A Parent's Guide to

TATTOOS

axis

> **"**
>
> Every one of my tattoos records an event or rite of passage. I think of tattoos as art, but also, every time I look at mine, I relive the emotions I felt when I had them.

—Sami Spagnuolo, "Painted Ladies: Why Women Get Tattoos," *The Guardian*

A Parent's Guide to
TATTOOS

Contents (click to jump to section)

axis

To tattoo or not to tattoo? (Why is that even a question?)

It used to be that only sailors, criminals, or the otherwise rebellious got tattoos. Now, about 40% of American adults have at least one tattoo.

Adults in their 30s are the most likely age group to have tattoos, although (not surprisingly) younger people are more likely than older people to get tattoos. Various studies on teenagers have found that the average number of them who had tattoos ranged from 10% to 23%. One of these studies found that 55% of high school students had an interest in getting a tattoo, even if they did not have one at the moment. The likelihood of young people getting tattoos increases as they approach and enter their twenties—which makes sense given that they're no long minors needing their parents' permission. And while teenage body modification (tattoos, piercings, etc.) used to be associated with high-risk behavior, scientific research shows that this connection among teenagers is more tenuous than it used to be.

It's more common for the older generations to have a negative view of tattoos and the younger to have a more positive one, but what should Christians think? And what should you do if your teens tell you they want to get a tattoo? In this guide, we hope to shed some light on these questions.

What are tattoos? Where'd they come from?

Tattoos are artistic designs that people permanently embed in their skin via needle and ink. This article from the American Academy of Pediatrics provides comprehensive information on the process and associated risks of tattooing.

The word "tattoo" has its roots in Polynesia, where tattoos developed into an art form and had serious social and religious significance for the people groups there. While the practice of tattooing goes back thousands of years, people in modern western culture were introduced to it through sailors who traveled to the South Pacific in the late 1700s. Even though tattoos were more common among sailors at the time, the English aristocracy also dabbled with them, as did the elite in the U. S. in the mid-19th century.

By the early 20th century, only people on the [fringes of American society](#) got tattoos [*warning: linked article has an inappropriate image at the end of it*]. These people on the "fringes" included sailors, circus performers, and criminals. It was a practice for some women in the 1920s to get "permanent cosmetics," that is, makeup tattooed on their faces. Because tattoos were stigmatized, women would generally be secretive about doing so.

In the decades that followed, tattoos continued to be associated with criminals and other society outsiders, but in the 1960s, they started to be more prevalent among celebrities (for example, Janis Joplin had a [famous bracelet tattoo](#)). In the '70s, it became more common for people to get tattoos in order to express themselves, a practice that continued throughout the next decades with celebrities still leading the way. But it really wasn't until the 2000s that tattoos became so mainstream that they are not shocking to most people anymore.

Why did they become mainstream?

As with most trends, pinpointing why they become so popular can be a bit subjective, but we can make a few observations and educated guesses.

Entertainment and Pop Culture

One main reason is that since the early 2000s, tattoos have become more visible and normalized in pop culture. A notable example is the reality TV show, *Miami Ink*, which aired from 2005 to 2008 and spawned some spin offs, such as *NY Ink* and *LA Ink*.

Since *Miami Ink* first aired, there have been multiple reality shows about tattooing, including *Inked* and *Ink Master*. These shows have allowed the general public to see what life inside a tattoo parlor is like—although we should note that "reality" TV tends to be pretty well removed from reality. In any case, these shows have likely done a lot to make tattooing seem more "normal."

It's also become very common for celebrities and sports idols to get tattoos. Rihanna, David Beckham, Lebron James, Shawn Mendes, Adam Levine, Drake, Miley Cyrus, Demi Lovato, and Lady Gaga are just a few. [Justin Bieber is an interesting example](#) of a fresh-faced and initially fresh-skinned heartthrob who eventually covered himself in tattoos.

