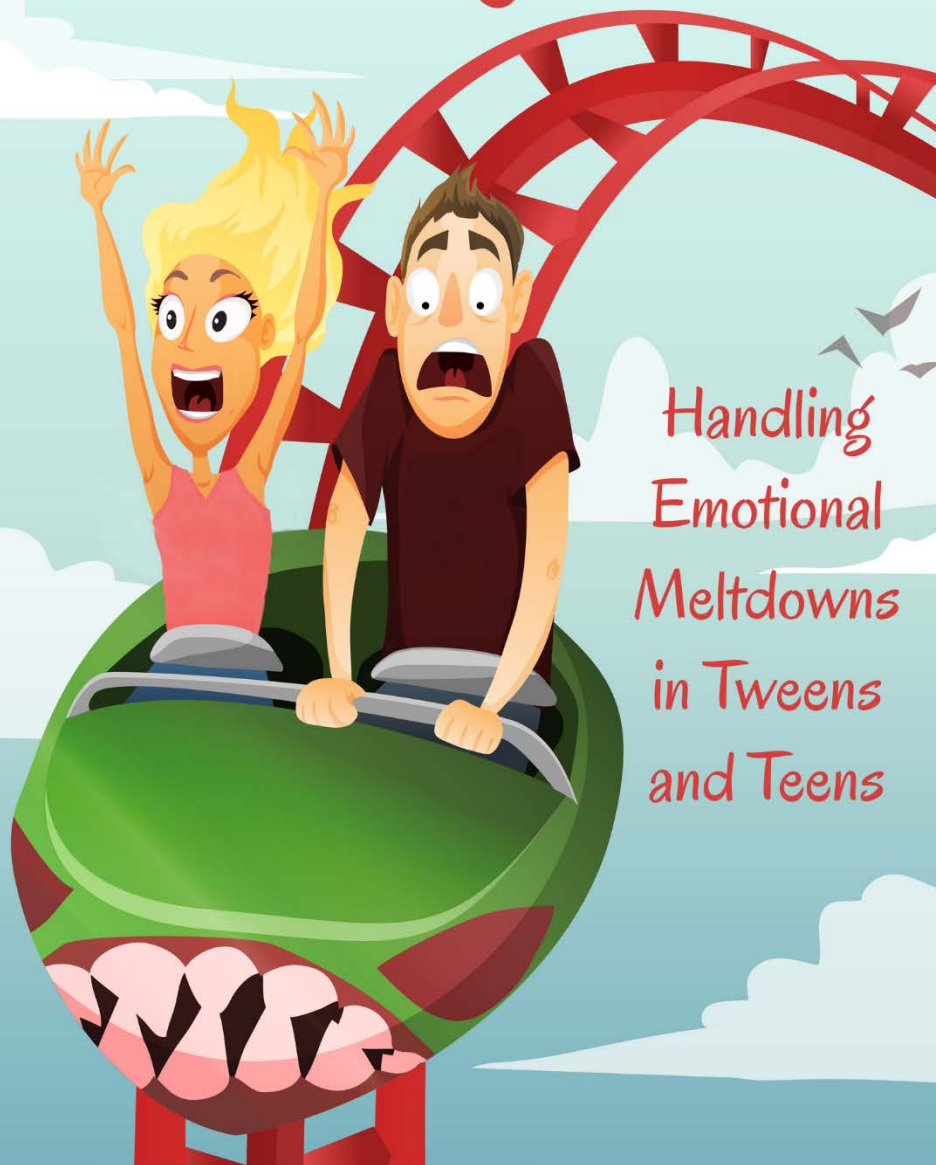


# Don't Get a Ticket for That Ride!



Handling  
Emotional  
Meltdowns  
in Tweens  
and Teens

Hal & Melanie Young

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# Don't Get a Ticket for That Ride!

*Handling Emotional Meltdowns in Tweens and Teens*



**GREAT WATERS PRESS**  
MAKING BIBLICAL FAMILY LIFE PRACTICAL

**Don't Get a Ticket for That Ride!**

## **I Can't Stand All the Anger in Here!**

It happened one morning in the middle of a family meeting.

