



Connecting with Teens' "Inner Adult": Guidelines for Parents & Teachers

Charles Bonner, Ph.D.
Editor, GPPA Report

In this article Dr. Bonner reviews "Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old," by Allen, J. & Allen, C.W. (2009) published by Ballantine Books.

Are you the parent of a teen? Do you work with teens and their parents in your practice as a therapist? Are you a high school teacher of teens? If so, you will welcome this book by Drs. Joseph Allen and Claudia Worrell Allen, psychologists involved both in psychotherapy and research with teens. To illustrate their points, the Allens include psychotherapy cases, examples from both the juvenile justice and education systems, anecdotes from their own lives, as well as data from research studies in a variety of disciplines.

The book's core claims are that contemporary teens are too disconnected from the adult world, are insufficiently challenged in their daily activities, and are overindulged by their parents in ways that ultimately stunt their growth (this phenomenon has been referred to as "The Nurture Paradox"). As a result

the early 20th century, teens' roles have shifted from actively contributing to their families (e.g. on family farms) to passively being served by others (including years of sitting in school). The Allens summarize this transition in responsibility:

Adolescents who had previously been seen as competent and productive junior adults were now increasingly viewed as highly dependent and incompetent large children. Adolescence shifted from being a time of *doing* to being a time of *preparing* (p. 79-80).

The first half of *Escaping the Endless Adolescence* reviews the historical context that led to the current situation, in which adolescence is now often extended through the college years and beyond (Chapter 1 title: "Is Twenty-Five the New Fifteen?"). In fact, ages 18-30 is now referred to as "Emerging Adulthood" by some developmental psychologists. Teens are told that they will need to wait 5-10 years before they enter the "Adult

World". Rewards for present efforts are deferred to a distant future—after college, grad school, first job, etc.

Another modern dilemma described by the Allens is teens' overdependence on peers for socialization. In previous generations and other cultures, teens were socialized by large communities of adults. Overburdened parents and teachers can't fill this role, so peers assume exaggerated importance. For example, teens text their peers an average of 2500 times per month! Further, teens spend 16 hrs/wk interacting with adults and 60-70 hrs/wk interacting with peers. This is true more so in the United States than in other industrialized countries. This is completely the inverse of current adult-centered cultures, in which peer time in adolescence may be as low as five hrs/wk (Epstein, 2010).

In the second half of *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*, the Allens detail the practical steps parents, teachers, and other adults can adopt to help teens move sooner rather than later into basic adult competencies and responsibilities. Their mantra is "*Let's put the adulthood back in adolescence!*" (p.95), which includes the clever corollary of helping locate and cultivate teens' "Inner Adult". For example, parents all too often perform tasks for their teens (and even preteens) that their kids are perfectly capable of learning to accomplish, with a little encouragement and modeling. The Allens use the metaphor of "scaffolding" to describe the type of

support adults can provide teens to help them grow into capable adults, and they suggest that whenever parents are about to do *anything* for a teen, they should ask themselves (p. 175):

1. Why don't they know how to do that yet?
2. How can I best teach them?
3. Is this a good opportunity?

Common parental beliefs that interfere with implementing these guidelines include: 1) The teen won't get it right, 2) He will resist the request, and 3) I can do it faster than him or her. Besides such common chores as helping clean the home and doing the dishes, here are other tasks the Allens add to the adolescent task mastery list: Changing light bulbs, doing household repairs, cooking family meals, learning to shop for groceries, and making more phone calls relevant to the teen's life-- e.g. even calling to schedule doctors' appointments.

For example, there was an incident last year when my then 12 ½ year old son left a library book at the movies. He realized this once we were already home. My first impulse was to phone the theater and have them hold the book for us to pick up. Then I thought "Why can't he make the phone call himself? He can speak clearly and is not a shy boy." When I suggested this to my son, he was aghast with protest and anxiety! He worried that the person at the theater would judge him as foolish for forgetting his book and that he would feel embarrassed. I reassured

him that this person's job was to help customers and that it is common for even adults to forget things at the movies. My son persisted in his protest, but he soon changed his tune when I said that if he did not make the call then the library would charge him for the lost book and that this fee *would come out of his money*. There's nothing like a real world, monetary consequence to instill the final dose of motivation required to perform a difficult task. We rehearsed what he would say on the phone, my son made the call and described the book he had lost, and much to his relief learned that it had been found. His reaction after getting off the phone was clearly not just relief but *pride*—he could barely suppress his smile as he agreed that he had done a good job and that it went better than he expected. In making this phone call, my son had experienced what the motivation literature has called a “sense of mastery”. The Allens make the case that:

The sense of mastery is a powerful reinforcer; often, it seems, more powerful than simple physical rewards..... Again and again, however, we pass up opportunities to allow our teens the experience of mastery, usually in the mistaken notion that we are nurturing them and showing them love by doing things *for* them (p. 175).