Celebrities have in many ways normalized tattoos, so it's not a stretch to think that because these mainstream stars are getting tattoos, their fans are as well.

We're Skeptical of Authorities and Crave Meaning

Tattoos also fit with the general cultural trends of informality, individualism, and suspicion of authority. *Atlantic* writer Chris Weller theorizes that modern tattoos have a lot to do with a postmodern search for meaning. This is something that could be true for many, even if only as a subconscious motivation. He mentions a study conducted by University of Arkansas professor Anne Velliquette and her colleagues that seems to confirm his hypothesis. People interviewed in 1998 used tattoos as ways to *confirm* their sense of self, but people interviewed in 2006 used tattoos to *find* their sense of self: "The people interviewed in the second group also seemed to need proof that their identities existed at all. They relied on tattoos as a way to establish some understanding of who they actually were."

Any other reasons people get them?

One reason why people get tattoos is to express their rebellion against a certain authority and/or to confirm their identity with a certain group, such as a gang. Other people get tattoos because they are "edgy" or have sex appeal. Or people might get them simply because they like how certain tattoos look. One friend of ours has several tattoos that are very meaningful to him (they represent different members of his family), but he also plans to get a tattoo of a cupcake in the future. It's not that that cupcakes have any particularly "deep" meaning for him—he just likes cupcakes.

One of the most common reasons why people get tattoos now is self-expression, not necessarily an existential desire for purpose and identity. We have a friend who gets tattoos both because of their meaningfulness to her and because of their beauty. She loves plants and animals, and her tattoos of plants and animals remind her of God's creation and artistry.

People often get tattoos in order to commemorate important values, people, or events in their lives. Often, these events could be painful memories or victories over some kind of personal battle. We have a friend who struggled with alcoholism for years and to commemorate his sobriety he got a tattoo as a reminder never to return to his former

lifestyle. Tattoos could even serve the cosmetic purpose of covering up scars from a major surgery.

Another motivation for getting tattoos is that doing so is a cathartic experience. [One woman says](#), "The pain is a weirdly enjoyable feeling. The unicorn on my arm was my first big one. Obviously it hurt, but it makes you feel as if you've gone through something to achieve it. You have to have guts to have a tattoo."

This feeling of release might be why, when some people get their first tattoos, they develop a "taste" for it and want to get more and more. The "newness" is appealing, so some people get more and more tattoos because trying something new is exciting.

And of course, sometimes people get tattoos because they're not using the best judgment. Kendall Jenner, for example, got the word ["meow" tattooed inside her lower lip](#) because she was drunk and that was the first word that came to mind. It's also common for people to tattoo themselves with the [name of their significant other](#) only to regret that decision later.

What's the Christian argument against them?

Besides the argument that only criminals or people in gangs get tattoos, other arguments that Christians raise against getting them are:

- Your body is a temple and you're defacing it. [1 Cor. 6:19-20](#) says, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."
- The Old Testament forbids tattoos. [Lev. 19:28](#) says, "You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the Lord."
- [It's adopting something from paganism](#).
- You're focusing on yourself by drawing attention to yourself.
- You're making a permanent change to your body (this could be the most significant reason why people get upset about tattoos).
- There are health risks.
- They are expensive. One could clearly argue that spending $100 or more on body

art may not be the best stewardship of our resources.

You'll probably notice that the reasons in the list above fall into different categories. Some of them point to Scripture, some of them rely on historical arguments, and some of them are questions of wisdom rather than moral questions of right and wrong.

What argument could be made for them?

First, let's deal with the most important arguments, the ones based in Scripture. If Leviticus specifically bans tattoos, how could it be right for Christians to get them? One of God's primary purposes with giving the Old Testament Law is calling His people to live differently from the pagan cultures surrounding them. The Jewish Law includes some commands we follow today and many that we no longer do.

