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Nurturing Attachments

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Chapter 7: Promoting Attachment in Tweens and Teens

Teen years worry parents. Some of these worries are based on memories of our own teen years. We recall such a mixture of feelings! The emerging independence of our teens means that they have the freedom to separate from us and our protection. Parents wonder if their teens will have good (or any) judgment. Will they be safe? Will they have good values? Will they stay connected to us? Will they do well enough in school to have a future? All of these are normal concerns for parents. Sometimes parents' worries can come across in such a way that teens' attachments are stressed at this age. Other parents steer a course that ends these years with parents and teens feeling close--with teens getting valuable help into adult years.

Knowing ourselves and developing our unique identities is a process of seeing ourselves as separate from our parents. This work occupies teen years. It starts with a more realistic view of parents at about the age of 11 years old. Children realize that parents are not such superheroes, but have strengths and weaknesses. The process of identity formation continues throughout teen years as young people decide how they are the same and different from their parents. They develop an identity outside of their families. A challenge of this stage is keeping teens connected to their families as they spend time increasing amount of time outside of their family by the end of teen years.

In this chapter, we will discuss how to maintain positive attachments as youth are pushing away to develop their own identities. We will include concepts and practical "how-to" suggestions for teens and their parents. All of us want to keep attachments strong as our teens move up and out.

Secure attachments in teens.

As mentioned in the first chapters, attachments come in patterns, or styles, throughout the lifespan. Of course, the type of attachment that we all want is one that is secure--marked by trust, collaboration, encouragement for exploration, giving us the sense that we are understood and "seen" in our closest relationships. Over the course of teen years our teens begin to develop a more mature understanding about attachment. Later-placed adoptees seem to mature a little later in their understanding of attachment, which makes them more vulnerable during this time frame.

What do parents look like when they are parenting in secure attachment relationships? Qualities are:

- Parents use respectful speech and attitudes.
- Parents are sensitive and readily available for time and conversation.
- Parents have reasonable limits, and reasonably enforce those limits.
- Family routines are reliable.

All of these help teens either maintain or move towards secure attachments with parents. Parents who “hold their teens in their minds” giving teens the sense that they are seen, give their teens the intangible gift that the teens are valued and that they are not alone. Teens are prone to feelings of loneliness and isolation as they separate their identities from their parents. Parents can help the process by making comments like, “You are a unique person, different than I am. I am so enjoying watching you develop!” Teens, being teens, might respond with an “Ahhh” moment, or may say, “That’s nice. Did you see my sweatshirt?”

Teens and Their Brains

Children do not have much abstract thought. This changes during tween and teen years. As sexual hormones hit the body, they begin shaping the brain into one that can use abstract thought. It makes our teens think about life differently. They no longer accept simple, concrete explanations. The teen who accepted the necessity of your limits one year, may argue persuasively the next. They examine our explanations.

Rather than taking the teen debates personally, parents can acknowledge that teens are using their new reasoning power. The glitch in the system is that most teens do not develop long-term perspective until their early to mid-twenties. While there are some early bloomers who are thinking long-term at the age of 16 years old, most teens have not, and will not, develop these concepts for several more years. They need our mature brains to supplement theirs. So, we need to strike the balance of treating our teens not as children, with concrete thinking, or as adults, with full, long-term thinking, but with abilities in-between. They need us to protect their long-term opportunities, but also need to share in responsibility for decision-making along the way. We give our teens choices, but limit them. If your teen has executive dysfunction, which was described earlier, you will be especially hard-working as a parent. Executive functioning develops through the mid-twenties. Parents will keep young adults in their sphere of influence if they are still maturing in their executive skills.

Maisie, who was a teen with executive functioning issues, *knew* that school was not for her. Using all available leverage, Maisie’s single mother persuaded her to finish high school and to attend a few University classes. Maisie worked part-time as an artist, and seemed oblivious to her career. At 21 years old her outlook changed. She decided that she *would* like to finish a degree. Motivated, she went on to teach and then design academic curriculae. Her mother said, “I still don’t know what happened. It was like she woke up.”

This is a successful, but typical scenario, for the later-developing teen.

