

author of the bestseller *for women only*

shaunti feldhahn

lisa a. rice

for parents only

getting inside the head of your kid



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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

FOR PARENTS ONLY
PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921
A division of Random House Inc.

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ISBN 978-1-59052-932-4

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Feldhahn, Shaunti Christine.

For parents only / Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa A. Rice. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59052-932-4

1. Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Rice, Lisa Ann. II. Title.

BV4529.F45 2007

248.8'45—dc22

2007020265

Printed in the United States of America
2007—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To our parents,
Dick and Judy Reidinger and Glen and Lee Hultquist*

It is said that the number one status symbol in America today is no longer a big house or car, but longevity in marriage. This book is dedicated to two great couples whose combined ninety-five years of marriage have created an invaluable foundation for this book.

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LOOKING IN ON GROWING UP

*Taking a tour inside your
kid's head and heart*

One recent fall weekend, I (Shaunti) went tent camping with my family and some good friends. With four couples and eight children under the age of seven, there was lots of laughter, not much sleep, and plenty of great memories.

One memory in particular will be burned into my brain for the rest of my life. After joining some other campers—a youth group—on a hayride, we all piled out of the wagon and began strolling back toward the camping area. One of the youth-group parents smiled at our small children. “Oh, enjoy this time, while they look like this,” she said. Then she turned and gestured at the group of tall, lanky teenagers now walking far ahead of us on the rolling country road. “Because in the blink of an eye, they’re going to look like that.”

As if on cue, our little ones began to break free from our hands

and skip ahead, first walking, then running down the hill. The rays of the setting sun seemed to capture a portrait of the small admirers racing toward the supercool teenagers...racing toward growing up. I couldn't stop the tears from leaping to my eyes.

Wherever You Are on the Road...

As I write this book with my friend Lisa, whose kids are long and lanky and off doing their own thing most of the time, we're both struck by the fleeting nature of childhood and sobered by our role in turning these dependent little people into healthy, independent adults.

Whether you're the parent of a small child or you only have a few months left until Junior leaves the nest, the goal of this book is to help you understand several key things that are likely going on—or soon will be—in the inner life of your child, some inner wiring that you may have never understood before.

As any parent can attest, there's a lot that we don't "get" about our children, a lot that leaves us feeling baffled. Why does a little girl who wants to be your best friend one minute become painfully embarrassed by your existence the next? What causes a normally good-natured teenager to yell something hot headed and even cruel, then run to his room and slam the door? What provokes a firmly grounded, responsible youth to start questioning everything your family believes in?

Most important, what do we do about it?

In the chapters ahead we're not going to focus as much on these confusing—even infuriating!—outward behaviors and attitudes as we are on the inner feelings, needs, and temptations that often *lead* to those behaviors. And as we do, we'll get a much clearer sense of what our kids need from us.



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As parents, we are often so busy putting out fires that it's hard to be settled and confident in guiding children along the ups and downs of the road to adulthood. But our research has convinced us that once our eyes are opened to how our children are wired, we'll be better equipped not only to maximize but also to actually *enjoy* the precious time that we have with our children.

An ancient Hebrew proverb says, “Happy the generation where the great listen to the small, for it follows that in such a generation the small will listen to the great.” That encapsulates the reason we've written this book. As we hear the dreams, concerns, and confusion common to so many of our kids, we'll learn how best to be an influence in their lives for years to come.

The People Behind the Book

Before we go too far, we should give you a bit of background. Shaunti is a public speaker, newspaper columnist, and the author of many best-selling books, including *For Women Only: What You Need to Know About the Inner Lives of Men* and its companion book, *For Men Only*. Lisa is a screenwriter, a youth speaker and leader, and the coauthor (with Shaunti) of *For Young Women Only: What You Need to Know About How Guys Think*. This series has been dedicated entirely to investigating and analyzing the key surprises about the people most important to us. And as sometimes-bewildered parents ourselves, we knew very early on that we needed to dig into those things that we just tend not to “get” about our kids.

