

A P A R E N T ' S  
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# Stranger Things

**axis**

# Think teens don't care about the '80s? Think again.

Thanks to the cultural phenomenon that is *Stranger Things*, the 1980s are making a comeback! The Netflix show has been wildly popular, drawing [15.8 million viewers](#) to the first episode of Season 2 the day it premiered and [setting records on Twitter](#). It's even spawned a [dedicated fan base](#), [plenty of memes](#), and tons of collectible items on Etsy. Though the show's fanbase is varied and spans many generations, [teens especially love](#) the world of *Stranger Things*.

With the amount of impact it's having, it's important that we parents utilize the opportunity to disciple our teens into a deeper understanding of themselves, God, culture, and others through the show. This Guide offers insight into many of themes of the show, as well as plenty of discussion questions to help get the conversations flowing!

*Fair Warning: Spoilers ahead!*

## — What is *Stranger Things*?

A Netflix original horror/sci-fi show that is an ode to the '80s. All episodes of the first season premiered on July 15, 2016, becoming an overnight hit out of nowhere. The second highly anticipated season premiered on October 27, 2017.

## — What's it about?

One night in Hawkins, Indiana, middle schooler Will Byers disappears in the woods. It soon becomes apparent that something evil is haunting the town. As Will's friends and family try to find out what's going on, they meet a strange girl named Eleven who has superhuman powers and is tied to a government conspiracy.

Season 2 opens with the characters trying to cope with the effects of their experiences a year earlier. Will in particular is suffering as he finds himself going in and out of the Upside Down without warning. He gradually realizes that something even worse than the Demogorgon is threatening Hawkins.

Characters:

- Will Byers—son of Joyce and Lonnie; best friends with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas
- Jonathan Byers—Will's older brother
- Joyce Byers—mother of Will and Jonathan
- Lonnie Byers—Joyce's ex-husband
- Mike Wheeler—one of Will's best friends and leader of their group
- Nancy Wheeler—Mike's older sister and best friend of Barb
- Karen Wheeler—mom to Nancy, Mike, and Holly
- Ted Wheeler—Karen's husband
- Lucas Sinclair—best friend of Mike, Dustin, and Will
- Dustin Henderson—best friend of Lucas, Will, and Mike
- Eleven/El/Jane—girl who escapes from the Hawkins Lab and is sheltered by Mike's group

and later Jim Hopper

- Jim Hopper–Hawkins Chief of Police
- Barbara Holland–best friend of Nancy
- Steve Harrington–Nancy’s boyfriend
- Max Mayfield–new girl in Season 2; becomes friends with Dustin and Lucas
- Billy Hargrove–Max’s older step–brother
- Dr. Martin Brenner (“Papa”)–man who runs Hawkins National Lab and who raises and experiments on Eleven
- Scott Clarke–science teacher at Hawkins Middle School
- Bob Newby–Joyce’s boyfriend in Season 2
- Sam Owens–scientist who takes over the Hawkins Lab in Season 2
- Murray Bauman–private investigator looking into recent events in Hawkins
- Kali–Eleven’s older “sister” who was also raised in the Hawkins Lab

## — Why is it soooo popular?

There are several reasons why people find *Stranger Things* so appealing. For one, it’s nostalgic. The series draws heavily on the pop culture of the ‘80s. Among other works of the time, the show references *Alien*, *The Goonies*, *Stand by Me*, *E. T.*, *Star Wars*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Lord of the Rings*, and the works of Stephen King.

*Stranger Things* wouldn’t work without the suspense and sense of mystery it creates. But as *Rolling Stone* contributor [Rob Sheffield points out](#), there is another reason the series has become such a hit. It compellingly and relatably depicts people trying to cope with problems all of us face. Sheffield says, “For all the geek bravado of *Stranger Things*, it’s that sense of trauma that makes it something special.”

