



Little Book of Questions that Get Teens Talking



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By Roy Petitfils, MS, LPC

"Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your hearts. ...Try to love the questions themselves...live in the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself living the answer some day."

~*Rainer Marie Rilke Letters to a Young Poet*

"...children's questions are not about answers—their questions are about relationship. Children intuitively know their questions are welcome, appreciated. Safe. And not only are children's questions welcome, but they are welcome. In a welcoming environment where questions are safe, children are infected with curiosity—a fascination with truth, an unrelenting hunger to know and be known, to capture and be captured, to touch and to be touched. When these children finally fall asleep at night, they are secure in the knowledge that the one who loves them is bigger than all their questions. They can sleep deeply, knowing they are safe in the arms of the Keeper of their questions."

~*Mike Yaconelli, Dangerous Wonder p. 35*

General Principles

All of the questions in this book are not appropriate for every teen, circumstance and setting. But you will find one or more questions that will be helpful for some teens in some settings.

I am often asked how to appropriately answer teens questions.

Why are Questions So Important?

Teens questions because they want a relationship, not an answer. Most often, I know you don't have the answer (and that's not what they're looking for white) but they want to know how much you care, are you willing to go and look beyond their questions to find out what they're really wanting, **relationship**.

If you look carefully through the contest, you realize answer very few questions. Fact memory serves, but the 183 questions in the Gospels directly answered three of them. Most often, he responded to every question with another question. (Decide to make Jesus real pain to be friends with!) He did this because he knew that more often than the questions were on track. Teens questions most of the night but they are a bit for a relationship – meaning that they want to have a discussion, dialogue and work to find their own answer to the question.

Of course, there are times when they do want "answer", Data or information. This, however, where there is so much data available today. But, when the teams are launching and we do not know the answer, we can say "I don't know the answer to that question. If you'd like (AND YOU THE MINISTER ARE REALLY WILLING) I'll look or help you find the answer.

Make them your own

These questions will be used most effectively if you're able to ask them using your own language. Test them out loud by yourself or with another adult to see if they "sound like you." If not, modify the wording to make it your own. Using language you are not comfortable with will sound forced and unnatural decreasing your effectiveness.

"Experience Rich, but language poor"

Learned this principle years ago from Dr. Bob McCarthy, PhD. Too often when teams are not as adorable as we would like, we misinterpret their lack of verbal response or interaction as not having the experience to discuss. More often it is not that they do not have the experience, but that they do not have the verbal ability to describe and express that experience. As adults have a high-level of expressive vocabulary (the words that we pull from the ether to use in our conversation), teens do not. They do however, have a high level of receptive vocabulary (the words that they can recognize). This is why we all do so much better on the multiple-choice tests—we can recognize the answer even when we cannot formulate an answer.

Use good pastoral judgment

The virtue to practice here is prudence. When deciding whether to use a particular question, consider the setting, the context, the emotional volatility of the teen, the group dynamics and the relationship you already have with the teen.

Asking permission to ask questions

This may sound weird, but it's a matter of respect, which is what asking questions is all about. If I'm working with a teen and I want to gradually shift the conversation to talking about something more significant than Snapchat, I might pause at a natural point in the conversation, take a drink of water and say something like, "Cool. I was wondering if it would be ok if we talked a little about your family." Of course the subject can change. The vast majority of the time, the teen will say "Sure."

Rapport Building

Don't Misinterpret Body Language and Facial Expressions

Teens can be intimidating. **Their facial expressions, tone of voice and body language** communicate to many that they want to be left alone and not talk. Additionally, they don't do

"small talk" the way adults or even young adults do. In a generation that prefers texting, Snapchatting (and other micro/short bursts of communication) it can feel near impossible for adults to start a conversation with teens.



On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being terrible and 10 being awesome, how was your day, week, month, year, experience? (or what was your experience of...? How would you rate...?)

- What would have made it a 10?
- Why wasn't it a 1?
- What would it take to make it a (1pt higher than they stated) or a (two points higher than they stated?)
- What could YOU do to make it a 9?10?
- What have you done so far in an attempt to make it a 9 or a 10?
- What obstacles do you encounter?
- How do you try to overcome them?
- Whose help do you try to get to overcome them?
- How have you dealt with similar problems to these in the past?
- What's the highest its gotten on any given day?
- What's the lowest its gotten on any given day?

What's been the best day of your life?

