

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

New Year's Resolutions

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Resolutions: Love ‘em or leave ‘em?

Just hearing “New Year’s resolution” probably makes you feel one of two things: either annoyance at the fact that people still resort to such nonsense...or complete and utter disappointment that you never seem to be able to keep yours. (If not, then you’re one of the few—[10%](#)—who actually set and achieve goals, to which we say...WHAT’S YOUR SECRET?!)

No matter the reaction, we can all agree that setting, striving toward, and achieving goals is highly important, especially in regards to learning how to become a mature adult. Because of that, we parents can use the opportunity the new year affords us as a means to disciple our teens into a better understanding of themselves, others, achievement, perseverance, dreaming, life-change, setbacks, failure, celebration, and even of God Himself.

So rather than allowing our teens to join the [42% who say they always fail](#) to accomplish their resolutions, let’s *resolve* to help them become everything God intends them to be by lovingly disciplining them through a time of year that often brings a lot of pressure, anxiety, and disappointment.

— When did New Year’s resolutions become a thing?

The idea of making personal goals around New Year’s Day surprisingly [dates all the way back to ancient Babylon](#). The Babylonians more or less invented New Year’s pledges: They would publicly renew their loyalty to their governing king and make promises to the gods to appease them (in hopes of assuring their favor in the year ahead). Then in 46 BC, Julius Caesar set January 1 as the first day of the calendar year, naming the first month after the two-faced god Janus, who was said to hang out in doorways and under arches (because they symbolized transition), looking with one face to the past and one to the future. Later, early Christians observed “watch night services” on New Year’s Eve or Day at the urging of John Wesley in 1740; these included Scripture readings, hymns, prayer, and spiritual goal-setting for the upcoming season.

In modern times, New Year’s resolutions are now much more of a secular practice focused on self-improvement. [More folks in their 20s](#) achieve at least one New Year’s resolution (37%) than those in their 50s (16%), and the most common resolution in the past year was to “lose weight” or “eat healthier.” In fact, personal improvement or education tops the list most often (44%), followed closely by money handling (42%), weight gain/loss (32%), and relationships (22%).

— Why are they so hard to keep?

It’s easy to view the beginning of a new year as the perfect moment for a “do-over”: a visible, memorable line in the sand for new beginnings, self-improvement, and moving dreams toward reality. Many will do a personal inventory, not just looking in two directions like Janus, but in *three*: at yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The word “resolution” comes from the root word *solut*, meaning “loosen”; when we resolve to accomplish something, we “loosen” the physical and emotional knots that prevent it, as

mentioned in Hebrews 12:1: “...*Throw off everything that hinders ... and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*” In addition, during the admittedly stressful holiday season, most experience at least a moment or two of “the thrill of hope” as “the weary world rejoices,” and we so hope to maintain that inspirational wonder throughout the coming year.

Even so, it’s pretty difficult to “loosen” the knots that bind us from our goals, especially when we rely primarily on willpower. The world has a way of knotting up our plans in new, unpredictable ways just as we get them untied. It’s no wonder that most of us completely forget our resolutions by about mid-February and then beat ourselves up for not keeping our commitments once we realize we’ve failed.

As parents, we can be especially hard on our kids when their resolution goals don’t materialize, mostly because we’re terrified that their lack of follow-through indicates a character flaw or a lack of ambition with which they’ll struggle for the rest of their lives. Worse, we think their inability to accomplish their goals might be due to flaws in our parenting, particularly when we find it so difficult to do it ourselves.

Pastor and leadership expert Ron Edmondson [lists several reasons](#) why we might have trouble achieving dreams (and resolutions):

- We don’t **specifically identify** what our dreams are. We think we “just know,” but there’s no way to aim at a desired result if we can’t specifically name it.
- We make no **solid plans** to achieve them. As Edmondson says, “A dream without a plan is just a dream.”
- **We have negative impressions of accountability**, so we miss the incentive and assistance a trusted mentor, partner, or cheerleader can provide.
- We **work on them alone** because (secretly) we do not want to share the win. This is a tough one to admit, right?
- **Past setbacks** make us afraid to try again. Failures can be easy to remember and hard to get over.
- We avoid **taking risks**, partially because of the fear of failure mentioned above, but partially because we do not see the benefit in the struggle.
- Our busyness gets in the way, and we never **get started**.

