Connecting with Teens’ Inner Adult: Guidelines for Parents & Teachers

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Two Books on Teens’ Inner Adult


What are Adolescents Like in Less Westernized Cultures?

Anthropological research (1991): In 186 preindustrial cultures where teens are routinely depended upon to help with adult work, there are minimal or virtually no problems with adolescent delinquency, apathy or rebellion. Also, in some of these cultures, there is no word for “teenager”!

How is this possible? What accounts for this remarkable finding? How might this phenomenon help us understand the challenges of contemporary teens?
The Invention of Modern Adolescence & the Artificial Extension of Childhood

- Mandatory high school created in the early 20th century; teens’ roles shift from actively contributing to their families (e.g. family farms) to passively being served by others (e.g. years of sitting in school).
- Adolescence has moved from being a time of doing to being a time of preparing.
- Teens previously seen as competent & productive junior adults, are now too often viewed as irresponsible large children.
- Developmental Psych.: Ages 18-30 is now referred to as “Emerging Adulthood”!
Teens told that they will need to wait 5-10 years before they enter the “Adult World”.

Rewards for present efforts differed to a distant future—after college, grad school...

What if our work world followed the teen template? Lawyers argue only mock cases, plumbers fix fake leaks, teachers are in an empty class speaking to a video camera.

Boredom, restlessness, & apathy would soon follow—just as it does for teens!

(Allen & Allen, 2009 & 2010)
In previous generations & other cultures, teens were socialized by large communities of adults.

Overburdened parents & teachers can’t fill this role, so peers assume exaggerated importance—teens text and average of 2500x per month!

Teens spend 16 hrs/wk interacting with adults & 60-70 hrs/wk with peers; US ratios are more skewed than other industrialized countries.

This is a reversal of historical ratios, which are as low as 5 hrs/wk. peer time in current adult centered cultures (Epstein, 2010)
Raised by 13 Year Olds

The Allen’s review a study of middle school kids showing that the kids who were “well socialized” & most popular had the highest drinking rates through adolescence. Why?

“The problem wasn’t that popular teens weren’t well socialized, it was that they were being socialized by a bunch of 13 year-olds!” (Allen & Allen, p. 66)

“These values—that getting ‘wasted’ is fun, that smashing mailboxes is a kick, that shop-lifting is cool—have sprung up like weeds on fertile soil left unattended” (Allen & Allen, p.67)
The Lure of Pseudoadult Activities

- If given too few ways to reach real maturity, teens instead seek out behaviors that provide appearance of adulthood w/o the substance.
- Pseudoadult activities: smoking, drinking, sex, watching R-rated movies, selling drugs, gambling, gangs, crimes (all emulate adults)
- Vandalism: in part reflects teens’ “… hunger to have an impact on adults and the adult world.” (Allen & Allen, p.121)
- Teens “are almost always pursuing adult goals even in their most disturbed behavior, and we help them most when we uncover and draw out those goals” (Allen & Allen, p. 119)
"If adolescence barely existed through most of human history & is still absent in many cultures, how could modern adolescence be the inevitable product of a genetically engineered teen brain?" (p. 189). .... The teen brain is, by necessity, every bit as much of a cultural creation as adolescence itself" (Epstein, p. 199)

Beginning in infancy, brain development is dramatically experience-dependent; new field of Interpersonal Neurobiology studies this fact.

Even learning to juggle will within weeks alter brain structure!

Correlational studies of teen brains often misinterpreted in causal terms, in accord w/ cultural biases
Previously, hormone research failed to explain everything; the teen brain is the latest scapegoat.

The Fundamental Attribution Error: Adults blame teen behavior they don’t understand on internal factors such as hormones & brain function.

If there are hormonal influences & neuronal hard wiring in teens, their main purpose is to motivate them to strive for action, autonomy & challenge.

Teen risk taking: “… also be a way of becoming more adult…most of the risks teens take involve adult behaviors: having sex, drinking, driving…” (Epstein, p. 189-190) i.e. Pseudo Adult Activities!
Beyond Brain Blame (3): Teens are Smarter than You Think

- Cognitive abilities of teens are, on average, superior to adults: Processing speed, reasoning, intelligence, & memory peak in the teen years—stable through 20’s, declines after age 30. Brain reaches maximum size at age 14 and declines the rest of the lifespan.