Most of us haven’t had to fight a terrifying monster or even resist human villains (although the latter is more in the realm of possibilities). But we have had to deal with varying degrees of closeness or alienation, say, in our families. *ST* depicts what it’s like to care for someone without being able to say anything, how it feels to be an outcast, and the heartbreak of losing someone you love.

In particular, the show captures the experience of childhood, with its accompanying pain and beauty. There’s nothing quite like surviving hardship alongside people who really “get” you. *Stranger Things* has a lot going for it, but one of its strongest qualities is how well it depicts the sacrifice and loyalty inherent in true friendship.

## — Should I allow my kids to watch it?

This is always an interesting question to answer. Parents with young children need to be forewarned that the show is dark and probably merits a PG–13 rating. There are gruesome scenes in both seasons. There is some sexual content, as well as swearing throughout. You can read a detailed breakdown of the mature content of the show [here](#). (It’s also worth noting that there is an obvious increase in the amount of swearing in Season 2 compared to Season 1. When the show was unknown, the creators were still trying to win people over. It could be that now the show has a dedicated following, the creators feel they can get away with more adult content.) (*continued*)

Beyond that, Christians have had varied reactions to *Stranger Things*. Some have criticized the show for its portrayal of swearing, sex, and violence. Some have perceived there to be an overarching Gospel metaphor, with Eleven (El) as an obvious Christ-figure. (Christian satire site *The Babylon Bee* had [an amusing response](#) to this point of view.) Yet other Christian commentators have taken a more holistic approach, attempting to evaluate the show's themes from a biblical point of view. We would argue that this is a more helpful strategy overall.

We believe that *Stranger Things* is worth watching *together as a family* if viewers are mature enough to handle its content. Only you can decide if your kids have this maturity. If they do, the show can be a great opportunity for you to explore your children's beliefs, as well as evaluate your own habits as a family.

What follows is an analysis of some of the most prominent ideas in *Stranger Things*, as well as suggestions for how to talk to your kids about them.

## — How does the show talk about friendship?

As we've already noted, one of the major themes of *ST* is the power of friendship. The show focuses on best friends Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will, who love learning about science and are in the AV (audio-visual) Club at their school. They play *Dungeons & Dragons*, ride bikes, and save their town together.

Because they are the quintessential nerds, they don't fit in with the cool kids at their school. They don't know how to talk to girls, and in Season 1, they experience quite a bit of bullying. But their shared interests give them a strong bond with each other, and they have clearly defined roles within their group.

This bond in turn makes it difficult for them to accept others, such as Eleven and Max. It's easy to root for the outsiders who don't fit into a larger group (i.e., the school), but we should recognize that all of us have the power to include or exclude other people.

Many of the show's characters are, in fact, outcasts. Eleven is a social outcast, abused and manipulated by the government, in particular, "Papa." Will's older sister Nancy has managed to break into the cool crowd, but her best friend Barb doesn't (and isn't going to) fit in.

For a while, Will's mom, Joyce, is the only one who knows that her son has disappeared into an alternate dimension. She spends the earlier episodes of the show in an isolation caused by no one believing her. Will's older brother Jonathan is a loner whom others see as a creepy (with some initial justification).

Police Chief Jim Hopper is isolated by his grief at losing his family, as well as by his taciturn disposition. In Season 2, new girl Max is an outcast both because she is new to town and because she puts on a tough front to deal with family troubles. Certain members of the AV Club reject both Eleven and Max at different times, although the girls eventually gain acceptance.

While El and Mike's relationship is obviously moving towards romance, their friendship is one of the beautiful aspects of *ST*. Eleven has been through a lot of trauma and is extremely different from her peers. Many would reject her, but Mike immediately accepts her for who she is. They remain constant to each other, despite having a misunderstanding in Season 1.