The story of my son's phone call illustrates another powerful principle: dispassionate consequences and rewards from the larger adult world

are usually much more effective than parental nagging and criticism. When my son heard that he would have to pay the library fine, this tipped the motivational balance and convinced him it was worth it to tolerate the anxiety of making the phone call. The Allens are very helpful in describing what this principle means for how parents should structure the household and communicate with their teens:

The goal is to create a house environment that does nothing more or less than *dispassionately* mirror the inevitable rewards and consequences of the larger world.... We find that figuring out how environments can provide such natural feedback requires a little thought and ingenuity, but ultimately this is the easy part; the hard part is to simply let these environments do their work. No lectures. No nagging. Just natural feedback, perhaps punctuated every so often with the mildest of suggestions that the system is designed to help teens someday thrive as adults (p. 184).

I have found the Allens' conceptualization of the role of responsibility in raising adolescents to be a very helpful framework for counseling parents about how to transform communication habits with their teens. In particular, parents need to be weaned away from their overdependence on lectures and criticism as the main mode of

communication. The Allens advise parents to "... use the same conventions of respect and politeness when talking with teens that we use when talking with adults (p. 151)..... "Adults typically don't learn from lectures and nagging; neither do teens" (p. 183)." One helpful suggestion is for parents to intentionally spend some time each week with their teen that is completely free of any effort to provide guidance, advice, or criticism.

Non-parental adults are less likely to fall prey to the Nurture Paradox and more likely to communicate in ways that encourage teens to grow. Teachers are one of the most consistent sources of non-parental adult influence for teens. The Allens emphasize how "teachers form their best connections with students when they are focused upon drawing out their inner adult.... Almost universally, the best teachers are remembered as treating their students as a bit older than they actually were." (p. 208). Along these lines, it has been suggested that teachers refer to their teen students as "ladies & gentlemen" or "young men/women" rather than "boys & girls" or "guys". Further, since the term "teenager" has been tainted by our culture, parents & teachers might instead refer to their teens as "young adults" (Epstein, 2010).

The Allens also offer a valuable perspective for parents and teachers on how to hear and interpret teens' often rude, angry and confusing ways of expressing themselves or behaving. They propose the "Plus or

Minus Five" guideline: i.e. consider a teen's age to be equal to chronological age plus or minus five years, in this way capturing the wide variability in how he or she speaks and behaves. Here the authors summarize this strategy:

The approach we suggest is not to reply to the childlike portion of what's being said, but to respond as though we've just heard an adult put forth a far-more-reasonable version of what we'd guess our teens might be feeling (p. 130).... *Remember, there's an adult in there!* Once we remember this, it's easier to direct our conversation to that (often well-hidden) adult, in an effort to bring him or her to the surface (p. 131).

This speak-to-the-inner-adult script also requires parents and teachers to manage the strong emotions evoked by their at times antagonistic teens and avoid slipping into what the Allens call the "bickering script" (p. 130). Along these lines, Sells (1998) has humorously suggested that "... the longer an argument goes on, the more the parents regress toward behaving just as their teenager. For every two minutes they stay in an argument, parents should deduct 5 years from their own chronological age" (p. 82).

The Allens are particularly compassionate toward parents and the inner emotional challenges that they must navigate in helping their teens become adults. This compassion is clear when the

authors declare that “in some ways adolescence requires as much emotional work and growth on the part of parents as it does of teens” (p. 149-150). To connect with their teen’s inner adult, parents must remain moored to their *own* inner adult! It is a credit to the Allens that they have written a book that will help parents feel less alone in this task and more aware of what’s at stake in easing their teen’s transition to adulthood.

Dr. Bonner is in full time private practice in Pittsburgh PA. For more information see

www.drbonneronline.com

For Dr. Bonner's PowerPoint presentation on "Connecting with Teens' Inner Adult: Guidelines for Parents and Teachers", go to: www.starcenter.pitt.edu/files/document/Dr%20%20Bonner%20STAR%202011%20Conference%20PowerPoint.FINAL.pdf

References:

Allen, J. & Allen, C.W. (2009). *Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Epstein, R. (2010). *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* (2nd edition of *The Case Against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen*, 2007). Linden Publishing.

Sells, S. (1998). *Treating the Tough Adolescent: A Family-Based, Step-by-Step Guide*. New York: The Guilford Press.

This article is an expanded version of: Bonner, C. (2010) Connecting with Teens' "Inner Adult". In The GPPA Report (quarterly newsletter of the Greater Pittsburgh Psychological Association), Fall Issue.