Modern believers generally don't believe that they are banned from eating all the animals forbidden to the Jews. We also don't think we need to follow the Old Testament's commands for dealing with leprosy or that it is sinful for us to wear clothing made of two types of material (Lev. 19:19). Lev. 19:27 (which comes right before the verse about marking the body) prohibits Israelites from trimming the hair on their temples and their beards. So it's inconsistent for people to take verse 28 as applying to them without having a good reason for rejecting the other verses in

this passage and in the rest of the Law. It's wise to consider which laws mentioned in Leviticus are timeless truths and which are contextually and historically appropriate for ancient Israel.

Tattoos and Culture

But if tattoos were actually associated with pagan practices, shouldn't Christians avoid them? A valid question! Certainly some people nowadays do get tattoos explicitly as symbols of their paganism. However, like any type of art, tattoos are not *inherently* pagan or Christian. Their meaning depends on the time period and culture they're in. Facial tattoos mean something different to the Maori of New Zealand than they do to rapper Post Malone.

As we mentioned, tattoos have different meanings within American culture. The importance of cultural context also applies to how we dress and adorn ourselves:

Clothing that is accepted in one culture can be extremely offensive in another. This offense might have nothing to do with the objective qualities of the clothing itself, just what the clothing means in that place. Tattoos are similar, even though they are a permanent form of adornment.

It *is* important to ask what tattoos mean in our culture. When we ask this question, we find the answer is that while they *can* symbolize paganism or rebellion for some people (what they mean depends on the individual getting them), almost no one sees tattoos on someone and thinks, "That person is Wiccan!" or "That person is a criminal!" **just because they have tattoos**. What the tattoo actually *is* makes a difference, but the fact that it's a tattoo doesn't immediately tell us what it signifies.

It's worth pointing out that there are other pagan traditions many Christians have been fine with co-opting because the traditions are so old they no longer carry those pagan connotations for us. Christmas is a prime example. Some Christians do refuse to celebrate Christmas because of its pagan roots, but many of us have adopted the holiday as a way of honoring Jesus. **The reasons why we carry out our traditions** matter more than the traditions themselves.

Can We Be Consistent?

What about the "your body is a temple" argument? An assumption that this argument makes is that getting a tattoo would be defacing your body. If we wanted to be extremely literal about the temple analogy, many temples were highly adorned. So someone could actually use this verse as a way of arguing *for* tattoos since the person getting one is simply "decorating" the temple God has given him or her. If someone were to respond, "Tattoos are different because they actually cause the body to bleed. They are harming the body," we'd have to question why so many Christians are ok with women getting ear piercings. If there is nothing wrong with this type of "harming" of the body for adornment, then what is wrong with tattoos? Yes, tattoos are more extreme. But if other types of adornment, including piercings, are ok, then tattooing becomes not a question of disobeying God's word, but of whether it's wise to mark our bodies in such a permanent way.

This pro-tattoo author actually thinks that it's a great idea to consider 1 Cor. 6:19-20 when considering whether or not to get a tattoo. We should question whether the tattoo will honor God or not. She says that when she was anorexic, she was not honoring God with her body. She got a tattoo to commemorate her triumph over anorexia and

uses her tattoo to share the story of her victory, as well as the Gospel. She believes she is honoring God with the tattoo she chose to get.

As far as the "drawing attention to yourself" argument goes, if we followed this line of thinking, we would have to ban all types of dress and adornment that enhances beauty, not to mention all cosmetic surgery. Certainly there are times when it is more appropriate to dress in a subdued way, but we don't think it's possible to apply this argument with consistency.

Are Christian tattoos better than non-Christian ones?

Because tattoos are a way of adorning yourself, we think that the same principles you'd apply to choosing your jewelry or attire can apply to getting a tattoo. If you want to get one that represents your faith, great! If you want one that has another personal meaning or is purely decorative, that's fine, too. Just choose something that you'll be fine with having on your body for the rest of your life.

What should I do if my underage kids want to get tattoos?