- Judgment & decision making: “…. Teens are, on the average, as competent or nearly as competent as adults in virtually every area of adult functioning…. Because teens are infantilized, their actual performance may not reflect their competence, but that competence is ready to be expressed at any time” (Epstein, p. 147) i.e. Competence vs. Performance
Scaffolding: How to Convert Competence to Performance

→ Metaphor for the type of support adults provide teens to help them master tasks just beyond their current competence (Allen & Allen)

→ Adults taper off this aid as it becomes less necessary, much as a scaffold is removed from a building during construction (Allen & Allen)

→ Scaffolding concept first developed in the late 1950’s to describe how kids learn language; concept was then expanded to multiple educational challenges.

→ Vygotsky: Optimal Zone of Experience—decreasing the difference between potential & actual development, via adult guidance or support from a more capable peer.
Teen Outreach Program: Dramatic Results
(Allen & Allen, 2009)

- Started 30 years ago-- several hours of meaningful volunteer service work & 1-2x week group discussion lead by an adult facilitator.

- Reduced school drop-out rates & failure rates by 60%; reduced teen pregnancy rates by 53%.

- Teaches non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, motivation, self-regulation, and self-confidence; feeling valued and depended upon by others; mentored by nurturing and supportive adults.
The “Adult Work Effect”  
(Allen & Allen, 2009)

- Whether a paid or volunteer job, teens should be “…doing work that matters to someone” (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes, animal shelters, soup kitchens, tutoring, camp counselor, childcare, eldercare).
- Teen self-esteem: depends as much on doing for others as what we say to them, do for them, or buy for them.
- For paying jobs: High financial reward + Low demand ≠ an Adult job
- Money provided by these jobs functions almost like drinking & smoking to teens--provide the trappings of maturity, but with none of the responsibilities (no bills to pay, work w/ mostly other teens, minimal adult contact).
Parents too often perform tasks for their teens that their kids are perfectly capable of learning to do.

Whenever parents are about to do anything for a teen, they should ask themselves:

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:

1. The teen won’t get it right.
2. He will resist the request.
3. I can do it faster than her.
Besides such common chores as helping clean the home, doing laundry, doing dishes, and lawn care, other tasks to add to adolescent mastery list include:

- Changing light bulbs, household repairs, using tools, shopping for groceries, cooking family meals, changing the car oil, sewing, managing money, computer maintenance, making phone calls relevant to the teen’s life (e.g. calling to schedule doctors’ appointments).

- Have teens accompany parents to parent-teacher conferences—more immediate feedback than a poor grade every nine weeks, increases accountability.

- Who’s Gonna Call? The case of the lost library book
“Without exposure to some risks & failures, we risk developing hothouse flowers—beautiful in their mastery of the cello, but subject to wither as they encounter the first cold frost of adult life.” (Allen & Allen, p.85)

 Teens often overindulge in ways that stunt their growth.

 Sense of mastery often is a more powerful reinforcer than simple physical rewards.

 Adults miss opportunities to allow teens the experience of mastery, in the mistaken notion that we are nurturing them & showing them love by doing things for them

 The principle of “Failure is our Friend”
Non-parental adults are less likely to fall prey to the Nurture Paradox and not overindulge teens.

Have you noticed how teens often behave better with other adults than with their parents? Why?

Use time with neighbors, adult family friends, relatives, or parents of teens’ friends. What other skills can these adults teach our teens to expand their sense of mastery? Benefits of Boy/Girl Scouts.

Well organized religious communities are also a good source of adult mentors, social justice work, inter-generational music performances, and leadership roles.
“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.” (Allen & Allen, p. 208)

One on one time especially helpful—e.g. 20 minute chat with a teacher recalled years later.

Referring to students as “ladies & gentlemen” or “young men/women” vs. “boys & girls” or “guys”.

Since the term teenager has been tainted by our culture, parents & teachers might instead refer to their teens as “young adults” (Epstein)
Communication Without Criticism

- Parents depend too much on lectures, criticism, & nagging as their main mode of communication.
- Lectures given ≠ Lectures received!
- Parents should “use the same conventions of respect & politeness when talking with teens that we use when talking with adults…. Adults typically don’t learn from lectures & nagging; neither do teens” (Allen & Allen, p. 151)
- When speaking to other adults & offering criticism, parents do so in a very different fashion than when speaking to or criticizing their teens.
- “The quickest way to gain the respect of a teen is to show respect” (Epstein, p. 409)
Allen & Allen (p.154) Adults generally do not:

... talk about other adults in their presence as though they aren’t there.

...... launch into important conversations without asking if it’s a good time to talk.

