

PARENTING ADOLESCENTS – THE MOST DIFFICULT AND EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TASK

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to all parents who, no doubt, have their weaknesses, but are wonderful persons nevertheless.

Abstract

Parenting adolescents is identified as probably the most difficult parenting task. Teens are preoccupied with identity crisis, eager to be independent; hasty to be adult - essentially lost, disturbed, and frightened with consequent loss of self esteem that

usually results in deep depression and a “Rebel without a cause” behavior pattern. Accelerated by rapid advances in media technology, adolescence now starts as early as 8 years of age, and has become more difficult today. Hence love, understanding and care by parents are more crucial now than before. Parents need to accept the fact that the peer group, central to adolescence culture, is a place for experimentation; and a supportive setting for achieving the two primary adolescence developmental tasks of identity and autonomy. Many issues

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ranging from drugs, reckless driving, drinking and depression to sex, pregnancy and abortion are involved. This paper is limited to just three areas: Goal setting, Conflict Management, and Raising Self Esteem.

1. INTRODUCTION

Watching newscasts of the Colorado, Λιττλετον, Χολυμβινε high school rampage with her two teen-age children, Sharon Stiller of Chesterfield Township, like many parents, was frightened and upset, unable to explain how such a tragedy - teens killing teens in school - could happen. *“My daughter, she’s 17, was absolutely devastated. She was crying,”* says Stiller, a waitress in Warren. She was wondering how these kids could do something like that and no one could detect (beforehand) that something was wrong. Karen Martin also discussed the ινχιδεντ ιν ηερ ωεβ παγε.²

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Similar incidents of varying seriousness have happened not only across the US, but also in other countries. There are less dramatic, less publicized, but equally devastating incidents that occur all over the globe. These demonstrate gross mismanagement by parents – extreme cases of bad adolescence parenting. Thus adolescent parenting is extremely important.

According to Lynne Namka³, an

educationist and a licensed psychologist in private practice, **“Systems Theory”** says we are all connected and an effect on a part affects the whole. This concept is similar to the Buddhist concept of cause and effect, where actions produce results. Thus bad parenting, as demonstrated by the above Littleton incident, not only affects the individual adolescent, but it affects the whole system, local or global, be it family, society, country or world.

Erik Erikson⁴, one of the first social theorists, identified eight development stages in the human life cycle: infancy, early childhood, play age, school age, adolescence, adulthood, maturity and old age. He believed that each stage is characterized by a certain crisis in which the individual’s needs and abilities are contrary to that of society. Old people face the crisis of meaning; maturities face the crisis of generativity; adults face the crisis of intimacy; and adolescence faces the crisis of identity. Other theories of developmental stages are mentioned in *“The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology”*⁴.

This present paper is concerned with parenting adolescents, which, in our opinion, is the most difficult parenting task. Teens are preoccupied with identity crisis, eager to be independent; hasty to be adults ... in short, **they are lost**: not a kid and yet not an adult; neither here nor there. As a result, they are disturbed and frightened, with consequent loss of self

esteem that usually results in deep depression. The common behavior pattern is “**Rebel without a cause**” *, which is putting up a brave front to hide fear by protesting and fighting everything, everywhere and with everyone, especially those representing authority (“The Establishment”): parents, teachers, guardians, etc.. Parental guidance with TLC (tender loving care) understanding and patience, is extremely important at this stage. Parents must not forget that the adolescent teen is in the process of turning into an adult, and parents must let go at a certain point; but **your teens need you until then.**

2. PARENTING ADOLESCENTS

Let us start off by reviewing general facts about adolescence, and then go on to examine a few solutions concerning parenting adolescents.

2.1 Adolescence

Adolescence is the life stage that runs from puberty to age 20, where stress and emotional turmoil dominate the lives of both males and females, especially the latter. I believe this is the most difficult stage in the life of a human. Parents can play a significant role. ⁵

* A 1950s movie on adolescence, starring the then teen idol James Dean, who met an untimely death.

In addition to psychological issues, marriage harmony, parenting style, role modeling and emotional status of parents can have a high impact on children’s depression patterns. Parents who are caring, supportive, and attentive; and respectful of their children’s emotions are less likely to cause high depression levels in their children than authoritarian parents who are aloof, restrictive and use punishment liberally.⁶

In a talk by Professor Michael Carr-Gregg, called ‘**Demystifying Adolescents**’⁷, it was asserted that adolescence is more difficult today because of the followings:

- * Advertisers vigilantly target young people;
- * Unlimited information access through the Internet;
- * Video games allow manipulation of reality.