Emotional Skills

This is a great age for our teens to refine or learn emotional skills

- seeing things in perspective,
- understanding another’s feelings,
- learning to solve problems instead of avoiding them,
- learning how to apologize or ask for an apology,
- use calming techniques,

- accepting responsibility,
- connecting care of their bodies to their emotional well-being,
- connecting their thoughts to their feelings, and then changing their thoughts to helpful ones to improve their feelings.

Parents are in a great position to teach these skills by describing their own emotions and thoughts. We do not ask our teens to take care of us, but do explain things that we would not discuss earlier in development. Most teens love a good adult drama, practicing their increasing insight. Family stories are great for teaching the lessons of emotional intelligence.

A 16-year old teen girl said, “I liked hearing about the way Aunt Kitty used *denial*. She just pretended her husband was great, but he was fooling around. I felt sorry for her, but it was soooo interesting! When my friend found out that her boyfriend was fooling around, I noticed that she was using denial like Aunt Kitty. They were both afraid to be alone. I remind myself not to use denial. I want to face problems instead. I broke up with my boyfriend who wasn’t good for me.”

This is an example of emotional intelligence (wisdom) that can be passed between parents and teens. If parents maintain a trusted, consultant role with their teens, they will be a source of emotional and real-life information. (And, it is a lot safer to learn from the mistakes of others than through our own mistakes, as in the example above.)

Hopeful, Confident Parents and Teen Tasks

Parents who are hopeful, caring, and confident about their teens will be attractive to their teens. All of us want to be successful in life. We want to move towards people who seem to promise that success. Parents can increase positive connection when they point out their teen’s areas of mastery, competence, and increasing areas of maturity.

Wise parents watch the degree to which they threaten teens with a view of the world as a dangerous place. Teens with pessimistic, negative parents may decide that they need a better guide! Instead, parents consistently teach teens how to stay safe through good decisions and the support of trusted others. Or, when there is danger, how teens should get help or get out of trouble.

Elise, who was 17 years old, was asked to participate in an outreach performance that would play for a downtown prison. She was the only female. “Mom,” she said. “The guys in the band say it will be safe. I don’t think that they really know for sure what is safe.” Her mother, who had been to the jail, described the location. Street parking was limited. The visitor’s parking was in a rutted lot with no lighting in the rear half. Bail bond businesses were on three corners.

“If you walk more slowly, will the guys in the band know that they should slow down for you?” Her mother said.

“No.” Elise replied.

"Have they thought how safety issues would be different for you, as a 105 pound person?"

"No." Elise replied." And, even if I explained, they wouldn't really get it."

"How do you want to handle this? Her mother asked.

Elise said. "I'll call my friends. While I'm on the phone, I'll ask you if it's alright."

Elise called the band's leader. She said to her mom, "May I go?" Elise held the phone away while her mother answered the question with a firm "no." Mom warmed to the task, spouting wisdom on safety--but realized that she was talking around to an empty room.

Elise had solved the problem and moved on to the next thing.

Much of teen life, especially in the later years, seems to be like the example above. Parents are there when needed, but are dismissed when teens can handle things themselves. Parents with secure attachments to their teens are both safety nets and coaches for the high wire act of teen years. Sometimes they are on the wire with their teens.

Tweens, Teens, and Parent Moods

While everyone wants to be a hopeful, confident parent, the kick-off into teen years can be deflating. At about 11 years old children start to develop abstract ability. Using that ability, they realize that parents are somewhat flawed and quite human. This tends to be a bit depressing for those of us who were the ideal a scant six months before. Rather than getting defensive, parents can make comments like,

"Your brain is changing right now. You are beginning to be able to think with a more adult-like brain. You will notice my flaws now. But, I also want you to know that I am quite able to take good care of you. If you have questions about why I do things, please come to talk to me about it. I'd enjoy that discussion. I like how you think. I like to hear your thoughts." Those are words that bring preteens back into close relationship with us.

Teens have both their changing bodies and changing brains to deal with. Nothing feels quite steady to them. In fact, they are not steady people. By 13 years old they are doing the necessary task of deciding how they are like and unlike their parents. (They seem to voice the "unlike" too much.) If teens have both birth parents and adoptive parents, they will have to do this identity work for two sets of parents, obtaining what information they can get about their birth parents to do the work.

Parents have a choice at this point. They can lend hope to their teens, pointing out these changes are normal. They show confidence that their teen will succeed in continuing to be a kind, good, and successful person. Or, parents can take very personally the moodiness of this stage, pushing their teen away when they are pushed. Parents who can enforce reasonable limits, but who sidestep control battles, do best at this stage.