As with the previous books, the eye-opening findings in these pages are entirely research based. We are not psychologists or family therapists. Rather, we are trained analysts just crazy enough to try to apply our skills and experience (Shaunti as a Harvard-trained analyst on Wall Street, Lisa as an appraiser conducting high-level business valuations) to helping people understand one another. And we think the best way we can serve parents who want to understand what’s going on with their kids is by taking you directly to the *real* experts: the kids themselves.

At first, some observers questioned whether children could really speak about their inner lives with any sort of clarity. But in our

research, we were amazed by the profound insights and often brilliant analysis the kids (primarily teens and preteens) offered into what's going on inside their hearts and minds—and what they most need from their parents.



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At this point, you might already want to ditch a book that forces you to listen to teenagers, especially if you're having a bad week or thinking ungenerous thoughts about your blessed offspring. (Or are we the only ones who do that?) And we won't deny that some of what we heard from the kids was challenging. But overall, we think you'll be not only surprised by what these kids have to say, but also encouraged and better able to relate to your own kids...at least most of the time!

The Six Findings

So what are these surprising findings about the inner lives of our children? The chart below shows six areas in which parents often misunderstand what's happening with their kids when they hit the 'tween and teen years, and the surprising truths our research uncovered.

When They Hit the Teen Years	
<i>Here's What We Think Is Happening</i>	<i>Here's What's Really Happening</i>
Peer pressure pushes kids to rebel and behave in reckless ways without thinking through the consequences.	The intoxicating nature of freedom—and the fear of losing it—can lead even good kids to make choices that look like recklessness and rebellion, but directly addressing their craving for independence will help them build responsibility.
Teens seem to reject parents and their values, no longer caring much what their parents think.	Separating themselves from their parents' identity is one of the only ways healthy teenagers can develop their own; but even as they seem to push us away, our children still secretly want to know our values and need our affirmation of who they are becoming.
Teens don't want rules or discipline.	Although our teens test our authority and argue with rules, they secretly want us to stand firm as parents and will lose respect for us if we don't.

<p>When kids make mistakes, they disregard their parents' opinions or criticism.</p>	<p>Although they may not look like it, kids want the security of knowing we are making the effort to understand them and will be there for them regardless of their mistakes—but kids will emotionally shut out a parent they see as judgmental.</p>
<p>Kids say parents don't listen.</p>	<p>Kids tend to stop talking because they perceive parents as rotten listeners but will open up when we prove we're safe and calmly acknowledge their feelings before addressing a problem.</p>
<p>Teens give in easily to negative attitudes—afflicting their families with sullenness, anger, or back talk—over what seem to be minor issues.</p>	<p>What looks like an attitude problem may actually be a sign of insecurity, but actively countering our children's fears can build their confidence and help them become more respectful of parents and others.</p>

A Behind-the-Scenes Look

You might be wondering how we managed to wring all this information out of a bunch of monosyllabic adolescents. Well, first we conducted confidential focus groups with teens and preteens around the country. We also held numerous kid-on-the-street interviews,

stopping teenagers in shopping malls, coffee shops, schools, and arcades to ask what they were really thinking and feeling about all sorts of issues. We dug into our files of input from hundreds of teenage guys for our earlier book *For Young Women Only* and followed up in more depth. Whenever either of us traveled for speaking events—from Los Angeles to Kansas City to Saratoga—we talked to kids to confirm that what we were hearing was fairly universal.

Finally, we conducted a groundbreaking, professional, nationally representative survey with the help of two sets of experts: Chuck Cowan at Analytic Focus—the former chief of survey design at the U.S. Census Bureau—and Kevin Sharp and Kelly Puig of the internationally renowned survey company Decision Analyst. In all, four hundred and twenty-seven anonymous kids across the country—ages fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen—answered roughly two dozen questions about how they think, what they feel, and what they need.*

The survey confirmed the results of our personal and group interviews. Not only did we hear the same things over and over from our young sages—reflected in the quotes you'll find in the following pages—but the personal stories and perspectives they shared with us were backed up by statistically valid evidence. In the end, this book incorporates the input and insight of more than twelve hundred kids.