He also says that research in the US, the UK and Australia shows adolescence is now starting as early as 8 years of age. Four causes are identified:

- * The effect of chemicals in the environment;
- * The effects of obesity, 26% of children are overweight;
- * The increase of animal products; and
- * The proliferation of sex in the media.

The adolescent processes consist of the following four characteristics:

- * Finding out who they are;
- * Breaking away from their parents;
- * Seeking love outside of the family;
- * Acquiring economic independence.

Carr- Gregg noted three stages of adolescence, Early, Middle and Late. **Early adolescence** commences by the brain sending a message that stimulates the glands. Physical changes and more mature thoughts occur. **Middle adolescence** involves risk taking behavior, via seeking comfort in friends and youth icons. Redirecting through traditional means such as sport, drama and music is advised. During **Late adolescence**, life begins to assume some normality. Views begin to change. There is a shift from challenging one's parents to a position of mutual respect.

2.2 Peer Pressure

The peer group is a place for experimentation; and a supportive setting for achieving the two primary developmental tasks of adolescence:

- (1) **identity** — finding the answer to the question “Who Am I?” and
- (2) **autonomy** — discovering that self as separate and independent from parents.

The latter is also a source of affection, sympathy and understanding.

Thus it is not surprising that adolescents like to spend time with their peers. Involvement with one's peers and the attraction of peer identification increases as children grow, develop, and move into early adolescence. Often “peer cultures” have very different values and norms. The adult perception of peers as a “united front of dangerous influence” is inaccurate.

As Herbert G. Lingren,⁸ an Extension Family Scientist at Nebraska University, Lincoln, said: “*During adolescence, peers play a large part in a young person's life and typically replace family as the center of a teen's social and leisure activities. ... More often than not, peers reinforce family values, but they have the potential to encourage problem behaviors as well.*” Thus negative peer pressure can actually force young people into experimenting without knowledge of possible risks involved. But Lingren goes on to say that the negative influence of peers is over-emphasized; and peer-pressured experiments can be prevented.

2.3 Adolescent Parenting

Creating a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood is a major responsibility of parents, and is the main concern of parenting adolescents. There are many issues ranging from drugs, reckless driving, drinking and depression to sex, pregnancy and abortion. Many articles on parenting adolescents⁹ have been published as

advice, suggestions, rules, commentaries and discussions – too many to cover in one document.

This paper is limited to just three factors, the ones that are deemed to be the most important of them all: **Goal setting, Conflict Management, and Raising Self Esteem.** The first, to help counter the “lost” feeling by identifying and defining a direction – equipping a rudder to guide the teens’ rudderless boat; the second, to deal with inevitable conflicts, among peers and between parents and children, that will be initiated by the “rebellious without a cause” attitude; and the third, to lift them from depression and help them face the world with confidence.

2.3.1 Goal Setting

One way of creating a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood is for parents to point children in the right direction by defining a definite goal. This gives direction in their “lost” world. The goal can be something material, like becoming a great physician, scientist, business person, movie star, fashion designer, etc. or it can be something immaterial, like a concept, character, or behavior. This has to be done in such a way that the goal is identified by the child, of course with parents’ guidance.

To be emphatic is as good a goal as any. Here it is used as an example to demonstrate goal setting steps. The following six steps are identified in the

book “**Six Steps to an Emotionally Intelligent Teenager**” by James Windell, a famous Bloomfield Hills psychotherapist and author of five parenting books.¹⁰ The quotes in the following paragraphs are the author’s words.

1. Establish a Genuine Relationship – the child’s capacity for learning to care for others develop when genuine care and concern are demonstrated by parents. “*So a first step is to form a solid relationship with your child.*”

2. Discuss Feelings with Your Child – parents who discuss their own feelings and encourage their children to talk about their feelings develop their children into empathic young people. Absence of such a dialog makes it impossible for a teenager to understand others’ feelings. “*Without this skill, there is no empathy.*”

3. Demonstrate Caring Behavior – James Windell recommends three things. First, asking about the children’s feelings and responding to them in a sensitive, feeling, and caring style. Second, asking children about their feelings and telling them your impressions of their feelings. Third, asking children to practice making sensitive, supportive statements to others.