Magic words from parents at the 13-year old stage are, "I know that you are your own, unique person. Of course you would have different feelings and ideas than mine. I am so interested in who you are becoming. I am interested in your tastes in clothes and friends." These types of

phrases let your teens know that it is fine with you that they are developing their own identities as separate. Yet, it strongly joins the two of you. Rather than feeling invisible, and misunderstood, they feel close and “seen.”

Teens, Challenges, and Stress

Parents will need to monitor the stress level of their teens. Teens need challenges in order to mature, but the stresses have to be within their tolerance. Parents, who are a base of security, can help their teen with resources if teens need more support or if they are struggling. These include lessons in an area of talent, tutoring, mentoring, involvement in community groups, ideas for handling stress that does not include completely avoiding it. As we move further into teen years, parents solve fewer of the problems, but remain as a coach and final authority for their teens. They will “check-in” asking what help their teen needs. For example,

Two teens could not figure out their school graduation requirements since both changed schools. The teen with a secure attachment to her parents said that she had the materials, but could not work out the requirements, since the courses had different names. She had tried to problem-solve with the school counselor, but failed. She and her father examined the materials together. Still confused, they went together to the school principal, looking at the requirements. It turned out that there was a problem that required a waiver for physical education. Physical education was offered at the same time as another required class. And, one of the classes had a name change since she began her program. The adults were able to both start and complete the waiver process at the meeting. The teen graduated on time.

A second teen, without a secure attachment, puzzled over the forms. She cried. She yelled, saying that no one would help her. Finally, her father looked at the paperwork. Already irritated by her emotional outbursts, he criticized her for waiting so long. He went to the school, embarrassed her in front of the principal for apologizing for waiting so long, and then “solved” the problem by agreeing that she should attend summer school, taking Physical Education, and not graduating on time. “It’s your own fault for putting this off,” he said. “I hope that you learn your lesson from this.”

Obviously, teens are much more forthcoming if parents are not shaming. It is to be expected that teens will have problems during teen years. These problems, and their solutions, become templates for them in learning how to solve life problems. We actually want our teens to have some problems so that they learn some problem-solving. During teen years parents do best to treat teen problems as a normal part of life. Shaming is minimized, although teens are responsible for some of the cost of the solution.

Learning about Close Relationships

In teen years learn more about close relationships, as teens observe the rhythms of relationships. They learn how people can have a hard time, get sad, become preoccupied, but come out of it within a couple of weeks. It helps them understand the processes of stress and how people can be temporarily, but not permanently, unavailable to each other. These templates are necessary for

the ongoing complexities of relationships. It helps teens to be more emotionally steady in their own close relationships when they learn that parents have not emotionally abandoned them just because they had a few bad weeks at work. Emotional preoccupation can be temporary.

They can also learn to ask for what they want in relationships with friends and family. A lot of these concepts are exercised by talking. While parents do not want to treat their teens as emotional peers, it does not hurt for them to know some of the workings of an adult relationship. For example, when working on a book my husband told my teens that jobs would shift because I was completing the book. After that, the family would ask for me to be fully “present” again—especially in cooking for the family

Teens learn a lot about reciprocal relationships through these years. All of us want our teens to have close friendships. While that is optimal, many teens are going through changes that will mean changes in their friendships. They switch friend groups as they try out new interests or develop. Almost all teens deal with friends who are not loyal to them, or, as they hurt others when they are not loyal. Parents are in a good place to listen and to provide support as teens try to balance their own needs with the needs of their friends. Teens need to recognize when a friendship is one-sided, or when they no longer feel much in common. If they trust us as parents, they will often come to us with questions about negotiating these changes in a way that is minimally harmful to themselves and their friends.

Of course, this usually includes romantic relationships. Teens have just as strong of feelings as adults do in their romantic relationships. They feel intensely the joy or loss of a relationship—but their ability to commit or sustain a relationship is lacking. It puts teens at special risk when in romantic relationships. Many parents wisely suggest that their teens put most of their energies into a steady, supportive group of friends. They also structure time spent with romantic relationships so that teens are still spending significant time working on their own achievements.