— Why should my family and I make resolutions?

There are a couple reasons why families can benefit from setting resolutions. The first is that, typically, teens don’t instinctively set specific goals for themselves; by definition teens exist in a state of constant change both biologically and socially, and they usually prefer to take each day as it comes, looking as far ahead as the end of the week, maybe, but not much beyond that. Creating and accomplishing a New Year’s resolution—even a small one—can help a teen (and everyone) understand what is really important to them.

Second, we often hear from parents that it’s hard to find opportunities to simply talk with their teens about topics that matter, let alone to teach and disciple them to become more like Christ. After all, teens are busy being way too cool to listen to mom and dad, and they *already* know everything. (But let’s be fair: Most of us felt that way when we were teens, too!) It’s like Mark Twain [is thought to have said](#): “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant, I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished by how much he’d learned in 7 years!”

The beauty of starting a goal-setting tradition with our kids, whether it's at the start of each new year or some other time, is that **it becomes a doorway to deeper conversation and discipleship**. It starts with something kind-hearted and benign—a question like “What do you want to accomplish this year?”—then naturally flows into all sorts of other discussions, like the definition of success, how to measure success, how to handle failure, the value of hard work, the value of putting off short-term rewards for long-term achievement, how our perspectives and attitudes play a large role in determining our success, what to do when we've achieved our goals and now feel disappointed, how God is *for* us (not against us), and even how He feels about us when we fail *and* when we succeed.

There are also biblical reasons to set goals. The Bible admonishes us as parents to “train up a child in the way they should go [teaching him to seek God's wisdom and will for their abilities and talents]” (Prov 22:6 AMP) and to avoid “exasperating” our children [bringing them point of resentment with demands that are trivial or unreasonable or humiliating or abusive] (Eph 6:4 AMP). We also must never “look down on youth” but encourage them to “be an example and set a pattern for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in [moral] purity” (1 Timothy 4:12 AMP). These expectations are tough enough for teens to live up to, but they reflect the purpose and ultimate result of achievement in the Christian life: to become more and more like Jesus. ***God's message to all of us: Resolutions and goals only matter when they arise from the way our Creator fashioned us and in light of His perfect, very personal plan for each one of us.***

However, all of this means that we don't simply force our kids to set a goal, then never talk about it again until the following year. It requires us to actively and intentionally walk through the process with them, being willing to help, listen, and offer a shoulder to cry on when necessary. It's in the messy middle when the opportunities for conversation arise.

And before we even start talking about New Year's resolutions with our sons and daughters, *we must let them know we want to help them become everything God plans for them*. Try to ignore the pressure coming from those with ulterior motives in setting goals for our kids. Best results come from parents who first commit to learning what their son/daughter's gifts, skills, and talents are: what they enjoy, what they dream about, what they want, what they need, what they dislike, and what they love. Ultimately, help them listen to their life. As pastor Frederick Buechner encourages:

See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and [life itself is grace](#).

We should also mention that participating in goal-setting with our kids is highly important! It makes us more relatable to them because they get to see our own journeys through the ups and downs of striving toward a goal. And it allows them to see how this is not some “stupid thing Mom/Dad is making us do because we're supposed to learn something,” but rather something that will be useful for the rest of their lives.

— That sounds like it just adds more to our crazy schedules. How do we make this happen?

While it can sound like a lot, it's possible for it to only take a bit of your time on New Year's Day, after which follow-ups and check-ins can be incorporated during other activities (like

driving home from school or during dinner). Here's a suggested "schedule" that might make it seem less daunting. Feel free to adapt and adjust in ways that work for you!