While we don't believe that whether or not someone gets a tattoo is a question of right or wrong, we do think it's a weighty decision that requires incredible wisdom. This is especially true if the people who want tattoos are teenagers.

If you want to have a rule in your household that your kids can't get tattoos for as long as they are minors or living in your home, that's perfectly reasonable. It's even probably a good idea. Tattoos are permanent (removing them is costly), and people's tastes can change quite a bit as they go from adolescence into adulthood. (If your teens don't think their passions will ever change, it could be helpful to illustrate with a story about something you were *so passionate* about when you were younger that holds way less sway over you now.)

However, if you decide not to allow your kids to get a tattoo while they are teenagers, we still think it's important and valuable for you to have an open dialogue with them about why they want to get one. The more authoritarian you are about it ("You can't get a tattoo, and that's final!"), the more likely some kids will be to get one in secret.

What do I do if my child and I disagree on their permissiveness?

If this is the case, it's important to keep the discussion open. Even if you *hate* tattoos, it's important to hear them out and respect their opinions while still holding to your convictions. A good question to ask of your kids (and of yourself) is, "Why?" Why do I want a tattoo? (Or, why do I hate tattoos so much? What's behind my hatred? Are they legitimate reasons? Or is my hatred simply based in old stereotypes?) Encourage them never to get one just because other people are getting tattoos or because the "newness" is exhilarating.

Recognize that the goal of adolescence is to train your kids to make healthy, responsible decisions when they're adults (and can get tattoos whether you want them to or not). You have an opportunity now to help them have wisdom if they eventually decide to get one. If you simply shut them down because you don't like tattoos, then you lose that discipleship opportunity. We'd also encourage you to temper your emotions on the topic if need be so that you don't react quite as dramatically as this mom did when her 21-year-old son came home with a tattoo.

What should I help my kids think through?

Health Risks

People can get tattoos safely, but your kids need to understand the health risks that come with getting a tattoo. We know of a kid who got an infection and died because he got a tattoo in an unsafe way in a foreign country. You can help your kids have wisdom so that they don't make a foolish decision like that one. Have your kids do extensive research about their options (there are organic inks now), including whether there

are long-term risks associated with people having ink in their bodies. They should also research the tattoo parlor and tattoo artist they want to use. Some are more reputable than others, and some artists specialize in certain types of tattooing.

Money—Make Them Pay for It

Have your kids pay for their tattoos with their own money. Making them do the research and save their own money will help them be less likely to take this decision lightly.

Make Sure They Understand How Tattoos Could Impact Their Future

While tattoos are more accepted in society now, it's valid to consider the fact that certain employers are still reluctant to hire people who have them, especially if they are highly visible. Your kids might think they'll never go into a job where they would need to hide their tattoos, but they have no way of knowing whether this is true or not. At the very least, it would be wise for them to get a tattoo somewhere that is easy to hide. For example, the food industry tends to be pretty pro-tattoo, but many restaurants require employees to cover any tattoos they have (this was the case at a full-service restaurant one friend of ours worked at).

Go With Them

One dad we know (who has tattoos himself) wants to be part of the experience of his son getting his first tattoo, so he plans to take his son to get his first one. Going with your kids to get their first tattoo is a way of showing that you care about them and want to support them. If your kids are minors, the artist will need your consent anyway, depending on what state you live in.

How can I kindly discourage my kids from getting tattoos of anything and everything?

Here are some other suggestions for guidelines for your teens:

- Don't let them get a tattoo of their boyfriend's or girlfriend's name. That just won't end well!

- Strongly encourage them get it somewhere where they can easily conceal it.

- Limit the size for them—encourage them to start small instead of going too crazy on their very first one.

- Limit the number—the goal of this is to teach self-control and intentionality.

