

'Positive Doubting' Is Essential for Faith Growth

Many Christians think (or fear) that if they question fundamentals of the faith, they're "flawed" as believers. But as the Bible shows, the people of God have always included the doubtful. Sarah laughed, Peter started sinking, and Thomas insisted on seeing and touching the risen Christ.

When we have doubts about something, we examine its truthfulness, we weigh and evaluate it, and we consider how much of ourselves we wish to invest in it. In other words, if we're ever going to truly own our beliefs, we must critically examine them first.

As Frederick Buechner wrote, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." One of the greatest concepts you can convey to your teenagers is how to deal positively with doubts. "Positive doubting" isn't so much the opposite of faith as it is an element of faith, according to theologian Paul Tillich. Professor Dean Hardy, analyzing statistics in the "Pulse" section below, wrote, "When the doubts get ignored, it could eventually result in serious skepticism of one's worldview and personal faith."

In the book *The Dangers of Growing Up in a Christian Home* (Thomas Nelson), psychologist Donald Sloat writes, "Each of us is different and has to come to grips with his own faith and make it real through personal experience." For that to happen, he notes, teenagers need "supportive environments that provide freedom for struggle so that their faith suits their unique personalities." Use the information in this issue of "The Parent Link" to help you provide an environment that makes it safe for your teenagers to doubt.

Here are some avenues for nurturing healthy doubting in your teenagers:

- 1. A "safe" family**—Foster attitudes that say it's okay to question and doubt. That way, kids will feel free to think critically and explore honestly.
- 2. A challenging youth group**—Help your teenagers find a youth group or Bible study that encourages them to evaluate and internalize biblical truths.
- 3. Experiential learning**—Truth comes alive when teenagers experience it rather than just hear it. For example, have kids play the role of a skeptic or an unbeliever. When kids must think like someone else, they raise questions that will stimulate growth.
- 4. Media opportunities**—Watch for movie clips and listen for song lyrics that center around doubt or questioning. Then discuss them with your teenagers.
- 5. Share your personal doubts**—Don't act as though you've "got it all together." If your kids are going to grow through positive doubting, they need you to be an example.



Recent studies show that as kids grow, their doubts don't fade away. Instead, they multiply.

- Among teenagers, 80% say they have "very few" to "no" doubts at all, while 19% say they have "some" or "many" doubts.
(*Soul Searching*, Dr. Christian Smith)
- Among college freshmen, 42% say they're secure in their religious beliefs.
(UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute)
- Among college juniors, 65% say they question their beliefs at least occasionally.
(UCLA)

Great Questions to Ask Your Kids

Use these questions to start some in-depth conversations about faith:

1. Is doubt healthy? Does it mean your faith is weak? Why or why not?
2. How skeptical are you? Before believing something, how much evidence or understanding do you need?
3. What things about God and the Bible are the hardest for you to believe, and why?
4. Why do you think God asks us to believe without visual "proof"?
5. Think about a time when you struggled with your faith: How did that affect your relationship with God?



Focus on Prayer

PRAY THAT:

1. Your teenagers will feel comfortable raising doubts and asking questions about their faith.
2. Your teenagers will grow closer to God as they wrestle with problems, relationships, and other tough issues.
3. God will help you be a good listener and support system to your teenagers in all areas of their lives.
4. Amid your own doubts and struggles, God will assure you of his presence and his love for you.

Verse of the Month

Jesus said to Thomas, "Don't be faithless any longer. Believe! You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." (John 20:27, 29)

When the risen Christ first appeared to his disciples in the flesh, Thomas wasn't present. He adamantly refused to believe unless he could touch Jesus' wounds. We, too, often waver and demand evidence to support our unsteady faith. But God assures us that all the proof and answers we need are available in his holy and unchanging Word, the Bible.