We have a large family and as our older kids became more independent, and as we moved from 9-to-5 corporation life to ministry and self-employment, we realized we needed to get the whole family coordinated and reading from the same page. We like to have the whole family's input and buy-in on schedules and activities. Naturally, then, we have lots of family meetings.

And on this morning, in the middle of some piece of mundane business, our 13-year-old suddenly started tearing his hair like a cartoon character. "I can't stand all the anger in here!" he shouted.

Startled, the rest of the family looked around the room, question marks floating all about.

“Uh, Son?” one of us finally spoke up. “There’s nobody angry but you.”

He glanced around, saw the wide-eyed query on all his siblings’ faces, then he blushed and shrank back in his seat.

“Oh,” he mumbled.

### **What’s going on here?**

For a young boy to change into a man, or a girl into a woman, there are tremendous physical changes and transformations that have to occur. These are started and regulated by the increasing level of hormones in the early-puberty child.

Most parents will have some recent experience with hormones for themselves—like the infamous Pre-Menstrual Syndrome. When the woman’s monthly cycle changes her hormonal balance at the end of the month, the result is often emotional—irritability, crankiness, sadness, and malaise. People laugh about it, but the feelings are real, as any woman can tell you.<sup>1</sup>

In the early days of puberty, our children are going through the same things. In fact, we said that our boys were going through PMS - Pre-Manhood Syndrome (it just lasts a couple of years instead of a few days).

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<sup>1</sup> We do not recommend you ask her in the midst of it, or you may suffer from her hormones yourself.

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The elevated level of hormones necessary to bring about huge and rapid physical change is going to have an emotional impact as well. This is one of the most challenging aspects of parenting this age - the emotional upheaval. The young person's moods are all over the map, and it's like they've climbed on an emotional roller coaster and invited you to join them.

Parents: Do not get on this ride.

In fact, one of the key recommendations we make to parents of preteens is to avoid this thrill ride. If you want to preserve your relationship with your child, you will need to keep your own feet (and heart and mind) on solid ground, in order to give them a point of stability they can cling to. It won't be easy; our kids have a special kind of crazy going on in their heads and hearts, and because they're so close to us, they can truly zero in on behaviors and words that will have the greatest bite.

## Here Be Dragons!

In the old days, cartographers often signaled that unknown and probably dangerous things might be found at the margins of their experience. An ancient globe was curiously labeled with the warning *Hic Sunt Dracones!* Here Be Dragons! Roman and Medieval mapmakers would flag unexplored territory "Lions abound," and the Irish satirist Jonathan

Swift mused that “*geographers, in Afric maps, / With savage pictures fill their gaps, / And o'er unhabitable downs / Place elephants for want of towns.*”<sup>2</sup>

Navigators were on notice: whether it be dragons, lions, or stampeding pachyderms, the incautious traveler should beware.

You’ve now entered that territory for the parent and the preteen alike.

Strange conversations ensue:

**Parent:** “Hey, Son - That shirt’s dirty. You need to change before you leave.”

**Reasonable Person:** “Oh - I hadn’t noticed. I’ll go take care of it.”

**Actual Son’s Response:** “What do you mean it’s dirty? It looks fine to me! You’re just too picky. You never like anything I do anyway. You’re always getting on my case! You never treat my brother like that. I might as well stay home. I can’t do anything to please you!” [exit, in huff]

The parent looking on wonders, “What was *that?*”

That, at least, was what we saw with our sons. Boys tend to respond to their hormonal rush with anger and aggression. It was like living in a house with a pet porcupine. One that has burst into flame. A flaming porcupine.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Swift, “On Poetry: A Rhapsody” (1733)

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Girls may respond to their hormone surge with a different reaction. Melanie walked into the living room recently to find our daughter sobbing on the couch, all alone.

"Honey, what's the matter?" Melanie said, rushing to her side. "Are you okay? Why are you crying?"

"I don't knooooooooooooowww!" she wailed.

"Then I do," Melanie responded. "Let's talk."

