Bob: When does a young person move from being a young person to being an adult/being a grownup? Is there an age for that? How does our relationship with them and their relationship with us change during that time? Here’s Steve Argue.

Steve: You know, I think, as parents, we’re thinking about, “Well, how do I parent my kid as they’re getting older?” but we just need to realize, if we use empathy/if we look the other way, a young person’s negotiating the same thing: “Now, I’m 18. What’s my relationship with my mom and dad? What does that look like? If I go away, how do we be a family, now, that we’re not all under the same roof anymore?” This is completely new for them.

I think we sometimes think they know what to do. It’s all new—like every step along the way is new to them.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, December 17th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. How do we, as moms and dads, stay connected with our young adults, even after they’ve become young adults? We’ll talk with Steve Argue about that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. My wife and I, from time to time, will look at each other and say, “Are we becoming those people, who look at the next generation and say, ‘Get off my lawn’?” You know what I mean? [Laughter]

Ann: Are you, Bob?

Dave: “You!—kid!” [Laughter]

Bob: We’re a little concerned that those thoughts pop into our head, and we don’t want to be those people. But you know, you do; you watch the next generation emerge—and I’m sure my parents watched my generation emerge—and you just think: “What are these kids doing and thinking?!?” and “Is this ever going to resolve itself?” and “Aren’t they going to burn down cities?”; you know? [Laughter] You worry about where things are going.
This week, we’re trying to say, “How can we, as parents, help our kids move into adult life in a way that enables them to be who they are and interact with the culture, as it is, and yet keep Jesus at the center of all that?”

Dave: I have actually yelled at a kid to get off my lawn, Bob; really.

Bob: I’m sure you have.

Dave: I would be scared.

Ann: Wait, wait, wait; no, you haven’t.

Dave: It was all—Ann doesn’t even know this. It was only because I just planted new grass seed. I had the little yellow caution tape around. This kid’s running through; I said, “You can run on any other part of the yard, just get off that part!” [Laughter] So I’m like, “I’m becoming that guy!”

Bob: We have Steve Argue joining us this week on FamilyLife Today. Steve, welcome back.

Steve: It’s so good to be with you again.

Bob: I should say Dr. Steven Argue. Dr. Argue is a part of the Fuller Youth Institute; he’s an associate professor at Fuller Seminary. He, along with other colleagues in the FYI/Fuller Youth Institute, are trying to help all of us, as parents and as youth leaders in churches, know how we can interact with culture, as it is, and kids, as they are, and help faith remain intact and vibrant in those kids’ lives.

Steve: Absolutely.

Bob: I remember reading research done by a sociologist at Notre Dame, kind of a famous study that Dr. Christian Smith did, where he said what kids are believing today/what they’re being introduced to today in their churches is moralistic therapeutic deism, which he is said is not authentic Christianity—it’s kind of an aberrant; it’s a caricature of the real thing.

Is his diagnosis, from decades ago, still accurate today? Is this what kids are learning in churches?

Steve: Yes, I think it depends on the churches. I mean, there’s been some research that’s been done to actually look more specifically at different sort of church congregations, or backgrounds, etc., etc.—but I think there is something to that. For our listeners, Bob, as you know, this idea of moralistic therapeutic deism is basically this gospel, if you will, that’s inadvertently taught in our churches that says, “God wants you to be good and happy; and to show up when I need you”; right?
Bob: Right.

Steve: What’s happening a lot of times is—young people have adopted that; but what’s interesting—and Christian Smith, also, says—is that the reason that they’ve adopted it—and you inferred to this—is that that’s what they’ve been taught. It’s actually come from their parents or from their churches. They are living out—quite well, thank you—the teaching that we’ve done with and to them. I think there are some challenges there.

Bob: But they’re finding, when they get to college and into real life, that: “I don’t believe that’s true—that there is a God, who wants me to be happy, and who wants me to be good; and as long as I’m good, He’ll make me happy,” and “He’ll show up when I need Him to.” They just go, “That doesn’t work in real life.”

Steve: Yes, it doesn’t. I think this is always the challenge with young people, growing up; is that, all of a sudden, they come to this realization that, “If I do the formula, that doesn’t mean that everything will turn out right for me.” I mean, we all probably—us around this table but, also, the listeners listening to this—have probably thought, “You know, if I just follow Jesus wholeheartedly, then nothing will go wrong with me or the people that I love.”