A teen basketball player said to his girlfriend, “Will you come to watch my games?” She said. “I don’t know. I have to make sure my homework is done first. Usually it takes me a lot of time in the evening. I have to keep my average up to get into a good school.” The boyfriend said to this buddy. “Basketball is wrecking my average! I like it, but I decided to play it this year so I’d get a girlfriend. I might drop it since I have a girlfriend now.”

This example is one of normal self-interest. It also reveals the limited decision-making that is normal for this age. Teens should be put their own achievements first. There are few times in life that people have this opportunity. Teen years should be primarily devoted towards the teen’s individual needs, not the teen couple needs. Since teens do not have much of a sense of time yet, it may seem to them that the relationship is long-term. Parents can help with conversation and with clever maneuvers. For example, my husband once rented an exciting road race game when a too-serious teen boyfriend came over. The boy became completely engrossed in the game over the course of a few days. He was revealed to be much less mature than my daughter thought, giving her a different perspective.

All teens will need clear boundaries on curfews, where they are, how they may be reached, and the nature of their activities. Also clear should be the enforcement of these boundaries. Usually these restrictions are loss of privileges and more home time or supervised time.

Securely attached teens look to parents for information and judgment when they feel that they need it. They tend to enjoy having the chance to handle some situations by themselves. As parents, we hope to see their relationships to friends become ones of trust, with some depth. It does not necessarily mean that they talk about everything, but there is evidence that they have strong connections with friends, as well as with us.

Less Healthy Patterns of Attachment

While we have been discussing secure attachments, there are other patterns of attachment that are distortions of the optimal, secure style, or pattern. This section is short, since the book's topic centers on creating secure attachments. However, seeing the patterns will help parents to curb a tendency to move into an unhealthy pattern.

In *disorganized attachments* there is marked hostility in the home--either between parents or with the teen and one or both parents. Criticism and shaming are prevalent in this pattern. Often there will be bizarre bits of conversation or behavior that just do not seem to make sense. There is a sense of a something wacky "spliced" into the daily life. Sometimes teens are expected to take of the emotional or physical needs of their parents, especially in alcoholic families. Teens with these attachment patterns tend to have high rates of mental health problems.

In *preoccupied (insecure) attachments* teens are preoccupied with past losses and traumas. Unresolved losses in earlier life are strongly correlated with teen depression—and into the rest of adult life. In teens we see this trend clearly, often for the first time.

A teen boy of 16 said, 'I always feel that I am less than other people. I feel that I lost something important that would give me confidence. I was not good enough for my mom to live. Don't tell me that it's not true. I know it's not logical. Why do I want to join her so much? It's like, "What's the point?" It would be so much easier just to end it now. I would like to do it cleanly. I don't really want to hide my intent.'

This is an example of a loss that led to clinical depression. The wounding of early losses and traumas often shapes the mood and the relationships that teens have at this stage. Professional counseling is such a helpful idea if this describes you or your teen. The strongly positive messages that people gave the teen, in the example above, simply did not touch this boy. He said, "I know that they say that I have all these great qualities, but it doesn't reach inside of me."

In *avoidant (insecure) attachment* patterns, the teen has decided that the parents are not available for emotional support. These teens shut down opportunities for emotional collaboration. There is a lack of trust in their relationships. They have determined that they need to be self-reliant, since others will probably let them down. These teens tend to look at their parents as people who are insensitive or unhelpful.

A teen boy told me, “My parents told me that I had to be patient while they settled in my new foster brothers. I waited a year. Then, those boys went home. My parents got my sisters. I waited another year. They were always saying, ‘Can you just be patient for a little while longer? Your sisters need us.’”

I used to think they were the best. I wanted to spend time with them. Now they are like, “Want to do something together?”

I don’t want to. They will just let me down again. I got used to doing without them. I don’t want to try again.”

This teen went from being securely attached to insecurely/avoidantly attached. He felt isolated and misunderstood in his home. His participation was marginal in celebrations or family activities. He planned a future with minimal parental contact. He did not use his parent’s collaboration or support, except in emergencies. His parents perceived him as resentful when they pushed for a better relationship. But, when the teen tried to talk about his hurt, the parents became defensive. The course to a better relationship would have been for the parents to hear and respond to his hurts with tenderness. After that, they could pull him closer, and eventually ask him to improve his overall behavior towards them.