4. Provide Consistent Rules with Clear Consequences – Parents *telling* their teen what’s right and wrong is okay, but they need to back up and practice what they preach through actions. If a certain behavior is believed to be wrong, then a clear rule must be

made, which is enforced with consistent consequences.

Adolescents need to know what is valued and what behavior is important, based not on what was said, but on rules that are enforced through reasonable consequences and punishments. This reinforces their understanding of what is right and wrong.

5. Use Reasoning - Reasoning means explaining why certain family rules are made. Reasoning works best if kids know that the reason an action is right or wrong depends on how it affects other people. James Windell calls this “**victim impact statement**”.

6. Teach the Golden Rule - Do unto others as you would have them do unto you - teaches the concept of putting oneself in another’s shoes. If teens would like others to treat them with dignity and respect, then they must treat others in the same way.

2.3.2 Conflict Management

Christine Todd, Human Development Specialist, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, in her article entitled “**Avoiding and Dealing with Conflict**” in The National Network for Child Care’s Connections Newsletter¹¹, states the following as things to discourage conflict: Keeping active, Keep Things Interesting, Keep Children Learning. Although these are intended for young kids, they can be adapted for adolescents also.

James Windell in his book, “**Six Steps to an Emotionally Intelligent Teenager**”¹⁰, says that formal methods may be used by actually teaching children a set of steps and requiring that they not only learn them but follow them when trying to work out a problem. He claims that teens are able to learn and use a more formal method of conflict resolution, and says he has seen students using this kind of conflict resolution procedure in the hallway and on the playground. He prescribed the following steps:

1. **What’s Our Problem?** Define and state the problem. For instance, a young teenaged boy might say, “I want to get my ear pierced, and you’re against it.” The parent would have to agree that that indeed was what the conflict was about.
2. **How Can We Solve It?** Both people in the dispute would have to think about it. In the above example, one idea could be agreeing on a simple, small earring that wouldn’t be gaudy or offensive. Another could be waiting until he was 16 years old.
3. **What’s the Best Solution?** After generating several possible solutions, both parties have to evaluate the ideas. That means looking at the consequence of each idea and trying to figure out what would happen if that idea was selected.
4. **Pick One and Try It.** By evaluating each solution in this

way, the two sides could then decide which the best idea was. Having picked one, the next step is to use it.

5. **How Did It Work Out?** After trying it, both the adolescent and his parent would each have to assess the outcome, "How did I do? Did this turn out the way I thought it would?" James Windell assures that when children and teens learn these steps and rehearse them several times, they will use the method.

In "**Twenty Alternatives to Punishment**", Aletha Solter says that many conflict situations can be turned into games, like "Let's pretend we're the seven dwarfs while we clean up," or "Let's take turns brushing each other's teeth." She also advises to defuse the situation with laughter. For example, if your child is angry with you, invite him to express his anger – like a playful pillow fight. Surrender dramatically. Laughter helps resolve anger and feelings of powerlessness.¹²

Aletha Solter¹² discourages punishment just as Dr. Peter Newell¹³, coordinator of the organization End Punishment of Children (EPOCH) does. The latter said: "*all people have the right to protection of their physical integrity, and children are people too.*" Hence hasty punishment needs to be replaced by efficient conflict management.

Lynne Namka³, an educationist and a licensed psychologist in private practice, in her collection which spans several years, says conflict is not simple. According to her, "*We Are All Part of the Problem. We Are All Part of the Solution.*" Problems do not have a singular cause. We live in a complex social system that has interactive effects - all are interconnected, and all are affected. Interactions of all the members of the system affect each member of the system and the greater whole. When anger and violence is used to solve problems, it contributes to the overall climate that condones aggression. This is why anger needs to be controlled and violence needs to be tamed. Use the proper way for conflict management. And "teens killing teens" will be a thing of the past.

Dr. Gerald Shiener¹³, a physician-psychiatrist and chief of consultation psychiatry at DMC-Sinai Hospital, Detroit advises to keep talking to the children, even as they grow into adolescence and simple communication becomes difficult.

