters of men striking roughly the same poses—something you never saw back then, “in my day.” I also read with interest an Ann Landers column in which a mom complained that her fourteen-year-old son's girlfriend gave him a collage of pictures of naked women—including side, front, and rear views. Call me old, but fourteen-year-old girls didn't do that sort of thing when I was in junior high! (Since I receive so many questions about sex and dating, I'll address those issues in depth later in this book.)

Understandably, this can create misunderstandings—some serious, some humorous—between the generations. (Those of you who already have a teenager in the house know exactly what I'm talking about.) I got a chuckle when professional tennis player Anna Kournikova—whose knockout looks had given her great fame—complained during a press conference organized to promote some undergarments that she endorses: “I'm not here to talk about my personal life. I'm here to talk about bras.”

In the world many of us grew up in, husbands and wives couldn't be seen in the same bed on television, so producers created the marital double-bed set. Yet most of today's kids have already seen everything that goes on in bed—and the scenes on TV many times are not even between husbands and wives.

Today our kids are up against a society that can't figure out

what a marriage really is. Cheating is rampant on college campuses. Teenagers are bombarded with multiple mixed messages of what is right and what is wrong—or they are told that everything is relative. There is no right or wrong; only what they feel. Some are raised in homes of faith; others are not. In the adolescent years, any religious beliefs are put in the crucible of fire. Will those beliefs be destroyed, or will they be refined in the adolescent's own heart and life?

YOU CAN NO  
LONGER CONTROL  
YOUR CHILDREN, BUT  
YOU CAN STILL  
INFLUENCE THEM.

Even more, with the horrific attacks on 9/11, war has struck home. Kids are asking—and rightfully so—“Am I going to be okay?” “Is our world going to be okay?” “Is it going to last long enough for me to get married and have kids, or will some great cataclysm end it all with a big *boom*, like the movies show?”

It's clear that today's children are growing up in a very different sort of world than the one we grew up in. And now that those children are no longer babies (who can be soothed by their blankies) or toddlers (whose dead goldfish can be replaced by another just like it) or preadolescents (who can be patched up readily with a Band-Aid and a hug), your days of controlling them are over.

What do I mean by that? When your kids were toddlers, you were able to control their environment and minimize many negative influences. You controlled, for the most part, what they watched on television and in videos and the friends with whom they played.

But when your child becomes an adolescent, those days are

## WHAT KIND OF PLACE IS ADOLESCENCE ANYWAY?

gone. Parenting rules that worked for your babies, toddlers, and preadolescents no longer work.

You can no longer *control* your children, but you can still *influence* them. You can provide loving boundaries that bring safety to the twists and turns of the teenage experience.

*Running the Rapids* will show you how.