We also asked some adult experts to help us make sense of what

* The scientific survey anonymously surveyed kids of all major racial groups, belief systems, and socioeconomic strata, and provided a 96 percent confidence level with a +/-3.5 percentage point variation.

we were hearing from the kids, and these consultants allowed us to pepper them with questions via e-mail, phone calls, and in-person discussions. These are not parenting experts so much as they are experts in understanding what's going on inside kids. We are indebted to, among others, Dr. Julie Carbery, PhD psychiatrist and child and family therapist who counsels troubled families; Nerida Edwards, nationally certified middle-school guidance counselor; Emerson Eggerichs, former pastor who now runs a national ministry to help the sexes understand each other and author of the best-selling book *Love and Respect*; and Vicki Courtney, founder of the Virtuous Reality organization for teen girls.

Before We Start

Before we take you inside your kid's head, we need to emphasize a few points:

1. *We are not endorsing the behavior or excusing the poor choices described by some kids in these pages.* Our goal is to serve as your tour guides through the strange and wonderful world of “teendom” and to give you new information to help you understand what's going on inside the kids, why they might do some insane things, and how these facts can give clearer direction to your parenting. We need to emphasize that just because certain thoughts and behaviors are seen over and over, we are *not* saying they are desirable or acceptable.

2. *Our findings are nationally representative, but we personally approach parenting from a Christian worldview.* We aim to lead our children toward choices that will help them reach their full, God-given potential. We want to help you do the same, and we believe our nationally representative findings and analysis will be helpful even if you do not share our worldview.
3. *This book is not just for parents of teenagers.* Although we were limited to surveying teens for legal reasons, and we focused the book on the most intense application of these truths in the 'tween and teen years, we believe parents of small children will find this advance information immensely valuable. As the mother of two young children, currently ages four and seven, I (Shaunti) can already see the application of several of these findings, and the value of laying the right foundation before the teen years arrive.
4. *There are exceptions to every rule.* When we say that most kids appear to think a certain way, realize that *most* means exactly that—most, not all. We're making generalizations out of necessity, and as the professional survey shows, there will be exceptions. (In addition, since some exceptions may include serious problems that are beyond the scope of this book, we strongly urge parents in those situations to seek guidance from a professional child and family therapist.)

5. *This book is not intended as a comprehensive overview of parenting principles.* Our sole goal is to open your eyes to several critical things that are likely to be going on inside your child, things that many parents tend not to “get.” But new insights alone are rarely enough to change a life. Once you recognize certain realities, you may want to investigate the wonderful resources out there that address particular topics in more depth—especially those that explore God’s power to transform the heart. (You’ll find links to several resources—including our survey data—at www.forparentsonlybook.com.) In addition, because our “what to do about it” sections can’t cover the highly individual situations parents will encounter, we strongly suggest that you read with pencil in hand and make running notes about how you might apply a particular insight in your family. The companion *For Parents Only Discussion Guide* can help you put your new insights to work.

One last point: as you read, give yourself a break. None of us as parents can possibly measure up to everything we think we should do—or, for that matter, to all the things kids say they need. At the end of the movie *Cheaper by the Dozen*, the oldest daughter says to her dad (played by Steve Martin), “You taught me that there’s no way to be a perfect parent, but there’s a million ways to be a good one.” We believe that if you’re reading this book, you’re already a good parent. Please keep the big picture in mind and avoid the

temptation to judge your parenting or that of others. Because there's only one perfect parent...and we're not Him.

Both of us believe that although we may encounter some challenges along the way, there is also a heavenly Father guiding those who seek the truth. That may or may not be your worldview, but we hope our findings and analysis will be helpful no matter where you are in your own parenting journey.

So are you ready? Let's embark on a thrilling and sometimes scary adventure...inside the head of your kid.