- What specifically made it better than the rest of your life?
- Who made it better than the rest?

What's been the worst day of your life?

- (if not obvious) Who made it worse than the rest?

What makes you laugh?

What makes you cry?

What makes you frustrated? Aggravated? Mad? Angry?

- If mad, frustrated, aggravated, angry had a color, what color would it be?
- If mad, etc. had a shape what shape would it be?
- What texture would it be?
- How big is it?
- What's the biggest, reddest, thorniest, smoothest, sharpest, its ever been?
- What was going on then?
- What's the smallest its ever been?
- When did it first become that shape, color for you?

What makes you sad? Embarrassed? Feel awkward?

What's the toughest thing you've ever done? Gone through? Achieved?

- How do you feel about it now?
- Who was with you?
- Who do you wish were with you?

What would it look like if you were happy/relieved/ at peace/angry, frustrated, aggravated?

What would it look like if you were not sad/angry/anxious anymore?

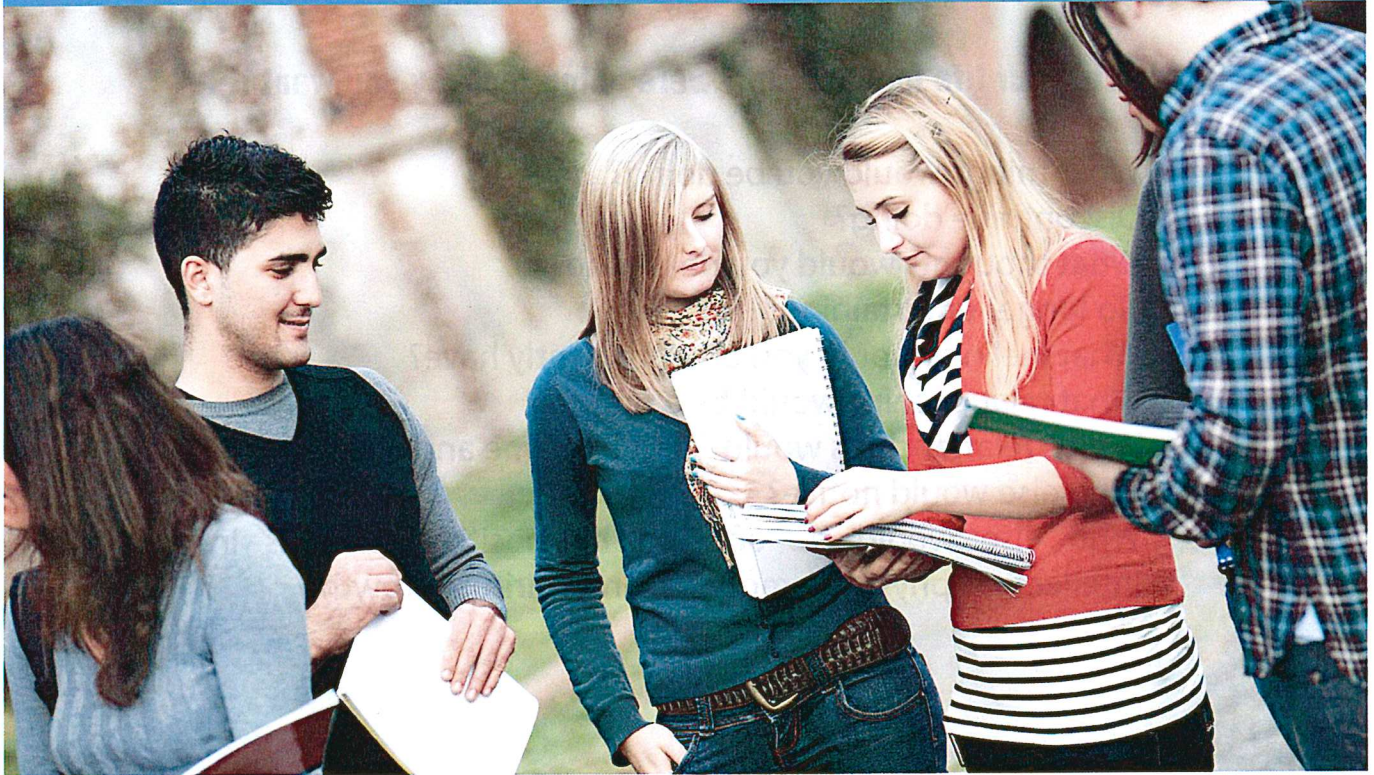
If I were watching a livestream of your life, what would I see? That would stand out? In That would show me “Hey she’s depressed/anxious/feeling left out/worried?”