The human desire to find someone who loves us, in spite of our weirdness or our brokenness, runs deep. *ST* evokes this desire poignantly.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Is it ok to have a group of friends that includes some people, but not others?
- What are different reasons, both good and bad, why people form exclusive groups?
- Describe what characterizes some of the friend groups of the show.
- In Season 1, how does Mike unintentionally make Lucas feel excluded?
- What are ways you might accidentally exclude someone else? How can you be intentional to make people you don't know feel welcome?
- It's easy to feel sympathetic for characters like Joyce, Eleven, or Hopper when we know the reasons for their behavior. But what about when we don't know the backstories of the people we meet? How can we be kind to people no matter how strange or off-putting they seem to us?

## **— What's the deal with "friends don't lie"?**

"Friends don't lie" is phrase that's repeated throughout *ST*. Lying is clearly depicted as something that brings division, not only among friends but also within families. In Season 1, when the boys and Eleven go off to find the gate the Demogorgon came through, El doesn't tell them she is using her powers to prevent them from finding it.

She is trying to protect them, but her decision leads to broken trust between her and Mike. It also brings to a head tensions between Mike and Lucas (who has been mistrustful of El since he met her). The division in the group and the isolation that results puts its members in danger. It's only when the characters reconcile and reunite that they can conquer the evils they face.

This portrayal of lying is refreshing when so many movies portray deception as a necessary evil. What's even better is that the characters are able to reconcile with each other and experience healing in their friendships. So the show is not only honest that lying is destructive but also shows us that redemption is possible.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Why do some people justify lying? Do you think there is ever a place for telling lies?
- How have you seen lying or concealing the truth divide people?
- How often do you think movies or TV series show people dealing with their problems on their own versus needing help from others?
- Do you think people can solve problems on their own? How do you see them doing so in your everyday experience?
- What are ways you see the need for community in your life and in the lives of those around you?

## **— How does it deal with sibling relationships?**

There are many brotherly relationships in both seasons, many of which are positive. One is the relationship between Will and his older brother Jonathan. In one flashback, we see Jonathan comforting Will by showing him music while their parents are fighting. Jonathan is dedicated to protecting Will in both seasons when Will has either disappeared or is struggling with the

shadow monster.

In Season 2, an unlikely friendship develops between Steve and Dustin. Steve is the stereotypical jock in Season 1, but repents of his jerkish behavior and heroically takes on the Demogorgon. In Season 2, he takes Dustin under his wing, teaching him how to have great hair and interact with girls. He supports and encourages Dustin when Dustin is nervous about going to the Snow Ball and asking girls to dance.

These relationships in *Stranger Things* are a real asset to the show. As [one blogger says](#):

*You don't see this kind of dedicated brotherhood much anymore. Culture has largely pushed the narrative that humans should be staunch individualists, happy and content as autonomous beings. Meanwhile, the Church has regrettably elevated marriage...building expectations the marital union was never meant to shoulder. The result is that the virtues of friendship have largely been forgotten by both parties.*

On the flip side, Season 2's Billy Hargrove shows what it looks like when the influence of the older brother is used to terrorize and intimidate. Billy is Max's older step-brother. He uses his status and size to dominate anyone around him who is weaker than he is. At one point, he lets his temper get so out of control that he is well on his way to killing Steve. We do find out, however, that his abusive father has shaped his behavior.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Do you think our culture elevates romance over friendship? If so, what are some examples?
- Why do you think older siblings and friends can have so much of an impact on those younger than they are?
- How have you seen older siblings influence those around them for good or bad?
- If you are an older sibling, how can you use your influence in positive ways? How can you influence the younger people you know who aren't related to you?
- How can it be helpful for us to understand that there are reasons for someone's cruel or offensive behavior?

## **— How does it portray family?**

*Stranger Things* shows us the lives of primarily two families: the Wheelers and the Byers. The Wheeler family is the stereotype we've come to expect from Hollywood. The parents are checked out, and the kids are secretive and rebellious. Nancy consistently lies to her mother about her actions. Mike conceals the fact that he is hiding Eleven in the house.