I don’t think there’s anybody at this table or listening that can ever say, for certain, that that’s been the case; because life is complicated, and things are thrown at us that we never suspected. We live in these moments of disequilibrium—where, all of a sudden, we have to renegotiate our understanding of who God is, and who we are in relation to God, and how this all works in the world. If we have a gospel that actually isn’t true—this moralistic therapeutic deism—it just shreds right away. Young people can smell it a mile away; it’s just like, “This doesn’t work.”

It working, actually, is pretty important. You know, what I love about Jesus is that—there was a theoretical aspect to Jesus—alluding to things through symbol, and actions, and His words—but at the end of the day, He just got close to people. Faith was real, and messy, and beautiful. It seemed like the people that were most frustrated with it were sort of the religious elites that really, in many ways, wanted the nice categories. Jesus sort of transcends that.

I think, as adults, we just have to, perhaps, realize that young people are really not the problem in our churches that are raising these questions; they actually are our prophets. They’re actually asking the questions that we adults all have, but we’ve learned to not say them; right?

Dave: Yes.

Steve: What if we were to treat it that way? What if the questions that young people brought to us in our churches or our families were actually the questions that everyone’s
really asking? I’ll be honest with you—I think, as a parent myself—but also with parents that we’ve interviewed and we’ve worked with—this becomes really scary.

Dave: I can remember when my oldest, who’s 33 now?—CJ must have been 12 when he came and said, “I don’t know if I believe this stuff you and Mom have been teaching us, all our life, about God.” I think Ann was right there; and she was like [gasp], and I was like, “Yes!” I was like, “Here we go!” I mean, I got sort of excited; right?

Ann: I wasn’t excited. [Laughter]

Dave: “We’re going to step into a journey of him trying to wrestle through”—and he’s young; he’s 12 years old; but man, he’s old enough to understand—’You don’t just easily accept it. I got to go on a journey.’”

Bob: But here’s the thing—when a child comes and says: “I don’t know if I think this is right,” or “I have doubts here,” as a parent/like Ann, you’re going: “Well, this is life-determinative.

Dave: Exactly.

Bob: “They could look at this and go, I reject it.” As parents, that’s a great fear. How can we feel comfortable when a child comes and says, “I’m doubting,” when we go, “This affects the rest of your life”?! 

Steve: A couple of things. If you’re in a two-parent household, and a kid asks that question, a lot of times parents have different reactions; right? Right away, there needs to be a conversation between the parents of going: “Before we take a step further, we have to just figure out how we’re playing this one. Who goes first? I was the heavy last time. What do you think?” It’s just sort of interesting how it affects that relationship

Then, I think if we think of faith as simply a noun, we probably will freak out—to think that, when a young person says, “I don’t believe in God,”—that somehow they’ve made this deep theological conviction that they’re going to hold to the rest of their lives—rather than saying, “If we think of it as a verb, that they’re faith-ing. What they’re actually doing is they trust you enough—which is actually a beautiful thing—to voice what they’re really thinking, because they actually want to have a conversation about it. It’s actually not a barrier; it’s a portal to a better conversation.

Ann: Great way to put it.

Steve: So if we can do that, I think that that allows us to, in many ways, hold the seriousness of the topic, but not freak out, to think that, “If I don’t get it right—right now—it’s all going to blow up.”
Dave: You have another verb in there that you talk about in your book, which I want to ask you: “How does this relate?” What Bob, I think, is going to ask is: “Okay, if they’re asking a faith-ing question, one of your answers is, “You better be with-ing them.” I know I’m not using proper—

Steve: No, no; with-ing is the hardest one. I don’t know—we just—people are like, “With-ing?”

Dave: But the with-ing idea, which is in your title, *Growing With*—when I picked up your book, I’m like, “Growing with what? Where’s this with?”—now, I understand it; but you have to walk beside them.

Steve: Yes.

Ann: When you say teens and young adults need to develop their with-ing skills, what does that mean?

Steve: You know, I think, as parents, we’re thinking about, “Well, how do I parent my kid as they’re getting older?” but we just need to realize, if we use empathy/if we look the other way, a young person’s negotiating the same thing: “Now, I’m 18. What’s my relationship with my mom and dad? What does that look like? If I go away to college,” or “…work” or “…military”—or something—“how do we be a family, now, that we’re not all under the same roof anymore?”

This is completely new for them. They’re trying to think about: “What does it mean to be with my family anymore? Do I be independent? Am I too dependent on them? Can I ask them for things? Should I ask them for advice?” This is happening in the teens/into the 20s, where they’re constantly trying to negotiate what their relationship is to the family as things are changing. If we give them room for that, we recognize the fact that this is a dialogue that’s constantly happening and is necessary.