Since most conflict can be prevented if anger is controlled, anger management is also an integral part of conflict management. In cognitive approaches to dealing with anger, teens need to be taught to think about what is happening to them and how they ought to best proceed. James Windell says the following is the best "**Stop and Think**" approach.¹⁰

- * Stop and ask yourself: What's making me angry?
- * Then ask: What are ways I can handle this?
- * Analyze the ways you've come up with and try the best one.
- * Ask yourself: How did I do, and could I have handled this better?

It's a simple process, yet teens who learn this skill must be able to remember it early enough when they're angry that they'll not only use it but remember to follow all the steps. It is important for adolescents to know that even those who handle their anger in impulsive ways can benefit from this technique.

2.3.3 Developing Self-Esteem

If it were required to identify the most important task of parenthood, the choice would certainly be: *helping children grow up with strong self-esteem*. Parents are the primary influence on the child's self-esteem. Kids with high self-esteem have an easier time in life. Parents are like a mirror. But providing a positive reflection does not mean allowing the child to run the family or approve of everything the child does.

James Windell¹⁰ in his "**6 Steps to an Emotionally Intelligent Teenager**" says

"Every parent wants to guide his or her child to healthy social relationships-within the family, with friends, and with the world

at large. But sometimes teenagers have a hard time dealing with their emotions. Feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness can come out in difficult or destructive ways".

Teens tend to have a problem with social skills. But parental training can be very beneficial. Enhanced self-concept, better self-esteem, an improved ability to control one's own destiny, and the strength to resist negative influences, are some of the benefits.

Getting along with others, ability to monitor own behavior, knowing how to calm down when upset or angry, and successfully solve conflicts are some excellent qualities of an emotionally intelligent adolescent. Such an adolescent will have a healthy self esteem.

James Windell advises parents to teach the following:

- * Set personal goals
- * Identify and change self-defeating behaviors
- * Be assertive about his or her needs
- * Have feelings for others
- * Handle anger constructively
- * Resolve conflicts peacefully.

The following are important points that parents need to keep in mind in building children's self esteem^{14,15}:

- * Listening attentively and actively

- * If necessary, helping the child find words to describe his/her feelings
- * Sharing the child's experience. Don't try to fix things. Solving problems on their own builds self-esteem.
- * Accepting the child's good and bad makes the child accept himself – the foundation to self-esteem.
- * Sharing the reasons behind your reactions
- * Praising without overdoing it.
- * Avoiding backhanded praise. Otherwise praise is mixed with insult. Say, "I'm glad you got it done," instead of, "It's about time."
- * Disciplining and setting limits
- * Proper Disciplining adds Self-Esteem
- * Using positive discipline (Children who are disciplined with only negative consequences or through negative talk may learn to behave but they often do it with a grudge against parents and with little internal self-esteem)
- * Gearing discipline toward the age of your child. Each age group needs different kinds of discipline.
- * Remembering to avoid punishment, as advised in "Twenty Alternatives to Punishment" by Aletha Solter¹², author of three parenting books (*The Aware Baby*;

Helping Your Child Flourish; Tears and Tantrums).

3. THE MOST SERIOUS CONSEQUENCE OF BAD ADOLESCENTS PARENTING

As stated in the introduction, "Teens Killing Teens" is the most serious and devastating consequence of bad adolescent parenting that not only affects the individual, family, and friends; but also reaches out and hits the whole world.

Lynne Namka³, Ed. D., an educationist and a Licensed Psychologist in private practice, in her report (a collection of her work over many years) "**The Dynamics of Rejection, Isolation, Bullying, Shame, Anger and Acting Out in Rage in Children**", under the heading "**Why Did Johnny Kill? School Violence Explained**", says "We Are All Part of the Problem. We Are All Part of the Solution". The need to be accepted while they sort through the challenges of the difficult teenage years is a basic need of young people in despair. The hurt child sends out signals, such as aggressive behaviors that are observable and the system where that child lives and goes to school can become supportive.

A fundamental fault of our society is that we are fascinated with violence. Witness the violent, action movies and TV programs that are well attended.