The kids' mistrustful behavior is bad, but the oblivious, complacent parents aren't any better. Mr. Wheeler is wholly out of tune with what is going on with his wife and his children. In the first season, Mrs. Wheeler at least attempts to connect with Nancy and find out what is really going on with her.

But in the second season, Mrs. Wheeler seems to have given up on those efforts. She is wrapped up entirely in her own world, talking for hours on the phone with her friends and reading romance novels. She also seems to be turning to alcohol to cope with her loneliness.

The Byers family has a rougher situation. Joyce is a single mom, and they are poorer than the



Wheelers. She admits early in Season 1 that she has been distracted lately and hasn't kept up with where Jonathan is emotionally. And Jonathan does spend a fair amount of time apart from his mother during Season 1, trying to figure out what is going on in the town. However, the Byers' relationships are stronger than the Wheelers' and there is a greater degree of honesty among them.

Part of this is due to the fact that events of the show revolve around Will going missing or being taken possession of by monsters. Joyce more or less has to connect with her sons because she is compelled to find out what's happening to Will. Still, it's hard to imagine either of the Wheelers being so dedicated if Mike had been the one to disappear instead.

The trauma the Byers family goes through ends up drawing them closer together as a family. Even in Season 2, when Will is inclined to hide his problems, Joyce fights to understand what is happening to him. She communicates that she loves and wants to help him. Because of their history and because she persists, he does open up to her.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- How could Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler have been more involved and demonstrated better that they loved their children?
- What could Mike and Nancy have done instead of hiding their actions from their parents?
- What do the Byers do well that causes them to be stronger as a family than they would be otherwise?
- How have you seen trauma draw families together? Have you ever seen trauma drive families apart? Why do you think pain divides people sometimes and unifies them at other times?
- How could you as a family be more open and honest with each other?

## **— How does it depict father figures?**

As we noted earlier, Mr. Wheeler is the classic passive dad. Lonnie (Joyce's ex-husband) is largely absent, and when he's around, he's manipulative. But in Season 2, two characters step up as positive—although not faultless—father figures.

One of these is Jim Hopper, who shelters Eleven while teaching her how to function in society. Their relationship is affectionate and mostly positive. Once again, though, we see a relationship damaged by a lack of honesty.

Hopper and El have an explosive fight in the middle of Season 2 that is painful to watch because it's an accurate depiction of the breakdowns that can happen between people. Both say hateful and hurtful words to each other, although Hopper's failure is arguably greater than El's. After all, he is the one who has hidden information from her. And because he is the adult, he has a greater responsibility to act with maturity.

They do end up apologizing and reconciling with each other later on. As with the conflicts between the boys and El in Season 1, this relationship is a strong point of Season 2. It shows the reality of the brokenness between people and that it is possible to rebuild trust.

Another positive father figure is Bob, Joyce's boyfriend in Season 2. Granted, he does give Will some misguided advice that has horrible (although unintended) consequences. But Bob is a

stabilizing presence for Joyce, who is constantly frantic throughout the show. He clearly cares about her sons and wants to connect with them.

These father figures stand in stark contrast to the man El calls “Papa” whom we mostly see in Season 1. Papa is a government agent who uses El’s desire for paternal affection to manipulate and control her. Fortunately, she escapes him and grows to recognize that his version of fatherliness is twisted and evil.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What makes someone a good father? What do Bob and Hopper do well as father figures?
- Contrast the positive father figures in Season 2 with “Papa” in Season 1.
- How would you say our culture typically represents fathers?
- Can you think of other positive cultural depictions of fathers?
- What are you grateful for in your own father?

## **— How does it handle trauma?**

*Christianity Today* contributor [Kaitlyn Schiess notes that](#) “almost every plot line in the second season is about the importance of perseverance in relationships to survive the effects of trauma.”

The characters in *Stranger Things* went through the wringer in Season 1, and in Season 2 they are trying to cope with what has happened to them. They do so in different ways. Mike is taciturn and withdrawn because he’s lost Eleven. Will has a serious case of PTSD and keeps flashing into the Upside Down without warning.

