

Staying close to the students in our midst

School starts this month and I have been thinking about the challenges our youth face in being students today. I have also been thinking about the role that we who are parent/parents have in encouraging the students who live in our homes. I have just three pieces of practical advice for those of us who want to be encouragers of these inheritors of tomorrow.

1) First, stay close to your daughter/son whatever you do. One ordinary and very good way to do this is to eat dinner together each evening. It's a time to count on and a definite place to catch up on our lives each day while life is happening. Staying close this way from kindergarten through grade twelve is a scheduling challenge, but one of the best of all tradition-builders. It can become a safe place for talking and listening and laughing — a time and place where each member of my family discovers that my story is needed and welcome just as theirs is.

2) Secondly, keep as many doorways open as possible in the life of your student. Keep your eyes open to the doorways of knowledge and if you see one beginning to swing shut, for any number of reasons, be wise as you try to be helpful. Do everything you can to keep those doorways open, whether it is through tutoring, or a different course with a different teacher, or a summer session.

SOME YOUTHS may be tempted to close off a future option like science or language or athletics or writing because they missed or stumbled on a stepping stone near a learning doorway. Watch for this and become a proactive encourager who helps keep as many doors open for as long as possible. Respectfully encourage your student, not as an "all-knowing" critic but as someone who cares and respects the integrity of the student in your house.

3) My first word of advice was to stay close. Now my third



From Your Minister

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word of advice is to step back far enough to enable your son or daughter to catch their own stride in their own time. We study and learn subjects in the first place, whether in home schooling or in the classroom, in order to learn the knowledge and skills that set us free and make us independent. We who love youth as parents and teachers and pas-

tors need to help this good independence happen.

One way that teenagers develop healthy independence is by choosing mentors and positive role models from friendly adults at school and church and family. This borrowing is one of the marks of youth who succeed academically, athletically, socially, morally and spiritually.

WHY IS IT that every day we meet youth who come from stressful home situations and who are still able to pull things together and even succeed in the face of obvious disadvantages in their families of origin? In almost every case the one difference was that teenager's ability to borrow non-exploitive and healthy adults, either from within their families or beyond, who became their mentors and encouragers; they stayed close, kept doors open and encouraged independence.

I believe this is one of the most important mandates of the Christian church in youth ministry. More than programs and sermons, we need to offer good people so that a teenager can

choose from them an adult friend as an encouraging reference point for finding his or her way through the complicated roadways of conflicting values and temptations. Just as youths need the Holy Scripture as a map, they need adult friends to help them unfold and hold the map.

Independence as a creative quality in the character of a teenager does not happen as that youth is disconnected and isolated from other people, but it is just the opposite. The freedom of spirit that produces a young man or woman who is able to make decisions, follow through and shoulder responsibility happens in relationship with other people. All of this takes time. There are very few shortcuts in making a resolved personality, a whole person.

AS BIG AS this challenge is, nevertheless it is the challenge of education and youth ministry, just as it is the challenge in parenthood. What is our goal as a Christian mother or father? It is to develop age-appropriate maturity and healthy independence so that our teenagers catch their own stride as youths who are able to think clearly, make decisions that really matter and move on to the next part of the journey alongside their friend and companion Jesus Christ.

Part of that moving-on called independence requires a resolution and understanding of the family of origin experiences that come together like a giant puzzle to help me know who I am. I am like every human being, so I have plus and minus legacies from the family I grew up in. Somehow I need to figure out the pluses with gratitude to God, and also to figure out with God's help the minuses with forgiveness and healing in them.

Sooner than we expected it to happen, the children in our family grow up and no longer live in our house, but they take their own part as the ones who care by stepping back, keeping doors open and staying close.