- Limit where they can get it—no facial tattoos and no spots where showing them to others would be uncomfortable or weird. (If they don't understand this limitation, talk it through with them. If someone asks if they have a tattoo and they say yes, the next question will be if they can see it. But if they have it in an awkward place or in a place they shouldn't be showing others, then is it worth putting it there?)

We know a man who has an interesting strategy for preventing himself from hastily getting a tattoo that he's likely to regret later. Whenever he decides he wants a particular tattoo, instead of getting it right away, he gives himself a year to change his mind. If he changes his mind before the year is up, he restarts the year for himself. It's a big commitment, but not nearly as big as actually getting the tattoo. This could be a good strategy to implement with your teens as well, especially if you'd like to allow the option for tattoos but keep your guidelines strict.

Final thoughts

If your kids want a tattoo, it's not the end of the world. If they really want one, they will get one when they're on their own. You have an opportunity now to help them be wise about how they go about that process, even if you decide they should wait until they are out of your house before they can do so.

Related Axis Resources

- *The Culture Translator*, a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- A Parent's Guide to Profanity
- A Parent's Guide to Tough Conversations
- A Parent's Guide to Body Positivity
- Check out axis.org for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the All Axis Pass!

Additional Resources

- "[Confessions Of A Celebrity Tattoo Artist](#)," Refinery29
- "[Tattoo Statistics](#)," ShouldITattoo.com
- "[5 Safety Questions to Ask Your Artist Before Getting a Tattoo](#)," TatRing
- "[What to Know Before Getting a Tattoo](#)," TatRing
- "[Getting Tattooed or Pierced](#)," Healthline
- "[Scientists studied tattooed corpses to see if ink travels](#)," Big Think
- "[How Tattoos Became Middle Class](#)," JSTOR
- "[New report cites risks youths face when getting tattoos and body piercings](#)," *Chicago Tribune*

Support Axis to get more resources like this!

Thanks so much for purchasing this Parent Guide from Axis! As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit ministry, Axis invests all proceeds from your purchases back into the creation of more quality content like this. By purchasing this and [other content](#) from Axis, you support our ministry, allowing us to come alongside you in your parenting and/or discipleship journey.

A Parent's Guide to
TATTOOS

Recap

- Tattoos are artistic designs that people permanently embed in their skin via needle and ink.

- Tattoos started to become mainstream in the 2000s, mainly due to attention from television and celebrities, and the notion of individualism they carry.

- Some reasons people get tattoos today include self-expression, rebellion, and to commemorate important values, people, things, events, or simply just to have one.

- Some arguments against tattoos include scriptural references, health, and cost.

- Cultural context and consistency in analysis are crucial in determining whether it is wrong to get tattoos.

- Tattoos are permanent, and the things teens like now are likely to change. It might not be a great idea to let them get one underage.

- It's important to be in open discussion with your teen about tattoos, whether talking about whether they should be allowed to get one or not while underage or about the risks, requirements, and recommendations of getting one in general.

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

axis

A Parent's Guide to
TATTOOS

Discussion Questions

- Why do you want to get a tattoo?
- What are some of the reasons some people think tattoos are bad?
- What guidance do you think God's Word gives us about tattoos?
- Do you know the risks involved with getting a tattoo?
- Do you think you would want to get more and more tattoos just for the sake of getting them? Explain.
- What if getting a tattoo now prevents you from getting your dream job in the future?
- What if you were to get a tattoo and then really regret it? What could you do to prevent this from happening?
- Have you really pondered why you want this tattoo, or are you making an impulsive decision?
- Where do you want to put your tattoo? Why there? Could that get awkward in the future?
- Have you researched the tattoo parlor where you would go?
- Are you willing to spend the money needed to make your tattoo high quality?
- Are you willing to spend the money on touch-ups?
- Do you know what's involved in caring for a tattoo?
- Do you realize how aging will affect your tattoo?
- How will you getting a tattoo bring honor to God?
- Are you prepared to explain your tattoo to other people? What are you going to say?

Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!

aXis