Teens form different attachment patterns with different parents, but one pattern begins to mark their own approach to close relationships over time. That is the pattern that they use in forming their own close relationships into the future. We want our teens to use a secure pattern.

Encouraging Secure Attachments

When we are encouraging secure attachments, we want to form an atmosphere in which greater independence on the part of our teen is met with support and enthusiasm. Their emotional pain is met with sensitivity. Their new ideas and experiences evoke a sense of discovery on our part. We allow ourselves to be changed and “updated” by the experiences of our teens. As parents, we want to take the lead in repairing our relationship breeches when things heat up or meltdown. By “repair” I mean that we listen to each other’s perspectives, take responsibility for the way in which we hurt each other, even if unintentionally, and then describe how valuable our teen is to us. All of the above require us to look and act like we have emotional and physical energy. We cannot be preoccupied and overcommitted if we are to do our job as parents!

A number of researchers and theorists have looked at the qualities of parents who are forming secure attachments, or maintaining secure attachments, during the teen years.

- The parents are authoritative, but not authoritarian.
- They are warm.
- They are curious about their teen’s views of the world, looking for opportunities for discussion.
- They negotiate when there is an opportunity for a joint project or a family decision—including a mix of ideas from everyone.
- They value the teen’s friends.
- They set and enforce limits.

- They do not use violence or criticism.
- When the relationship is under stress, they respect their teen's emotions and respond to them.
- When teens withdraw, the parents do not withdraw. They remain available.
- They validate the teen's feelings of powerless, lack of value, or confusion when these arise. They work to help the teen re-connect and feel valued again. They ask for better behavior after they re-connect, but not as a condition of re-connection.¹
- The parents convey hope in their teen².

These are some ways that you can improve attachment between you and your teen.

- Increase the positive looping that teens have with you. That is, a back-and-forth that is only positive.
- Make zones of time that are completely positive. For example, mealtime does not include a discussion of chores or homework. Or, the drive to guitar lessons does not include a discussion of the smell of pot on clothes. It will be addressed later.
- Touch your teen positively and often, if your teen permits this.
- Use food to entice your teen (and their friends) associating you with nurture.
- Find new ways of connecting if you have fewer shared interests. Start a new activity with your teen. These include: volunteering at an animal shelter, paintballing, shopping, skiing, or getting or enjoying a family pet (mammal).
- Look for opportunities to have friends around, showing that you value their friends.
- Enjoy your teen's appearance. (Your decade and judgment in clothing really has passed.) On the other hand, do make certain that the wear "enough."
- Do not snipe at your teen or make negative, global comments. Keep a positive to negative comments ratio of 7:1.
- Have a life of your own. Do not make your teen's life your primary source of support or frustration. Get your emotional needs met elsewhere.
- Keep your marriage healthy, if you are married. Take time for romance. It gives your teen confidence in your family.
- Set limits, enforcing them with restrictions. Do not yell or carry-on in order to control behavior. Enforce limits by loss of privileges, or ask your teen to make amends.
- Apologize when you fail. Let your teen have the chance to forgive you or let you make amends.

Helping our Teens, Understanding our Teens

The relationship lessons that we teach our tweens and teens during these years are profound. In our secure attachment relationships:

- We teach our tweens and teens to get on the same emotional wavelength of others, attuning to them.
- We teach them the skill set of connecting meaningfully with others.
- We guide learning how to understand our own emotions and interests, balancing these with an understanding of the emotions and interests of others.

- We show our teens how to handle stresses, using others to help us.
- We teach how to tolerate when people with problems become emotionally disconnected for short times, but come back to us.

Teens are learning about these realities as they develop a world view about attachment that is more complex. Our discussions in the home help them to put together a sturdy working model of understanding relationships.

When our teens have difficulties, many of us want to hold our teens too closely, causing our teens to be dependent. Alternately, as parents we might get hurt and act defensively when our teens have behavior problems. Teens need limits and support as they venture out—as well as parental approval and support as they encounter challenges. A lot of what our teens go through is *not about us*. It is our responsibility to make certain that they have the necessary support to weather challenges.

We want teens to have some problems. That way they will have real life experiences in learning how to cope with problems before they leave our care. Most teens are not particularly skillful in dealing with problems at first. There is a learning curve. Wise parents allow teens to make decisions, and to have and solve problems, getting better at decision-making or problem-solving in the process.