This sort of unexplained or unprovoked sadness and weeping are common in girls, anger and rage with boys, but the full range appears in both sexes at different times. Sometimes the switch from one to the other can cause neck injuries in observers, as the boy who is spoiling for a fight and ready to provoke the world, suddenly finds himself with an irritated older brother on his hands, and starts wailing, "Nobody cares about me!"

## Exasperating

These irrational outbursts can certainly test our parental patience. They may actually be worse for the children experiencing them, because they usually don't understand why they feel so *bad*. And this creates a more direct test for the parent.

Before this time, whenever your child felt anger or frustration or sadness, it was usually because something had happened to cause it. Somebody



spoke harshly to him, or took away something he wanted, or treated him badly somehow. The emotions followed an identifiable cause.

But emotions have a biochemical component that hormones affect, and attacks of moodiness in the preteen may have no other cause but this chemical state. Now, when your boy experiences a surge of testosterone and feels edgy, irritable, and angry, he looks around to find out what's causing it. Surely there must be someone or something causing this feeling; that's always been the case before.

Guess who happens to be there? "You! It must be you!" he thinks, and searches around in his heart for some real or imagined slight or offense.

This is pretty upsetting when you're the target of the anger. It may be totally unjustified, and likely catches you by surprise. However, this is a moment when a parent who resists the temptation to react immediately can find an opportunity to connect with the child's heart.

## **De-Fanging A Serpent**

When our kids are younger, maybe seven- or eight years old, we try and give them a little heads-up for the changing times to come. It's likely a universal experience for all of us - when we were this age, didn't we all have gloomy days when we thought to ourselves, "Nobody likes me. Nobody cares about me. Nobody

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understands me. ..." ? Even well-loved children with careful parents and affirming homes go through this. It's something we warn our younger kids about, the same as we clue them in that body changes and growth spurts are on the way.

Why? For some of the same reasons, we think, that God lays out prophecies in the Scripture - because the day will come when our kids can look back and say, "Yes, we were told about this, weren't we? Maybe our parents were right after all!"

So, when these emotional eruptions occur, and our child is accusing us of rank injustice or unloving harshness or other things which (hopefully) are not true in the slightest sense ... instead of reacting to the accusation, we'll listen first.

We find it's helpful to counter this kind of confrontation by saying, "Why don't we sit down here and talk about this? Tell me what's going on. What are you thinking here?" And then really, truly, *listen* - let them talk through it. Ask questions if you need to clarify what's on their mind, but don't respond yet. Give them time to get it all out, if they can.

Here's the critical point - our child has an enemy, the oldest in the Book, and the devil seems to take special advantage of this emotional turmoil to tempt our children away

from our care and guidance. He'd love to break the trust of the parent/child bond if he can. When our kids are full of strong emotions they can't understand and can't control, the tempter's quiet narrative is exactly what we all remember - "No one cares about you. No one understands you. No one's on your side. No one really loves you ..."

That persistent temptation makes this stage of parenting one of the most crucial. A strong parent-child relationship is vitally important for the teen years coming up, so what better time to lay a minefield for the high school years than by fracturing the God-given relationship with those in the best position to guide them through? And indeed, we hear again and again how parents and children fell out with each other and dissention and rebellion grew up from the middle school years.

## **Preserving the Relationship**

Instead, if the emotional rollercoaster beckons but we refuse to climb aboard, we can focus on preserving the relationship and guiding them through this rough time. There needs to be an adult in this relationship and it isn't going to be them.

When we choose not to respond in anger, but instead we sit down and try to understand them, we pull teeth right out of the Serpent. He

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says, "Nobody cares. Nobody understands," but there we are, saying, "I care. I want to understand. Let's talk."

Does that mean we ignore the disrespect? Certainly not! Now is not the time, though. Remember that proper discipline is not focused on punishment but on correction and teaching - in other words, discipleship - and that isn't effective when the disciple is too overwrought to receive instruction! Whatever discipline is needed can wait until the anger and uproar subsides.

We've had some interesting and unintentionally amusing conversations in these times. One of our children was talking on and on about some imagined slight, then finally stopped and realized, "I'm not making much sense, am I?" No, he certainly wasn't, but it was much more effective for the truth to dawn and come from his own lips, rather than us scolding him for such foolish talk. We've found in many or most cases, allowing them to talk through their complaint will at least get them back off their emotional ledge, and then they're more receptive to reasonable discussion.