What would your life look like if it were going the way you want it to?

- What things would you be doing?
- Discontinue doing?
- What thoughts would you be having?
- No longer entertaining?
- What feelings would you predominantly have?
- What relationships would be a priority?
- Which relationships would merit less time and energy?
- Who else would notice?
- Who else would be affected by positive changes in your intellectual/physical/emotional and spiritual growth?



Self Awareness



What's normal?

Because its so easy to assume others, including teens, are more like us than they are not, we must constantly remind ourselves "this person is not me." We would then follow that question by asking "How would I respond to this question if I were their age, or in their situation? How did I think about things as a teenager?" Even then we still need to account for generational and cultural factors.

What have you learned about yourself to this point in your life?

- What do you see as your greatest strength?
- Weakness?
- What is one of your unique gifts?
- Shortcomings?
- What is one thing someone has complimented you on?
- Criticized you for?
- How did you feel after, during the compliment?
- Criticism?

Was there ever a time when you felt left out, betrayed?

- What did that feel like?
- How did you respond? React?

No matter what. No matter WHAT, never refer to me as _____.

No matter what. No matter WHAT, never _____.

No matter what. No matter WHAT, always treat me _____.

If it weren't for _____, I would _____.

If _____ (person) hadn't _____
I would _____.

If _____ only knew _____ about me, they
would _____.

I wish my parents...

Question for reflection: What cultural, generational factors make this generation of teens different from when you grew up? What has stayed the same?

What is one quality of your parents you hope to emulate as an adult/parent?

What is one quality of your parents you hope to never emulate as an adult/parent?

God, Church & Religion



Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing

It can be tempting when discussing matters of faith and spirituality to get caught up in using exact theological jargon and rhetoric. I'm not suggesting that the language is not an important component in matters of faith and spirituality. Because I do believe that one of our primary roles in the lives of young people is to help them name their experience (or lack thereof) of God, faith and church.

Too many of us however, don't recognize when our approach, word choice create resistance in young people. I have written at length ([insert hyperlink to book](#)) about resistance and ways to lower resistance.

If God could be an animal, what animal would God be? What personality would God have?

- If you were an animal, what kind of an animal would you be? If you could choose a different one, which would it be? Why?

If you could draw God's face, what would it look like? Would he be smiling? Frowning, apathetic, tired, unconcerned? Attentive?

Who is a person in your life that most emulates the best qualities you see, experience in God?

If you could ask God to change God's mind on one thing, issue, way the world is as God created it, what would it be?

If you could ask God to change one thing about you what would it be?

If you could ask God to change one thing about your parents, teachers, ministers, friends, family members, who would it be and what would it be?

If you could enlist God's help with one thing you struggle with what would it be?

What's the hardest thing about praying to, with God?

What's the toughest thing about believing in God?

Believing in God would be easy if it weren't for _____.

Believing in God would be easy if _____.

I wish God ...

I wish my friends...

Life...

The world...

School...

When I get to heaven, the first thing I want God to explain to me is

_____.

When do you first remember believing/thinking/feeling that?

- Is there anyone you know who holds similar beliefs/thoughts/feelings?

Who is someone you know that you'd consider "holy"/close to God/spiritual?

- What is it about them that makes them that way?

**If the Pope/Father/Church only knew _____
there's no way they'd continue to preach, promote, teach
_____ (church teaching/dogma/moral regulation,
etc.)**

If your family were a football (soccer, baseball, softball, etc.), which position would each member play? Why?

Of the following emotions (happy, sad, angry, worried, stressed) which do you feel the most strongly?

- The most frequently?
- Which one concerns you the most?

On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being "the most", how happy (sad, depressed, worried, anxious, stressed, frustrated, mad, annoyed) have you been in the last week?

What else is there about you that would be good for me to know?

How have you dealt with anger, stress, worry, depression, sadness in the past?

Has there ever been a time when you handled it well? Poorly?

What did you do to handle it well? What were you thinking about?

How would your life be different if you weren't stressed (sad, depressed, mad, angry, etc)?

- How might it be better?
- How might it be worse?

What is one thing someone else is doing to contribute to your depression (attitude, thoughts, sadness, etc)

What's one thing you do that contributes to your attitude, depression, anxiety, etc?