A year before college, we removed the curfew on two of our teens. We wanted them to work on limiting themselves. If they were not able to do so, we stepped in, imposing the curfew again. However, in a few months we tried again. This way, they had real-life experience while they were still home with us.

We parents feel the urge to use their greater experience to prevent issues. It is better parenting to allow teens to fall into a few “holes” so that they learn the process of extricating themselves from a difficulty. We can ask them if they need a few ideas, or, we can actually intervene temporarily if the problem is too serious and outside of their ability levels.

A teen’s mood disorder, illegal activities, school failure, or a friend’s threatened suicide would be in the “must intervene” categories. Parents are intervening to protect their teen’s well-being or future. The intervention should not be a rescue, so that the teen simply falls into the same hole again and again. If parents find themselves rescuing repeatedly, they need to obtain professional guidance. This is not a disgrace. It is a reality of our complex society. I recommend that parents obtain objective, profession counseling, if teens have learning, health, grief, trauma, or mood issues. Family counseling for parents is a good idea so that the parents can get on the same page.

Allowing Lessons from Negative Experiences

Many teens with executive dysfunction or ADD learn best from experiences. Our words may pass them by. This is hard on parents. Naturally, we want to save our teens from painful consequences. It is not a moral problem that they have ADD. But you have to begin the process of letting them learn lessons from behavioral consequences. Examples are: getting a poor grade

by putting off a homework assignment, missing the team bus and a game because their sports equipment is missing, or losing a friend because of impulsive comments.

You may want to allow some of these losses, even if you could swoop in to “save the day” so that your teen feels the negative effects of their actions. The proper attitude is a compassionate, kind reflection that the teen will eventually be able to foresee negative consequences. (Inhibit the desire to trumpet, “I told you that things like this would happen if you would not listen!”) Your teen needs support and encouragement in order to try again and try differently. This would be the time to lend a little hope and encouragement.

Of course, you do not seek out disappointments, blaming the teen for their brain-based problem. If there is a natural solution, parents would not want to “set-up” their teen for a disappointment.

A parent of a teen with ADD found a permission slip for the all-day event that concluded Junior High. The parent mentioned that she found it in the laundry room, and that it needed signed and turned in that day. “Thanks, Mom. It would be so awful to miss that!” Her teen said. “I am trying to think how I could remind myself so that I don’t forget important things.” That led to a discussion on using a cell phone reminder.

The balance is to keep enough support that your teen feels optimistic about life. The teen shows successive improvements in handling life challenges.

Some teens begin to sink during these years. Because issues like depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and anxiety may gain traction at this stage of development, parents should be more concerned with diagnosis than teaching lessons. If your tween or teen is developing a mental illness at this stage, your efforts are put into handling that mental illness. Parents should not embark on teaching a series of lessons before they understand their teen’s state of mind.

Tough love, applied to a depressed teen, can be catastrophic. I counseled a 13-year old whose teacher was planning to restrict his attendance at the school holiday party due to missing assignments. In fact, the boy was planning suicide for that weekend. Fortunately, the parents and I were able to help this boy, who is doing well today. However, the timing of the teacher’s consequence would have been awful. As it was, a quick note to the teacher allowed for some flexibility. The boy eventually recovered from depression and did much better at school.

Connection and Encouragement

Our teens need us when they need us. They seem to be self-sustaining—until they are not. They do not schedule their neediness. At our house, some of our critical, later teen conversations were like this: There was a knock at our bedroom door—usually just after my husband and I had settled in bed. We turned on the light, calling, “Come in.” Our teen would apologize and suggest leaving. (They always seemed surprised that we were in bed). But we would act like it was perfect timing. “We weren’t asleep yet. It’s fine.” Then, our teen would talk to us about something quite significant. (I seem to remember a slight humming in the air, as if there were an electric charge present.) I would know that how we listened would be *very important...*

Parents of teens need continued regular connection with their parents. They need lots of positive comments about their emerging identities. They can benefit from your continued help coaching “self skills” (calming, planning, perspective-taking, insight, trying again). As parents, we make ourselves available for being consultants on some of the emotional challenges that our teens face.