New Year's Day (or whenever you choose):

- Take some time as a family to reflect on the past year. What did they like? What did they not like? What do they wish they had done more or less of? What was their favorite moment? What was their least favorite moment? Then ask what they hope is different about the upcoming year. What do they hope to accomplish, do differently, and learn?
- Then tell them you'd like to try something this year. Have everyone (including you!) write down one goal they'd like to try to accomplish this year. It doesn't have to be anything outrageous, but it shouldn't be something like "Finish the school year" because that's going to happen no matter what. Something more along the lines of "Finish the school year with a 3.5 GPA" is preferable because it's a measurable goal with an end date. (See "goals" section below for more tips on how to set goals.)
- Next, have everyone choose 2 or 3 actions they can take that will help them accomplish the goal. For our example, something like "Study for at least 1 hour every day for 2 weeks before each exam" is a good action because it's an action that helps a person achieve higher grades, but it's not rooted in the grade itself. If one were to choose, "Get a 95% on every exam," it'd be a much harder action to accomplish (and would be really frustrating if it's not accomplished).
- Next, choose some dates for check-ins. These can be different for each person, depending on the end-dates of their goals.
- Also, have each person outline what others in the family can do if he/she gets off track. This gives others permission to "call us out" when we're slacking.
- Then, make sure to lay some ground rules for how to lovingly help each other with goals. It could easily devolve into a way for kids to pick on or make fun of each other, so be careful to explain what is beneficial and kind and what is not.
- Finally, figure out a fun way to display the goals, dates, measurables, and actions in the house for everyone to see and track their progress!

Weekly or Bi-weekly:

- Check in with each other! Simply ask how it's going, if they need anything, if they've hit any roadblocks, etc. This can be done at any point during the day.

Quarterly (or on predetermined dates):

- Have an official check in. Find out how far along each person is and if they've been able to keep up with the actions they chose.
- Offer to help each other if necessary.
- Celebrate the wins, even the small ones!
- If someone is struggling more than others, make sure to encourage him/her and not compare to other members of the family. If necessary, find ways to check in on him/her in more private moments in order to make him/her feel safe and able to be honest.

End of the year (or on predetermined end-dates):

- Have a final check in! See how everyone did in accomplishing their goals.
- Again, make sure to celebrate the wins!
- And if someone didn't accomplish their original goal, chat about why. Was it due to a lack of effort, setbacks, unforeseeable roadblocks, too ambitious of a goal, changing desires, or something else entirely? Use this time to figure out what was accomplished and learned along the way, then celebrate that.

No matter what happens, it's of utmost importance to remember our ultimate goal: **To become more like Christ in all we do.** Sometimes it's easy to get lost in achievement, competition,

and winning. If we allow that to happen, our teens may end up feeling like they're not good enough, OR they may begin to see others as competition, rather than as fellow laborers. So while accomplishing goals is important, it's even more important that we keep ourselves focused on our teens' hearts. The more conversations we have with them along the way, and the more we point them toward Truth, the better.

As anyone living the surrendered Christian life will tell you, it is only when we reach for God that we can know how ready He is to guide us in our lives and speak to us through His Word, and it is only when we *fail* (not when we succeed) that we truly understand God's unending mercy and love.

— How do we choose good goals?

What if your daughter wants her resolution to be, "Get more Instagram and Snapchat followers"? Or what if your son says he wants to get good enough to beat his favorite video game or to set a PR in track? As the parent, what do you say to that?!

These situations can be tricky, but they can also be great times of learning and growing. First, let's ask God to give us wisdom and discernment in how to converse with our children about their goals and how they relate to God's will for their lives. It's easy to over-spiritualize everything, categorizing goals like "Pray every day" as "godly" and goals like "Lose 10 pounds" as "secular" or "worldly." But those are false dichotomies that don't do anyone any good. It's never that simple, and there are many things in this world that God wills for us to do that don't seem "spiritual" on the surface: "[There is no event so commonplace](#) but that God is present within it."

Second, help them analyze their motives. Why do they want to accomplish that goal? Wanting to lose 10 pounds or gain more followers could be purely out of insecurity and vanity; but it could also be because they truly want to take better care of their bodies or they want to use their platform and influence for good. Taking time to be honest with ourselves about why we want something is important because it helps us recognize our selfishness and our need to feel significant. The way to root it out is by recognizing and confessing it, not by trying to pretend it's not there at all. (If your teen does admit to wanting something for unhealthy reasons, that's good! That opens the door to conversations about *why* they find those things so appealing, which allows you the chance to demonstrate the ultimate emptiness behind their desires.)