Several things can happen at this point. It's entirely possible that we parents actually did do something to cause offense, and we need to repent. It could be the child is in sin, and we need to take them to the Word of God and deal with the situation on that basis.

Sometimes we need to administer a reality check. Young people this age are, by definition, lacking experience and knowledge, particularly in “grown up” areas from which they’ve been excluded. This may be a good time to open that doorway a bit and explain why something came about that caused the child grief.

We know of one family whose son suddenly exploded at his dad, “You don’t keep your promises! You lied to me! You’re just a liar!”

His father was dumbstruck. What on earth was this boy talking about? The parents had always placed the greatest emphasis on honesty and integrity, so this accusation was a serious affront.

But though it was tempting to respond in immediate anger and instant punishment, the father held back for a moment and asked, “What do you mean? Let’s talk about this.”

“You said we’d go back to our old church,” the son began. “You said we’d get to visit sometimes and you never took us. You’re a promise breaker!”

Never mind that it had been seven years since they left that church, his dad thought. The boy was only five years old at the time, and he hadn’t mentioned it since, but suddenly today it was a relationship-breaking crisis?

As frustrating as this sort of thing is, in the emotional whirlwind of the preteen, it really may be a crisis to him. It’s easy to react to this

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kind of accusation with some rage and frustration of your own. No one takes well to being abused and maligned, especially by their children (and without warning!) ... and doubly so, if the accusation is unwarranted, unfair, or untrue. It's tempting to jump into the fray with a few accusations and "explanations" of our own.

On the other hand, you can see it as a great opportunity. The Bible reminds us that only God sees the heart of a man; we humans can only judge by what we see.<sup>3</sup> If our son or daughter has an offense or grudge against us, don't we want to know about it? Even if it's not fair or makes no sense, it's a blessing to find what's in our kids' hearts. Once we know it, we can address it.

"I'm sorry, Son," his dad replied. "I should have explained the situation to you. Not long after we left that church, there were some leadership changes and most of our old friends left. There was no reason to go back. Will you forgive me for not talking to you about that? I didn't realize you were still thinking about it."

## Don't Worry About Pedestals

Some parenting teachers take the approach that fathers and mothers hold authority from God but

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7 - "For the LORD does not see as a man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

only tenuously. The message, whether explicit or implied, is that parents need to stay above the fray in some sort of Olympian detachment. It may diminish the child's respect and awe toward her parents if they ever climb down from their pedestal.

This is some kind of late-Victorian claptrap, at best. The fact is, your children are well aware of your imperfections and shortcomings. If you have sinned against your child, even by accident, then you need to repent and seek their forgiveness.

Instead of lowering yourself in their estimation, what you are actually doing is three-fold. First, you're accepting blame for an offense and seeking to restore the relationship, regardless of whom the offended party might be. Secondly, you're demonstrating to your child how much you value the relationship over your supposed pride. But maybe more than this, you're demonstrating to your son or daughter how a Christian responds to rebuke or criticism—if it's a fair rebuke, he should humble himself, confess what he did, and seek forgiveness. You're modeling a behavior which your young people need to learn—which, incidentally, they'll probably need to practice themselves in the next few minutes!

What if you didn't do anything wrong? What if they aren't making any sense? What if

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*they're* the ones in sin or they simply don't understand the situation?

Sometimes we just need to give them a lesson in reality or at least some perspective they may have missed. Say your daughter is upset that she has more chores to do than her younger sister. You might need to say, "Sweetheart, I know it feels like you're doing a lot more chores than Elizabeth, but you may not remember that you didn't have many chores when you were her age, either. At that age, you were just learning how to do some of the things you do well now. And when she gets a little older, she'll be doing most the same things you are now, too."

Or maybe there's jealousy in the other direction, toward an older sibling. It's normal and healthy for a preteen to want to stretch his wings and become one of the "big kids" (really, the young adults), but there is the reality that he isn't ready for every freedom and liberty all at once. "Son, I know you'd like to have your own computer like Bobby does, but you have to remember he's three years older than you and taking classes online, too. A few years from now, if you're responsible, you probably have the same privileges he does."