At our house I found that cooking on Saturday morning was an ideal time to make myself available. I would make soup and bake. Our teens would wake up slowly, arriving in the kitchen to talk. They ate and we talked together while I cooked. It was an easy-going pajama time that continued during school breaks after they left home. Those were great opportunities to connect and to enjoy each other.

But while we want to make ourselves available, we also want to give our teens the chance to solve some relationship problems themselves. The statements sound like: “You may want to solve this problem yourself between your friend and your boyfriend. I’ll be interested in what you are thinking. If you need someone to bounce ideas off, then let me know.” You can also give hints, clues, or sample suggestions. (Your suggestion is typically *not* the one chosen.)

Effective parents:

- Enhance dreams,
- Encourage areas of mastery,
- Help teens to develop insight into their thoughts and feelings as well as insight into the feelings of others.
- Enjoy their teens,
- Notice when their teens need limits, providing limits,
- Give reasonable and effective consequences when teens ignore limits.

They do not:

- Lecture,
- Forecast doom with no solution,
- Refuse to consider compromises or new ideas,
- Act harshly,
- Diminish family members in order to gain dominance,
- Behave violently either psychologically or physically,
- Waffle on consequences or limits when teens have defied or ignored limits.

When Teens and Families Are in Difficult Times

If teens are moving into danger areas, then parents will need to provide tighter limits, increased structure, and an insistence that the teen pays for the cost or inconvenience of their negative behaviors. However, the parents continue to be caring, ready for connection, and considerate of their teen’s feelings. The message is loud and clear that their teen’s well-being, rather than the immediate problem, is most important to parents. Wise parents slow down, proceeding carefully and with a steady hand, when their teen has troubles. They are not rigid, mean, and distancing.

Some parents will see the clear outlines of depression or anxiety in these years. Or, they may notice that their teen has particularly low self-esteem. Especially when teens are in schools in which they are constantly being compared to their peers, teens with academic struggles are at-risk for low self-esteem. They may start to compute their grade point average as their worth. Parents should be aware that teen suicide is a leading cause of death for this age range. Any threats should be taken seriously. If things are simply not going well, medical check-ups and mental health assessments should be arranged.

One boy entered teen years feeling good about himself. His family began having difficulty feeling close to him as he began to suffer from obsessions and depression. His friendships moved to an alternative crowd and grades deteriorated. He was reluctant to tell his parents that he thought he was going crazy. With strong parenting support, he eventually revealed his problem--which was genetic and affected other family members. Over several years he found the strength and skills to deal with these issues. The parents said, "We are so grateful that we stayed supportive, even when we did not understand. If we had gotten tough, we don't think he would have made it. He is a joy to be around now. He is a caring young man." When you do not seem to understand changes in your teen, a prudent course is to continue to be steady and sensitive. It is not a time to move into a tough approach.

All parents want their teen to enjoy a positive identity. Things that help teens to develop this type of self-confidence are:

- Secure parental attachment,
- Positive influence of other adults,
- Acceptance in a peer group.
- Areas of Mastery
- Good ethnic identity

If your teen is having difficulties, looking at the ways that you can help your teen in some of the areas above will be important. Sometimes a mentor can help your teen more than you are able to. If your teen is experiencing loneliness or rejection daily, then look for a place that the teen can learn some relationship skills. Sometimes teens are simply in a no-win situation for them. A teen who was the only person of her ethnicity in a school, said to her parents, "I don't know what you were thinking! I get teased by other kids on the way to school, have to take two buses to get there, and always feel like an outsider." Her self-esteem was immediately improved by moving into a racially integrated school.

Teens may not want to speak to their parents if there is a pattern of conflict. They say. "All that happens is that we end up fighting anyway." They will retreat into their rooms so that they avoid conflict. This is a great time to get some family therapy. When I was working with a family, a teen learned to listen to her mother, without interrupting, and vice versa. I prompted them to listen with respect. The teen said, "We actually worked it out! We could do that at home if we needed to." My job was to keep them both calm enough to keep talking and listening. It was a simple step, needing just two office visits to accomplish.

At times it seems as if our teens want to fight with us. (I am sure they feel the same.) It is critical for parents to continue to put in the effort to communicate, without comebacks or lecturing. If you feel yourself being baited, you can respond by saying, “I value being with you so much, that I am not going to respond to that. I’d rather just hang out with you. I’ve missed being with you.” Even if they grumble and move off, at least you have left a positive comment in the air. Often teens will re-emerge saying. “Actually, I had a horrible day...” They may even apologize for trying to involve you in an argument.