What happens, a lot of times, when a child comes back home after they’ve been away for awhile, we kind of move back into our roles.

Dave: Yes.

Ann: Yes.

Steve: We have these roles; right? It’s in that moment we have to stop and kind of go: “Wait a minute; wait a minute. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Am I perpetuating a younger relationship form of our relationship that actually is getting in the way of us becoming what the relationship needs to be?” This is what with-ing is all about.
Bob: I remember driving home from visiting my parents, as a young newly-wed couple, and Mary Ann looking at me and saying, “You were different.” I go, “What do you mean, I was different?” She said, “When you were back home, you acted different.”

Steve: Interesting.

Bob: I look back on that; and I thought, “Well, of course, I did; because when I was home with my parents, this is how I acted around my parents; and when I’m with you, I act differently.” All of a sudden, it’s like: “Oh, yes. We do have roles and patterns we fall into.”

We, as parents, have been very intentional with our kids, as they’ve grown up, to say: “This is a new phase/a new chapter of your life. We need to make adjustments. We need to be invited in rather than imposing ourselves in this situation.” We’ve gone to our kids and said, “You get to set the terms about how often we interact or how much you want to communicate,” and “We’ll be more responsive rather than initiative in those areas.”

It’s hard for us, as parents—because you spend 30 years, saying, “I’m in charge”; right?—to go, “Well, now, you’re in charge of some of this stuff.” But we have to learn how to make those adjustments in order for the family dynamic to work.

Ann: And even to be cognizant of our conversations/of things that I used to say. I’ve realized, when our kids all come over as they’re adults, I have to take a breath. I hear myself saying things like the word, “should.” “Hey, maybe you should…” or “Why don’t you…?” or “You should do this.” I keep catching myself, like: “Don’t say that! That sounds so parental.” It just comes right back.

They don’t say anything; but I’m catching myself, thinking: “That’s alienating them from me,” and “I’m becoming so parental, and they’re adults,” and “I need to respond as an adult peer with my kids.”

Dave: Instead of “should,” what should we say?

Steve: With my daughters in high school, I’d be like, “Did you do your homework?” I realized that, as they moved on, I’d say, “So, tell me what you’re learning.” Notice the difference. Now, it was no longer they’re accountable to me; but I’m trying to encourage/I kind of want to know if they’re studying—that’s what I really want to know—but I’m trying to come at it a little bit sideways and come at it in a different sort of way.

What you mentioned—we try to unpack in the book. We say, basically: “Instead of thinking of this trajectory of teenage into the 20s as sort of adolescent and what a lot of researchers call emerging adulthood, we’ve broken it down into three different categories. We have the learner, which is about the 13-to-18-year-old/the teenager; and then we have the explorer, which is about 18 to 23; and then we have the focuser,
which is 23 to 29”—basically saying, “Our kids are entering these different phases, where they have different needs. A learner’s learning; they’ve never done things before. The explorer is beginning to sort of venture out on their own. There are some things they feel confident about, but there are still some technical things that they’re not ready for. The focuser is really starting to hone in on what they want to be about toward the end of their 20s”; right?

What we’re saying with that is that there needs to be a different type of parent for each of those phases, as well; right?

**Bob:** Right.

**Steve:** So you have a learner that needs a teacher parent. A teacher parent gives them the basics: gives them some steps forward/sort of leads the way.

An explorer young person needs a guide parent, someone that walks alongside them. In the technical moments, when they don’t know what to do, sometimes the parent says: “Let me take the lead with you here,” and “We’ll get through this together.”

Then the focuser child really needs the resource parent. We step back; we have to hold our breath and wait for them to come to us with the significant things that they want to talk about rather than us taking the lead.

**Bob:** Yes, we talked about it as moving from being coaches to consultants.

**Steve:** Yes, yes; great idea.

**Bob:** So when they were in the teen years, we were coaching. Sometimes, in coaching, you pull them out of the game and you bench them; because you’re the coach. If they really mess up, you can say, “You’re grounded,” or something like that.

Consultant is a whole different category, and you’re not the coach anymore; you’re now the advisor. You kind of wait for them to say, “I need your advice,” or you might step in and say, “You know, I have something here I could offer.”

I’ve seen parents who can’t make the shift.

**Steve:** Yes; you guys are talking about this idea of consulting. When the signals get crossed, that’s when things go crazy; right? So if I have a focusing young child, but I’m acting like a teacher parent, do you see what’s going on there?