What is one thing in your life that you are in control of?

What is one thing in your life you feel you're not in control of?

What aspects of your life are "out of control"?

Which of those would you like to be in control of?

What is one thing you're good at?

What is one thing you're not good at?

What is one thing that you're not good at, but would like to get better at?

Is there anything you've done in the thing you're good at that might be helpful in getting better at _____?

Is there anything you don't do when it comes to _____ (the thing you're good at) that you perhaps do in _____ (the thing you're not good at).

How do you think people get "Good" at certain things?

What makes someone "good" at something?

When you see someone doing something they're really good at, what thoughts do you have? Feelings?

What do you believe about that person? Do you think there's also things they're not good at?

How long do you think it took them to get good at that thing?

Incomplete Sentences

I like people who...

I want to know...

I wish I...

It is hard to...

The happiest time...

I get mad when...

I always worry about...

I feel sad when...

My biggest frustration at school is...

My biggest frustration at home is...

What I need most in my life right now is...

My friends...

My mom...

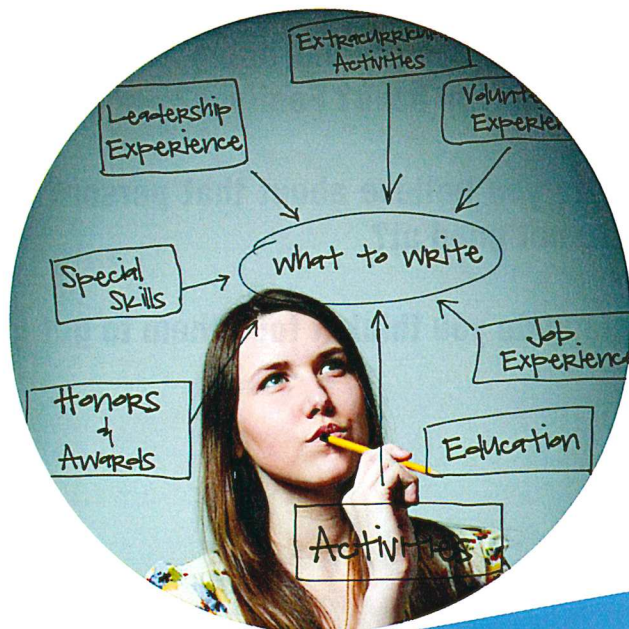
My dad...

My step...

I am afraid...

I like to...

I secretly...



Sometimes I...

The future...

No matter how hard I try I can't...

If only my mom...

If only my dad...

I get angry...

I wish I never...

My biggest regret...

People think I...

I hope I never...

If only God...

I get stressed when...

I'm proud of...

I'm good at...

I suck at...

I'm getting better at...



Touchy Subjects



Asking permission to talk about sensitive issues:

1. Shows respect by preparing them for a conversational shift and gives them a chance to mentally shift gears.
2. Gives them a sense of power and control of the dialogue. Even when they say "Yes, sure" it gives them an opportunity to have some power and control in a situation, relationship where you (the asker) possess more power.
3. Signals I'm not a dufus and I'm mature enough to know that I'm asking a more probing question.

"Would it be OK if we talked about your views on, feeling toward, thoughts about, opinions on _____?"

You mentioned that you thought the Church hated homosexuals. Could we talk about how you came to feel that way?" *[question tip, try using the word "feel" with girls and "think" with boys. In general males respond better to "think, thought" than "feel, felt"]*

- o Did you always feel that way?
- o If not, describe to me how you came to a place of thinking/feeling differently about it...
- o What factors do you think influenced your thoughts/feeling on this issue?

You seem to feel strongly about _____ (name issue). Help me understand why this issue is so important to you?

- What, for you, does it mean to hate something? Someone?
- Who/what is something, someone that you hate?
- What is someone/thing you dislike but don't hate?
- What is something that you don't like, but don't dislike, that you feel, say "neutral" about (trees perhaps)?
- If you were in charge what would you do differently about this issue?
- What do you think _____ (the church, government, teachers, parents, etc.) took into consideration when formulating its teaching on this issue?
- What else could it have considered that may have been helpful?
- Is there *any way* _____ (the church, government, your parents, school, teacher) may be "not wrong" about in this teaching?

Who else do you know that feels similarly about this issue?

- Do any of your friends think differently about this issue?
- How do you stay friends/maintain a relationship with them, even though they feel differently about something you feel so strongly about?





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