Parents who respond sensitively to their teens, and who make statements about the teen being “an important member of the family,” find that they have the best chance of keeping a close relationship with their teen—in spite of any hard times through the teen years.

Parent Failures and Apologies

If you are a parent of a teen, you may have finished the sections above thinking, “I am a terrible person and parent. I have blown this.” Join the club. We all find ourselves doing exactly the opposite of what we should be doing some of the time in these years. I believe that if you cannot model the correct behavior, at least you can model a good apology.

A good apology is not an explanation. That may come later. An apology sounds like,

- “I am sorry that I was sarcastic.
- I am sorry that I yelled at you.
- I am sorry that I used that tone.
- I am sorry that I did not listen to your point of view.”

Perhaps you over reacted. The apology would be, “I am sorry that I said that I can never trust you.” It can include, “Would you give me another chance to listen to you?” Or, “Your feelings are important to me. Is there some way that I can show that to you now? I’m sorry that I did not listen before.”

Teens will usually describe how they felt at that point. It is best to resist butting in as they describe how you wounded them. Usually we feel defensive, so jump in to defend ourselves. Instead...listen. Say that you are sorry again if you need to. Sometimes teens will forgive easily, and sometimes it will take a while. It depends both on the teen and on the gravity of the situation. Offering especially good food tends to be an extremely successful move on the parent’s part during an apology period.

After things are better, or, if it is important for teens to know why we behaved as we did, we can describe why we had trouble. This is not given as an excuse, but as an explanation. Explanations include things that made you take such a poor turn in the road. “I just got back from the hospital, visiting my sick relative, to find a message from your school that you were not in school today.” Another example:

“I found out that you went to a party at the Smith’s that I asked you not to attend. Earlier this year the Smith’s allowed drinking at one of their parties. One of the kids who attended was drinking, had a car accident, and was jailed. I was scared and angry to think

that you would be at that party. I should have asked you about it, rather than accusing you. Later, I found out that you only stopped to pick up a friend there, and then left before the party got going. But, I was scared and acted from that fear.”

Sometimes your teen has done the wrong thing, but you also handled it poorly. You may have to give a consequence, but apologize for the way you came across. For example:

“You drove without a license, just with your permit. We were not home. You took the car without permission. We thought that no adult with a driver’s license was in the car. I am sorry that I yelled at you and that I told you that I could not trust you. I should have handled this better, hearing your side of the story.” After the apology the parent says,

“We are putting off your driver’s license for another 6 months. Your friend pressured you to drive him to work so that he would not lose his job, saying, it was only 4 miles. I found out after listening to you that your friend’s mother, who has a license, went with you. But we were clear that you were not to drive the car while we were gone. I think that you need time to be able to avoid caving in to friends’ pressures. We do not think that it is safe to have you driving teen friends. You will be tempted to lie to us rather than disappoint your friends. I don’t want you in that situation. I love you and do not want you to end up hurt in an accident.”

If you feel very upset by your teen, it is just fine to say, “I am upset right now, and need some time to think about this clearly.” You do not have to wait until you show zen-like control. Rather, you want to be able to speak with respect, even if you are angry and disappointed in your teen.

Summary

Parenting our teens is not done by formula. It is a dynamic connection with amazing young people—who soon will be making decisions for our society. Our day-to-day can be as up and down as the moods of our teens. Rather than shaping them so that they best fit into our homes, we shape them so that they are their best selves, finding their place in the world. It is an amazing privilege to parent teens and to enjoy them. At the end of this stage, we know our teens as caring, perceptive people who have the capacity to understand themselves, other people, and to use this understanding as they move into society. That they choose to keep a relationship with us is a gift, more than what we could have deserved.

¹ Susan Johnson and Alison Lee. “Emotionally focused family therapy: restructuring attachment.” In C E. Baily (Ed.), *Children in Therapy: Using the Family as a Resource* (2000): 112-136. New York, Norton.

² Guy S. Diamond. Attachment-based family therapy for depressed and anxious adolescents. In J. Lebow (Ed.), *Handbook of Clinical Family Therapy*. (2005):17-41, Wiley.