
As stated on the back cover, the purpose of What Your Son Isn’t Telling You is to provide “keys to understanding your son’s heart and mind.” The book, then, is clearly aimed at parents, especially those who are new at raising teenagers.

Ross and Shellenberger address a series of issues in raising boys that many parents will find helpful and enlightening. For example, “Breaking the Code of Cruelty” (Chapter 2) offers counsel to parents in helping boys deal with put downs and bullying in school and on the athletic field. These venues can be torturous to boys who are not yet physically strong and/or athletically coordinated. Internet pornography (Chapter 8), Homosexual feelings (Chapter 9) and the tendency toward risk taking (Chapter 14) are topics all covered with direct, open (and refreshing) honesty. These are topics unlikely to be covered in a parenting Sunday School class at a typical church.

One topic, not normally covered in parenting books, is when a son (or daughter, for that matter) walks away from the Christian faith. Ross and Sheelenberger are quick to state (Chapter 15) that the “blame game” should be
avoided. Yes, something about one’s own parenting style or parent/son interaction may possibly have contributed to this faith-rejection, but ultimately, the authors state, grown children make their own choices.

Having said that, however, the authors urge parents to take a hard look at themselves, even in consultation with others, to assess if there is something they have done for which a parental apology is necessary. (I have a colleague, for example, whose father has never once admitted wrong, about anything. Even now at age forty, my colleague struggles with Faith, as the whole ethos of Christian humility, grace, and repentance has not and is not to this day evidenced by this “Christian” father. The authors guide the reader into what an apology/confession might look like in this setting. There is very helpful counsel here. The chapter ends with words of exhortation and encouragement “Love him unconditionally, agree to disagree, give clear expectations, exert tough love when necessary, and lastly, don’t give up (p.186).”

While the book does contain sage advice for parents, its usefulness is very limited in youth ministry education. It certainly does not purport to be an academic text by any stretch of the imagination. There are no citations, “research” is only anecdotal, and the various lists seem to come out of thin air. For example, in Chapter 1 we find a list of six truism for teenage boys, including “rejection is a fate worse than death” and “his drive for independence is as
strong as his drive for food.” These are sweeping generalizations that have no basis in research, nor are they calibrated to adolescent development research, so routinely discussed in youth ministry education classes. When the authors do overview developmental issues, the most important one (to my way of thinking), that of cognitive development is overlooked entirely.

Those of us familiar with personality theory will wonder why such a critical piece for parental understanding was not covered in the book, even in a cursory fashion.

Those of us who teach youth ministry classes may find ourselves also leading parent seminars at conferences or churches. Though I could not recommend *What Your Son Isn’t Telling You* as a source for our seminar content, the book wouldn’t be a bad resource to recommend to parents. It is easy to understand, well written, and contains simple advice, generally doable in the real world.

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