What's Up With Kids

Wondering how you can discover your teenagers' doubts, questions, fears, and feelings? Youth minister Doug Fields, writing at SimplyYouthMinistry.com, says great questions are key:

- 1. The key to asking great questions is to LISTEN.** Silence is golden. Many times I'll walk away from a conversation and say, "I'm an idiot, I talked too much." Listening is the best way to communicate care. Try to refrain from thinking ahead and trying to solve someone's problem with a verbal bandage. Listen for someone's needs. What does their body language tell you? Begin the process of identifying needs even before you start to ask questions.
- 2. Ask questions without a question mark.** For example, instead of asking, "Did you have a good day today?" say, "Tell me what you did today."
- 3. Don't give up; push with follow-up questions.** The second question is often the most difficult one to ask. Hang in there. Keep asking questions (go for six to 10 before you give up). Asking good questions can be the key to opening the door to dialogue (superficial, basic questions), which leads to connection (deeper questions), which leads to growth (challenging, faith-building questions).
- 4. Use your questions as a way to teach.** Telling someone exactly what they need to know is ineffective for at least two reasons: The learner is passive and isn't convinced he or she needs the truth. The eternal truths of God and wisdom for everyday living are simply too important (and complex) to reduce to a lecture of platitudes and clichés. A good question puts the "ball in the court" of the other person. Aside from generating verbal interaction, everyone can answer the question in their own thoughts.

MUSICSPOTLIGHT



Mainstream Artist

Background: This Denver-based alternative-rock band consisting of former schoolmates formed in 2002. The group, best known for its song "How to Save a Life," has a Grammy nomination. Soon after the band's self-titled second album released in February, it knocked Bruce Springsteen from the number-one spot on the Billboard charts.

Albums: *The Fray* (2009), *How to Save a Life* (2005)

What Parents Should Know: The Fray's piano-rock songs feature moody, minor-key melodies and introspective lyrics. "You Found Me" is about an imagined encounter with God. The band's songs have received some airplay on Christian radio.

What The Fray Says: Frontman Isaac Slade says, "I have a lot of baggage with [God], and the things I'd like to say to him aren't totally nice. It's like, 'Where were you?' ... If I'm going to be a believer... then I need to have some answers.... Help me make sense of this."

Discussion Questions: If you could meet God, what would you want to say to him (both positive and negative)? What questions do you have for God? To have faith, how much clarity or understanding do you need first, and why?

Christian Artist

Background: This alternative-rock band from Cincinnati formed in 2004. With some friends, brothers Aaron and Ryan Morgan hastily recorded three songs in Aaron's bedroom to meet a "Battle of the Bands" deadline. They placed second, and Seabird was formed. Seabird's songs have been featured on TV shows such as *Pushing Daisies*, *Numb3rs*, and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Albums: *'Til We See the Shore* (2008)

What Parents Should Know: Seabird's British-influenced sound has been compared to Coldplay, Ben Folds Five, and The Fray. Lyrically, the band moves beyond Christian clichés to address tough topics such as loss, doubt, and relationships.

What Seabird Says: About the song "Rescue," frontman Aaron Morgan says, "I felt like everything good I was trying to do was ending up in failure and only God could turn it into something beautiful and life-giving... I know many times in my life I've felt like I've had no way out."

Discussion Questions: Read Psalm 72:12-14. Why do we need God's help so often? Think of a time God came to your rescue: How did he help you, and who or what did he use? What are some ways God has transformed your life and your faith?

Movie: *Slumdog Millionaire*

Genre: Crime, Drama, Romance

Rating: R (for some violence, disturbing images, and language)

Synopsis: This film, an Oscar favorite for Best Picture, is about Patel (Jamal Malik), a poor, uneducated teenager from Mumbai. After an astounding performance on the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, Patel is arrested for cheating. As he tells investigators about his life and his struggles, we find out how Patel knows the game-show answers. Despite some objectionable content in the movie, love and hope triumph over tough conditions.

Discussion Questions: When have you felt like an underdog? What obstacles have you had to overcome at home or at school? Are hard work and good intentions all you need to succeed? Why or why not? When people doubt or challenge you, what motivates you to keep trying?