

### **13. ON TEENAGERS AND TOADS**

**I** thought I knew my two oldest sons extremely well, since I've lived with them for the past fifteen years. But only recently have I discovered that a new and unique species inhabits our home—teenagers. After observing their behaviors, I can clearly see that teenagers and toads share some unique qualities.

During the summer, I get the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with both groups. Once school is out, our family heads to the country for four weeks. There are three frog-filled ponds located in the field next to us. With two of my three children now officially teenagers, my hunch regarding the similarities between teenagers and toads has been confirmed. While each is distinctively unique, they have a number of common features.

Both groups sleep long hours and are nocturnal creatures. Toads hibernate for long periods during the winter months. Teenagers can easily snooze ten to twelve hours a day, sometimes thirteen. Considerable noise and activity during the night is quite common. Need I say more about teenage night-noise?



They even move alike. Toads make unexpected jumps. You can't tell which way they will go, or when they're going to make a move. Teenagers have this element of unpredictability about their behavior, too. Often, it is impossible to tell how they are going to react. They may say "no way" to something and then be jubilant when you decide to go ahead with it anyway. One thing is for sure—their moves are erratic and they're difficult to catch.

Toads are amphibians. The word amphibian means "two lives." Toads and frogs were the first four-legged, backboned creatures to walk on land and survive out of water. Teenagers also have two lives. They are in transition between

childhood and adulthood. Much of their energy is focused on shedding the ways of children and evolving into adults.

Toads experience an unusual metamorphosis. Watching a tadpole grow to an adult frog is an incredible sight. Its head and body become distinct, and its legs pop out—first hind legs, then front legs. The tail slowly grows shorter and all but disappears. Teenagers' bodies experience a similar metamorphosis. Half-tadpole, half-frog bodies are comparable to the teenagers' half-child, half-adult bodies. Both groups are physically transitioning into something else.

Toads have considerable expertise in camouflaging themselves to the color of their surroundings. To conceal themselves from predators, they hide in ground cover; but in open areas, they make “dugouts,” and burrow into the ground until danger has passed. Teenagers also engage in a type of burrowing. They are very conscious of their surroundings, especially when other people are watching them. In particular, they burrow or get out of sight, when they don't want to be seen at a public event with their parents. Concealment from their parents is important. We can't take this personally. Equate it to nothing more than a toad wanting to be safe from its predators.

Eating habits are similar between teenagers and toads. The majority of amphibians are carnivores. Most gulp down spiders, insects, earthworms and other types of crawlers—ants, snails, and slugs. They will gorge themselves when food is abundant in order to survive when food is scarce. Witness the ornate horned toad with its huge mouth and camouflaged body. After catching a large prey, this toad blinks its eyes repeatedly to increase the pressure in its mouth, assisting it in swallowing its meal. Teenagers approach snacks and meals with

equal vigor. They can handle big mouthfuls too and swallow large quantities of food with ease, fully in control of their movements.

Toads are great fun to watch. Their unusual physical features alone make viewing a sport. They have bumpy skin, their eyes change shape and color, and their long stretchy legs are always ready for jumping maneuvers. Teenagers are fun to watch, too. As parents, we could do more watching. Why not focus on observing and accepting their unique qualities, strengths, and extraordinary characteristics? We need to value our teenagers' genuine individuality. Most parents fiddle with and want to change their emerging teens. But success is achieved only if we let teenagers grow up according to their own schedules, in their own way. Let teens make contact with their own "insides," and help build their self-esteem.

To me, listening to toads and frogs around a pond on a summer night is the most glorious, harmonious symphony one will ever hear. As my teenager says, when something meets with his complete approval, the sound is "so sweet." When our children were little, I took them to a workshop at a nearby nature center. We learned how to make the sounds of four different toads and frogs. After considerable practice, we were each assigned one frog call to imitate for audiotaping. I was a spring peeper and my sons were bull frogs. The recording session was our big debut! When our tape was played back and compared to the sounds of a summer night pond scene, there was a remarkable resemblance to the sounds. Likewise, as parents we need to listen deeply to our teens. Get to know their sounds so well that you can play them back.

**Appreciate the innate beauty, mystery, and joy of teens. It can truly be a “ribbet-ing” experience.**