**Dave:** Yes.

**Steve:** I’m becoming the helicopter/snowplow—whatever parent—you know what it is. [Laughter] I mean, there are a million names for them now; right?—this overbearing,
still-trying-to-control-my-older-child type of parent, sometimes out of great intentions, but it doesn’t allow for the relationship to really grow.

Or the other way—I could be acting like a resource parent to my learner child, and that’s a distant parent; we’ve just let go and don’t realize that we still play a crucial role in the dialogue/in the training that’s part of that.

**Bob:** You alluded to this; but I think it’s so significant; because sometimes, a 12-year-old will look at Mom and Dad and they will give off this vibe: “I don’t need you anymore.

**Ann:** Right.

**Bob:** “I have this figured out. Thanks for your help, but I’m good.” As parents, we have to be smart enough to go, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

**Ann:** I had a conversation with our 15-year-old, our oldest, at one point. I could tell I was bugging him: he’s rolling his eyes; he’s not having conversation. I sat down and I said: “Hey, I want to talk to you. I feel like our relationship is strained. I feel like I’m bothering you, and you don’t want to talk to me. Will you just be truthful to me and tell me: ‘Are there things that I’m doing that are just irritating to you, or things that I could change that would make our relationship better?’”

**Steve:** Good for you.

**Ann:** It was interesting—he said: “You know, I feel like you’re constantly on me. I feel like you’re telling me when to do my homework. I feel like you’re telling me when to go to bed. I feel like I’m old enough that I should be able to make those decisions for myself.” I sat and I thought: “You’re right; I agree. Is there anything else?” He had a couple more things that were legitimate.

And then he said, “Well, there’s just one more thing, Mom.” He said: “I think the rule of not allowing girls to be here with me when you guys are out of town or when you’re not home—I think girls should be able to be at our house alone with me. I think that’s a really dumb rule.” I said, “Hmm, that’s interesting.” [Laughter] In my head, I’m thinking, you know, “That rule’s not changing!” But we just kind of went through of why that rule was in place; so “No, that rule’s not going to change”; but we had a discussion about it.

I was amazed at how that one discussion brought us closer instead of the attitude/the rolling of the eyes was pulling [us apart]. As a parent, we can feel insecure and pull way out of their lives, feeling like: “They don’t like me. I should just get out of their lives.”

**Steve:** I love that you did that. I think that sometimes, when our kids critique us, we get defensive and we think, “How dare you?” But what if we thought of this as the moment when perhaps the relationship is just shifting? You gave space for that to happen. In some ways, we can celebrate that perhaps the relationship is just growing up!
Bob: How did you handle it when your daughter came and said, “I’m breaking up with my boyfriend”?

Steve: Well, I celebrated. [Laughter] Most of the time, my daughters have broken up with the boys. I’ve always worried about when the boys might break up with my daughter. I think, as a dad, I just get sort of crazy about that.

But I think, if they can be open to processing things with their parents/with me or my wife Jen, I think that that’s a good thing, because I think we can talk about more than just the breakup. We can say: “What does it mean to honor the person?” “What does it mean/how does this feel for you to not have this relationship anymore that maybe gave you a sense of being wanted or a sense of identity?”—right?

I think there are moments when we can process those experiences with them. Remember—sometimes, it’s the first time.

Bob: Yes.

Steve: I think we have to constantly remember, as parents, that as our kids are going through things for the first time, they feel it in ways that we maybe don’t remember; and they don’t have the tools to necessarily handle that at first.

Bob: And that’s where you look at the sign on the wall/the artwork that you have that you told us about—

Steve: Yes, absolutely.

Bob: —that says, “Tell me more.”

Steve: “Tell me more.”

Bob: Yes.

Steve: Absolutely.

Bob: In those moments, you invite conversation and dialogue and let them take it. If they say, “I don’t want to talk about it,” do you just say, “Okay”? 

Steve: Yes; I think there are times when the timing isn’t right. This is the other thing—I think as kids get older, I think I realize more and more that I couldn’t schedule the times that we were going to have the good conversations. It was always in the most inconvenient times.

Bob: Eleven thirty at night!
Steve: Yes; it was the worst; I'm like, “Seriously, you want to talk about that right now?” For us, we just realized—at least, for my daughters—they all are different. My oldest: a coffee shop; a good, deep, intellectual book; and maybe we'll stop and look at each other and chat—that's the space.