Hopper, who still deals with the pain of having lost his daughter, is trying to figure out how to raise Eleven. The doctors at the beginning of Season 2 offer easy, irrelevant answers to Will problems. Bob gives Will advice that he means to be helpful, but which ends up being harmful. Nancy wants to openly deal with what’s happened, while Steve wants to move on with life.

Schiess believes that Christians can learn a lesson from the show about the importance of truly helping people face their pain. Too often, we offer simplistic solutions, condemn others, or try to pretend that everything is ok. Instead, we need to face the reality of people’s suffering and point them to the true hope that Christ offers.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What are good and bad ways that Christians react to pain, either in their own lives or when they encounter it in the lives of others?
- How do you deal with conflict? How do we as a family deal with conflict?
- How can our family grow in dealing with conflict better?

## **— What about the supernatural?**

Another positive aspect of *ST* is that it supports the idea there is a hidden, meaningful reality beyond what most of us can see.

Writer [Alissa Wilkinson points out](#) that the show appeals to the human desire for adventure



and an underlying purpose to life: “What we’re after is joy—the serendipity of discovery, the thrill of mystery, the feeling of excitement lurking around the corner.”

*Stranger Things* captures the notion that life might seem tedious and mundane. But it is actually full of unseen, powerful entities that are mysterious and dangerous. This idea is right in line with the Christian belief that there is a spiritual reality we can’t see, but which still impacts and shapes human events.

However, the hidden reality portrayed in *ST* is violent and terrifying. This is not a supernatural world that is friendly or welcoming to humans. While it is helpful to remind ourselves that there is a spiritual realm, it can be dangerous to dwell on the idea that the spiritual world is dominated by darkness.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- If you always watch shows that have a dark portrayal of life, do you think that will affect you? Why or why not?
- As Christians we believe in a supernatural world that includes God and the devil, angels and demons. Discuss how the world of *ST* might lead us to believe that our reality is darker than it actually is.
- If you think the show faithfully depicts the harshness of human experience, explain why you think that.

## **Ok, what about romance?**

There is something of a love triangle between Dustin, Lucas, and Max in Season 2. But the major love triangle of the show is the one between Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan. When we first meet Steve, he is selfish and his friends are jerks. But he does have a genuine interest in Nancy and is not merely trying to use her. In Season 1, Nancy seems to be motivated to be with Steve because she likes having the attention of someone so popular. She also doesn’t have a firm grasp on who she is.

Steve significantly changes over the course of the series, becoming much more selfless. He still displays some immaturity in Season 2 (he leaves Nancy drunk at a party after she says something deeply hurtful). But his character has a major turnaround as the show develops.

Jonathan Byers spends most of the series caring for Nancy from a distance. He displays some sketchy behavior early on (he takes some photos of Steve and Nancy just before they sleep together). But he apologizes for it and is consistently there for Nancy when she needs protection. (For example, he’s the one who brings her safely home from the party where Steve leaves her.)

The attraction between Nancy and Jonathan grows in both seasons when they are united in their efforts to solve the mystery of what is happening in their town. Jonathan is willing to help Nancy figure out what happened to Barb, as well as how to reveal that truth to the world. They work together to battle the Demogorgon. They’re obviously attracted to each other, but it is their shared goals that continue to draw them together.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What are the different reasons why Steve and Jonathan are each drawn to Nancy? Why is

she drawn to either of them at different points?

- What do you think makes two people a good match? Do you think Nancy was right to choose Jonathan at the end of S2, or should she have stayed with Steve?
- Is it important for two people to have a common purpose in life in order for their relationship to work?
- Do you think most people are looking to date someone who shares the same life goals? Why or why not?

## — Last but not least, what does it say about sex?

Unfortunately, one of the areas where the show stumbles is in its depiction of sexual relationships. At first, the creators seem to be offering us a different picture of sex than we usually get in our culture.