...... continue talking even after another adult has said he doesn’t want to talk anymore.

...... tell other adults that someday they’ll understand.
Why do teens spend hundreds of hours on seemingly meaningless video games?

These games “provide them accurate, instantaneous feedback about their performance on a millisecond by millisecond basis” (Allen & Allen, p. 181)

Objective, rapid-fire feedback is one of the reasons participation in sports is so rewarding for teens.

In school, where main feedback is occasional grades, there’s little to motivate the bottom half of the class.

Again, the peer world fills the feedback vacuum for teens—e.g. appearance & dress evaluated daily.
Natural & Dispassionate Feedback
(Allen & Allen, 2009)

- Dispassionate consequences & rewards from the larger adult world: more effective than parental nagging & criticism.

- Home environment should *dispassionately* mirror the inevitable rewards & consequences of the adult world.

- When teens fail to meet the challenges before them & are about to suffer the consequences, parents should *relax*, relieved that they can share the burden with other adults.

- Communicate that you are on your teen’s side in helping them learn to meet the challenges of the adult world; express trust that your teen will learn from failure & become an adult.
Feedback Should Not be Punitive

- When feedback is impersonal & objective, teens more likely to respond calmly & pragmatically (Allen & Allen, p. 186)
- Even strong-willed teens are able to accept & adapt to feedback "when it appears as an inevitable part of the ‘real’ world "—more like a locked door than a ranting parent (contrast with “contrived contingencies”).
- Teens most likely to ignore/fight feedback if it mainly expresses parents’ efforts to control, criticize, or punish them— which motivates them for battle or resistance.
- “Resist the temptation to restrict your teen in ways that you, as an adult, would find demeaning, if not laughable”— e.g. “Go to your room!” (Epstein, p. 399)
Good News & Bad News: What you believe and say about your teen may come true (Bayards, 1983)

Parental beliefs often converted into teen beliefs:

1. **Parent belief**: “I am responsible for what my kid does“
   **Teen belief**: “Dad (or Mom) is responsible for my actions; I am not responsible for what I do“

2. **Parent belief**: “She can’t make decisions“
   **Teen belief**: “I can’t make decisions“

3. **Parent belief**: “She’s stupid“
   **Teen belief**: “I’m stupid“

4. **Parent belief**: “My kid is responsible for what she does“
   **Teen belief**: “I’m responsible for my own actions“

5. **Parent belief**: “She can make decisions“
   **Teen belief**: “I can make my own, good decisions“

6. **Parent belief**: “He’s basically okay“
   **Teen belief**: “I’m okay“
Suggestion to parents: Spend some time each week with your teen that is *entirely* free of parental guidance, criticism, or advice.

Short of imminent danger ("You're about to drive the wrong way on the interstate!"), parents should let all opportunities for criticism pass.
In arguments, teens are often verbally overmatched & can easily be made to feel foolish & irrational.

Their positions may be reasonable, but the way they argue makes them look more immature than they are.

Even if teens ultimately give in, they end up feeling not so much persuaded as unheard & embarrassed.

Finding the Inner Adult: help teens voice their position as clearly as possible-- acting as their spokesperson.

Look past the way teens talk, and voice the more mature, reasonable side of their demands & complaints. (Allen & Allen)
How to Respond to a Rude Teen: The “Plus or Minus Five” Guideline
(Allen & Allen, 2009)

➔ Consider your teen’s age to be equal to chronological age plus or minus 5 years (or even “Plus or Minus Ten”).
➔ Don’t reply to childlike portion of what’s said; respond as though you’ve heard an adult put forth a far more reasonable version of what you guess teen feels/thinks.

Remember, there’s an adult in there!

If we keep this in mind, “it’s easier to direct conversation to that (often well-hidden) adult, in an effort to bring him or her to the surface”. (Allen & Allen, p. 131)
Parents face the challenge of managing their own strong emotions & must resist regressing to own “Inner Teen” or “Inner Child”!

“… 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 chronological age” (Sells, 1998, p. 82).
As your Teen Grows, so must you too!

- “In some ways adolescence requires as much emotional work & growth on the part of parents as it does of teens” (Allen & Allen, p. 149-150).

- “It is almost impossible for parents to stop over nurturing their teens [unless they’re] simultaneously developing their own independent lives and preparing for life after parenthood.” (Allen & Allen, p. 192)

- In addition to connecting with their teens’ inner adult, parents must continue developing their own inner adult!
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