For my middle daughter, it is definitely on a hike. We have to be facing together, forward, and moving in a direction.

For my youngest, she just makes me want to pay for everything—[Laughter]—so breakfast, that is it; but we also had some really great car time.

Ann: How did you figure that out, Steve?

Steve: You know, I think just trial and error; right? I mean, you're just like, “Well, that didn't work,” and recognize the fact that a failure doesn't mean that we failed. A failure is just that that expression isn't the way that we sort of connect, so “Let's find some other ways.”

You know, I think this is where, if you have other parents in your life, too—I mean, parent-to-parent—this is where we can sort of process these things together—like: “I tried this thing, and it didn’t work; now, what do I do?” I think too often we think, as parents, “Well, if it didn’t work, then I must be a bad parent. This isn't working,” rather than hanging in there.

I guess, if I could say anything to parents, it would be: “Just hang in there. It’s never too early; it’s never too late.” Kara and I really believe that there's always a chance to make the relationship with your child better, no matter where you're at and no matter what you're doing.

This is more than just Steve being super optimistic, which I'm sometimes accused of, but the research actually suggests that, when a child moves into age 18 and into this emerging adult sort of stage, more times than not, the relationship actually gets better. If you have a good relationship with your teenager, there's a good chance that it's going to be better. If you had a rocky relationship with your teenager, here's the good news: “You have another shot, so hang in there.”

Dave: I hear you say, “Be there.”

Steve: Yes.

Dave: I mean, I'm thinking of the parent, whose child is pulling away, because they should; they're becoming an adult. We've all said it's easy, at that point, to go, “I'm done.” “No, be there; with-ing means be there.”
Steve: Yes.

Dave: It’s going to be a different way to be there; but pursue, pursue, pursue. Maybe not now as a teacher, but as a guide. But when they need you, be there—at night/in the morning—whatever—this is your number-one job.

Bob: As parents, get some coaching. Get someone, who’s been a few laps around. If you have a couple that’s ten years older than you, and their kids have gone through some of this, just say, “Help us here,” or get a copy of a book like the one that Steve and Kara have written, called Growing With, and read it together.

I would say, especially if your kids are in the teen years—the thing I love about this is you’re really taking us beyond the teen years to that decade of parenting that a lot of us figured, “We’re done at 18.” We’re not; we have another decade of adjusting, and learning, and allowing our influence to still be shaping and molding our kids and, as you say in the title of your book, growing with them; because it’s not just a one-way street.

Steve: Yes.

Bob: We’re learning and growing at the same time.

We have copies of the book, Growing With, written by Steven Argue and his colleague, Kara Powell. We have it in our FamilyLife Today Resource Center. You can order the book from us, online, at FamilyLifeToday.com; or you can call to order at 1-800-FL-TODAY. Again, our website is FamilyLifeToday.com; the number to call is 1-800-358-6329—that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.” The title of the book is Growing With. Ask for it when you get in touch with us, and we’ll send it out to you.

You know, I hope these kinds of conversations are helpful to you, as parents. As we sit down to talk about all that we’re doing, here at FamilyLife, we’re always asking the question: “Is this going to be helpful? Is this practical? Is this biblical? Is this going to help people where they are in their marriages and in their families?” That’s what guides us, here in the ministry of FamilyLife Today.

I trust that, over the past 12 months as you’ve listened to FamilyLife Today, you’ve found this program encouraging. I hope it’s equipped you; I hope it’s given you some new tools you can use in your marriage or as you raise your children. If that’s the case, can we ask you, here as the new year is approaching, can we ask you to make a yearend contribution to support the ongoing work of this ministry so we can be here for you and for your friends and neighbors in this community in 2020?

The work that we do depends on you. We are listener-supported, so we want to ask you to make a yearend contribution. When you do, that donation is going to be matched,
dollar for dollar, up to a total of $2.5 million. We’ve had some friends of the ministry, who have agreed to match every donation we receive this month, up to that total.

All you have to do to donate is go online at FamilyLifeToday.com, or call 1-800-FL-TODAY and donate by phone. If you’re able to help with a donation of $50 or more, we’d love to send you, as a thank-you gift, a new devotional that our team has put together called The Story of Us. It’s our thank-you gift if you can help with a donation of $50 or more, here, at yearend. Be sure to ask for that when you get in touch with us.

We hope you can join us back again tomorrow when we’re going to talk about what the local church can do to help work with moms and dads and to help young people stay connected and stay engaged in their faith journey.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

*FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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