Episode 3 of Season 1 opens by cutting back and forth between Steve and Nancy making out upstairs while Barb is brutally snatched by the Demogorgon. While jarring and uncomfortable to watch, the juxtaposition of those two events underscores Nancy's selfishness and the consequences it has for her friend.

Instead of feeling empowered by her decision to sleep with Steve, Nancy feels self-conscious when she goes to school the next day. She feels as though everyone at school knows what she's done and is judging her for it. Overall in Season 1, Nancy's decision to sleep with Steve is not portrayed as a positive one.

But as far as we know, as Nancy and Steve continue in their relationship, they continue having sex. And what's worse, when Nancy and Steve drift apart in Season 2 (without officially breaking up), she and Jonathan have sex.

At that point, the show has been developing sexual tension between Nancy and Jonathan for some time. Far from being portrayed as a negative, their "moment of weakness" is something that seems right and that the audience is led to want to happen.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Contrast how the show portrays Nancy's sexual encounters in the first season versus the second. What are her motives each time? What were Steve's and Jonathan's motives for sleeping with her? Do you think that each of the characters is generally being selfish or selfless?
- How does the show make it "feel right" that Nancy and Jonathan sleep together?
- Even if Nancy and Jonathan are a better match because they see the world similarly, do you think Nancy treated Steve fairly?
- How can watching shows that normalize sex outside of marriage shape our perspectives on what is right and wrong in that area?

## — Wait, what about binge watching?

This is a great question to be asking. We think disciplining your teens to have a better perspective of binge watching is of utmost importance in today's day and age. Why? Because unfortunately, it's somehow become normal to talk about "bingeing" as a positive activity,

at least when it comes to consuming entertainment. There's nothing wrong with enjoying a creative show and perhaps nothing wrong with watching a lot of it at one time—at least on occasion. But as Patheos's [Jonathan Sturment observes](#), "There is a way to watch Netflix that just reinforces consumerism as the master story of life."

Yet in order to help teens think more deeply about their watching habits, it doesn't work to just tell them they watch too much (aka nagging) or to simply start enforcing new boundaries on how much and how often they watch without any explanation. Rather, we must start with conversations and (preferably) questions.

Part of the reason why younger generations are willing to binge watch is because it's become normal. *Everyone* does it, so is it really that bad? At some point, it may be worth researching with your teen the effects all this screen time has on us, but let's take a big-picture approach first.

Start by asking your teens what they like about binge watching. Ask if they've ever felt worse after realizing how much time they just spent on a show. Ask how it would make them feel if you asked them to take a "Netflix fast." Maybe ask them if they've ever watched a show then later realized they don't remember much about it OR if a show has ever impacted them so much that they wanted to take time to reflect on it before starting another. Ask if a show has ever been so inspiring that it made them want to go out and do something positive in the world.

Asking these types of questions will not only get them thinking more deeply, it will also spur conversations about constantly consuming vs. taking time to reflect and ponder. It will also lead into conversations about the balance between consuming and creating, allowing you to help them become more like Christ by being creators and fostering creativity, as opposed to solely being mindless, insatiable consumers.

As you disciple your teens into a better theology of the role of entertainment in our lives, keep in mind what C.S. Lewis said in *The Weight of Glory*:

*We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition [and entertainment] when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. **We are far too easily pleased.*** (emphasis added)

More than drilling stats into their heads about how binge watching is negatively impacting them, **helping teens see how they've settled for less than God's best will motivate them to make a change.**

## — Final thoughts

The *Stranger Things* perspective on life includes hope, but it is still dark. As the parent, you know best how mature your children are and will need to judge whether or not your children can handle the show's material. If they can and are interested in the series, we think the show is worth watching...together. Watching it with them is chance for you to help your kids

analyze what they are consuming and become mature Christians who know how to think *well*.

More than that, it is a chance for you to connect with your children, evaluate where you are as a family, and use something they know and love to help them pursue and discern truth.



Eighth episode of Stranger Things in a row. I feel you, Nancy.

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