Who is to blame? The teens, parents, gun-makers, screenwriters, who else? The problem of young people and violence is systemic, and complex. All of us contribute to it as a bystander, letting it happen while blaming others. Many children are angry and they are showing this by their behavior. As the cartoon character, Pogo said, *“We have met the enemy and he is us.”*

Lynne Namka³ has suggested the following to prevent recurrence of incidences like the Littleton incident.

- * **Use Proven Models that Work With Young People.**
- * **Reclaim the Schools** (Create a “We’re all in this together.” school climate).
- * **Train the Teachers How to Work with Bullying and the Resultant Pain.**
- * **Insist Students Take Responsibility for Unacceptable Behavior** (Minimize discipline techniques that emphasize guilt and punishment, which lead to students fuming and focusing on getting revenge. Maximize discipline, which encourages taking responsibility for one’s actions and understanding one’s behavior).
- * **Take Student Pain and Threats of Violence Seriously** (Get kids talking about their grievances before the anger and rage build up. Create peer counseling, conflict resolution and mediation programs).
- * **Teach Assertiveness Training to Victim Kids, and Empathy Skills to Children Who Bully, and Anger Management to Everyone.**
- * **Becoming a Heart Centered Nation** (Examine and research the suggestions for discipline and management techniques made in discipline approaches that emphasize respect and taking responsibility for misbehavior).
- * **The Law of Correction says that “Whoever Messes Up the Environment Must Clean it Up”. *Change the Meaning of “Snitching” and “Narcing:”** Create an open system where everyone understands that it is absolutely necessary to report violence.
- * **Do Not Condone Bullying, Violence and Rejection of One Group by Another:** Societies that condone violent behavior allow it to happen. School districts that have a zero violence policy that is stressed to the children will have fewer children who become violent. The effects of speaking out and standing up to abuse can help change the social conditions that support it.
- * **Bring in New Models for Decreasing Prejudice and Conflict:** Curriculums can be enriched to teach moral values of respect, courtesy, tolerance, social responsibility and values

clarification. Teaching children perspective taking, decision making, integrating different views and critical thinking will help create a climate of cooperation and caring. There are hundreds of fine programs that have been developed to address the attitudes of disrespect and ruthlessness that have crept into our society. We need to be made aware of what programs is available.

- * **Finding Balance in These Times of Stress:** We live in a stressful world. Many people today have lives that are out of balance. Teaching children the relaxation techniques can have surprising health benefits. New research shows that deep relaxation practiced regularly can strengthen the immune system and promote good health and a calm mind.
- * **What's Taking Responsibility Got to Do With It?** Everything. Turning schools into a police state is not a solution. School security is needed, but the bigger answer lies in everyone taking. ***What's Caring Got to Do With It? What's Love Got to Do With It?** Everything! Cruelty doesn't discriminate!

Both Dr. Gerald Shiener¹³, a physician-psychiatrist and chief of consultation psychiatry at DMC-Sinai Hospital, Detroit, and James Windell¹⁰ point out that it is common for teen-

agers to wear black clothes or black lipstick, tattoos or outrageous jewelry, and that those things alone aren't signs of potential trouble.

The key, according to Windell, Shiener and Michael Horn, principal of Thompson Middle School in Southfield, is to **look for extremes**. "It's OK to wear a black trench coat but to wear a black trench coat every day is something to be concerned about," says Shiener. Parents can get a clue about their children's frame of mind - whether they're simply trying to be different or if it goes further than that - by keeping tabs on or supervising their activities, talking to them and meeting and talking to their circle of friends.

Children should be encouraged to tell an adult if they know a schoolmate who appears disgruntled or otherwise threatening. According to Shiener, children should feel safe in giving this information. They need to be assured that the information will only be used to help, and that their trust will not be betrayed. Confidants should keep their word accordingly.

4. CONCLUSION

Adolescent parenting is the most difficult type of parenting. There are many issues and solutions. Goal Setting to identify and define a direction for the "lost" adolescent; Conflict Management to efficiently manage conflicts that will invariably occur among peers and

between parents and teens; and Building Self Esteem to equip the adolescent with confidence in preparation to face the world; were chosen as the most important triad to be discussed. The most serious, devastating and sadly tragic consequence of bad adolescent parenting is “Teens Killing Teens”. Remember “We Are All Part of the Problem. We Are All Part of the Solution”. Avoid the “You are to blame – not me” attitude, and start taking responsibility. We all are responsible for our beloved adolescents!

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