

Priority Parenting

3 John 1:4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Staring spellbound through the nursery window at the perfectly formed fingers and toes, new parents are captivated with the miracle of life, an unprecedented passage in their existence. From the first click of the seatbelt around the tiny, homebound bundle, profound powers of influence are taking form. The backpack laden kindergartener, a half decade later, exudes the defining marks of her personality. In only a dozen years, watching flowing robes and streaming tassels, proud parents see the shadows fall on the life-shaping influences of adolescence. The early years forge the personhood profoundly. These are critical years of preparation!

Parents! Yes, parents have the most profound level of influence in a child's life according to a study conducted at the University of North Carolina entitled *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, published in 2005. The research was conducted by Christian Smith, a noted Sociologist and Melinda Denton, PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina in 2005. This study was gathered in three waves over a five year period in 45 states with thousands in the sample size between the ages of 13 and 17. According to Smith, "The lives and faith of most youth closely reflect the lives, faith, culture, and institutional values of the adult world they inhabit"; furthermore, "The faith lives of teens are powerfully shaped by the faith lives of their parents for better or for worse" (Smith, 2005)

One very concerning fact emerged, only one third of American youth had any kind of consistent faith experience and most could *not* articulate what they believed. Even many students who were active and faithful in their churches had trouble articulating the Gospel. Smith coined the term "Moralistic Theistic Deism" (MTD) to summarize the central concepts of faith that most students described. Stay with me, because this is very important information for parents, and

Christian school leaders. Here are the summary concepts from the student interviews which are quoted from Smith's own power point presentation:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one one's life except when He is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die. ” (National Survey on Youth and Religion, *Soul Searching* Power Point Presentation, SEBTS/ 2011/ 07/15).

In other words, teens said it is important to be moral and treat people nicely. They see the benefits of morality are therapeutic to the person who pursues these values. Students think that God who is up there, yet distant, and not really involved much in the details of day to day life, will keep watching over the big picture. There is very little personal or demanding about their conceptions of God. You can see that these are not biblical concepts of faith. Smith explains that the way teens view faith contrasts with true faith. For example, Smith says that many students perceive faith in a way that “is not a religion of repentance from sin, basking in God's unmerited love and grace, [or] living as a servant of a holy God, [or] building character through suffering ” (Smith, 2005)

What can we do with this information as parents and teachers? Key points in the research indicate that we need to prioritize real discipleship. Live with intentionality! Smith concludes that “two of the most important human factors in strengthening the Christian faith of teens are: “1. Serious, committed parents working intentionally to pass on the faith to their children. 2.

Other mature Christian adults (besides parents) intentionally developing significant personal relationships with teens (Smith, 2005). In the coming months I will be sharing articles to help us understand and respond to the spiritual needs and cultural complexity facing parents and students.

Let's work together to prayerfully, and intentionally raise a culture of world-changing disciples.

Keep Praying! CM

The quotations in this article are taken from Christian Smith's power point presentation on the research presented in *Soul Searching*.

Smith, C. , & Denton, M. (2005). *Soul searching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.