Often, though, *they're* the ones in sin. Maybe he lost his temper and punched his brother, but thinks it's all his brother's fault because he was provoked. Perhaps she threw her brother's computer bag in the floor in a storm of tears, but



she thinks he deserved it because he hurt her feelings.

Even if they weren't in sin for the initial conflict, they've probably been disrespectful or unkind to someone in the argument that followed.<sup>4</sup>

We find the Word of God reaches their hearts way better than our words do.

"Son, I know you were angry at what your brother said, but Proverbs tells us that a man who can't control his temper is like a city whose walls are torn down.<sup>5</sup> When a city has high walls, they can decide whether or not to fight a passing army, but when the walls are torn down, any passing enemy can force them into a fight. When you can't control your temper, other people control you. All they have to do is provoke you a little, and here you are, in trouble. It puts you at other people's mercy. Yes, your brother was out of line to tease you like he did and we'll be dealing with that, but when you lost your temper and hit him, you sinned. You did wrong. *'Vengeance is mine , I will repay.'* Says the LORD.<sup>6</sup> You aren't supposed to avenge yourself - and don't tell me it was self-

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<sup>4</sup> We often remind our kids, especially as they get a little older, "The First Rule of Holes is: *stop digging.*" Once you're in trouble, it's best not to compound it by lying, losing your temper, or showing disrespect.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 25:28, *Whoever has no rule over his own spirit / Is like a city broken down, without walls.*

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:19 and other passages

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defense. He's your brother and I was right here in the next room. You weren't in any danger, and you could have called a parent in to deal with the problem."

### Repentance is Sweet

This is usually the point where we can see repentance. When we do, we can't flame off and say, "Well! Can we get past this now?" Instead, we need to rejoice that they've come to this point - remember, the angels in heaven rejoice when a sinner repents, so we should do so as well.<sup>7</sup> Maybe you didn't plan to spend the last half hour on the emotional rollercoaster, or standing on the platform waiting for the child's train to slow down—but that may actually be the most productive time you spend this day, training your son or daughter's character.

Now's a good time to remember the father of the prodigal son.<sup>8</sup> After the younger son had taken his inheritance early and blown the whole thing on wine, women, and song, he came crawling back home a humbled and degraded man. How did his father respond?

Honestly, it would be tempting to say, "It's about time, and you smell like a pig!"

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 15:10 - "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." - Jesus

<sup>8</sup> Luke 15:11-32

But that's not what happened-- the father ran to meet his son with joy that he was restored to him. The story is meant to teach us about God the Father, but it is a good model for us in our parenting, too. The right response to repentance in our children is joy.

It's important to point our kids to Christ when they repent. They need your forgiveness, and the forgiveness of others they may have hurt in their storm, but they need His much more. At the end of one of these outbursts, when you've talked it all out, there can be a time of openness to the forgiveness of God. Sometimes they feel foolish or wretched. They know better than to say the horrible things they said and they feel awful. What a great time to remind them that Christ died so that our sin could be forgiven and that we could be made new.

Note, however, that there were still consequences for the prodigal son. He'd spent his inheritance and it wasn't coming back. Sometimes there will still be consequences for our children's sin, even after they've repented. The unkind actions or harsh words cause real hurt, and there may be restitution or healing yet to come.

When you finally get through to them, you may need to discipline the disrespect or disobedience or whatever the particular sin is. We'll say, "Son (or Daughter), I am so glad you've repented, but you know, you were really

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disrespectful, and it was in front of the other children. You know I have to discipline that for their sake and for yours."

To our surprise, one of our young people responded, "You know, Mom, you're right. What are we going to do?" Several times we've seen children apologize publicly to their brothers and sisters for showing disrespect to their parents and lack of love to their siblings. That is a sight to cheer the tired parental heart - a child who started completely out of control, changing to one who is repenting of his sin and willing to accept discipline. It's time-consuming to get there, but it is so worth it.

## Want more?

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