Third, let's use the opportunity to remind ourselves and to teach our kids to pray as Jesus did: "[Father, if You are willing](#), take this cup from me; yet not my will, but Yours be done." His desperate prayer is a beautiful template for us to follow. He didn't try to hide His desires from God; He plainly asked God for what He desired, but He couched it in God's will. Twice He says it: "If You are willing" and "not my will, but Yours." By praying in a similar way, we can accomplish two things: 1. Being honest with God about what we want; and 2. Submitting ourselves and our desires to His will. This is powerful because it humbles us, as well as reminds us that God knows His will for our lives, even when we don't, and will bring it to fruition when we are willing to let go of control. And remember, we are what we pray. The primary purpose of prayer is to be properly formed into the very image of God. How and for what we pray matters.

Fourth, this exercise can be a great segue into talking about what the purpose of life actually

is. Our culture is constantly selling the idea that we're supposed to do whatever makes us [happy](#), to do what "feels" right, to find freedom in [having no boundaries or rules imposed](#) on us. If we believe that (whether we realize it or not), then we'll make goals out of that search for happiness. However, as mentioned before, God's primary concern for our lives is that we become holy and more like Him. What's so beautiful about that is, despite our misconceptions, holiness is actually [the path to true happiness](#)! If our teens are struggling to care about reading their Bibles more or praying more consistently or anything that would help them to know and love God more, it may be because of this fundamental misunderstanding. Rather than beating our heads against the wall arguing over which goals they *should* set, we may need to start further back and help reframe the concept of happiness.

Last but not least, we often fail to accomplish our goals because we're just bad at setting achievable ones, as well as at defining the actionable steps we can take to get there. For more info on how to do that, we highly recommend reading [The 4 Disciplines of Execution](#) by Sean Covey, Chris McChesney, and Jim Huling.

—— **What do I do if my teen refuses to participate?**

We all have our moments, don't we? If your teen only rolls his/her eyes or comments on how cheesy the whole thing is, that's ok! The rest of the family can continue on in the process while continually offering your teen a chance to join in when ready. And as the parent, make sure to offer to talk if they want to. Sure, they may just be being a "typical teen," but there also may be underlying issues or insecurities that they're not ready to work through in front of the whole family. Being open to talking with them might be just the thing they need—when they're ready, of course!

—— **Final thoughts**

The past year may have been horrible—so horrible you would rather forget it ever happened. Or you might have enjoyed the past year so much, you fear the coming year can't measure up. As much as we would like a fresh start every January 1, our position in life always reflects where we've been. We can't move forward into the future if we are unwilling to reflect on how we got to where we are now. God says it like this: You can't look at yourself in the mirror, then walk away and two minutes later forget what you look like (James 1:23–24).

God intends for us to review our pasts, looking to moments of success and failure, to know where and how we will "grow forward." However, He does not want our failures to make us afraid to set goals. The apostle Paul urged the Philippians to move into the future as he did: "Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us" (Phil. 3:13–14 NLT).

When we look at our New Year's resolutions as a process of setting and reaching goals, they can lead to important life-change. Although willpower alone won't "loosen" the knots in our dreams, our commitment in faith to visionary planning, prayer, adjustment, and celebration will.

Prayer and action are never mutually exclusive. We pray, then we act; that's how prayer works! We look forward to joining you and your family in doing this in 2018. Happy New Year!

Resources

[*Listening to Your Life*](#) by Frederick Buechner

[“9 Actions You Must Take to Reach Your Biggest Goals”](#) by Dr. Rick Warren

[“How John Maxwell Sets Goals”](#) by J.D. Meier

[*The 4 Disciplines of Execution*](#) by Sean Covey, Chris McChesney, and Jim Huling

[*The Selfless Way of Christ*](#) by Henri Nouwen

[“3 Things to Consider as You Prepare for 2018”](#) by Sam Collier for *Relevant*

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