

UNDERSTANDING BEING A TEENAGER

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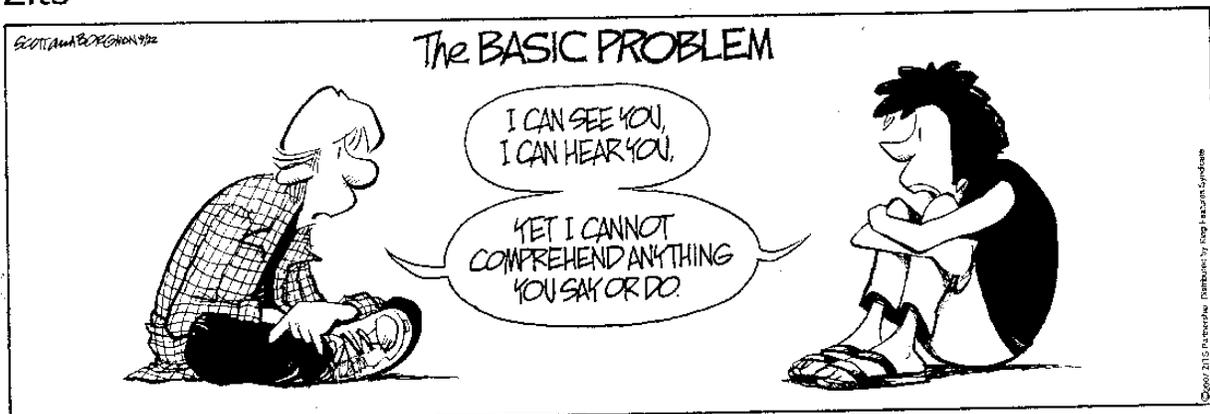
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May 2006



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A. UNDERSTANDING THE TEENAGE YEARS



0 A Time of Transition ... The years between 12 and 20 are the years of self-discovery and the transition from childhood to adulthood. It's a time of leaving and arriving: Of leaving childhood, with its freedom from adult cares, and arriving in the adult world of responsibility and duties. It is also a time during which the child is moving from dependence on parents, teachers, and other caregivers, to interdependence on peers, employers and eventually even a spouse and extended family circles. He or she must learn the skills necessary to make it in the adult world, while at the same time deal with a range of physiological and biological changes.

It is a time of separating from parents to form one's own unique identity and find one's own purpose in life - a process known as "Individuation". Parents often mistake this process – or stage – as being rebellion as it may come across as a return to the "Terrible Two's" and its infantile response of "NO" to every minor request.

0 Changing & Raging Hormones -- physiological changes during puberty lead to mood swings. The boy is becoming the man, the girl is becoming the woman: both transitioning into adults capable of sexual reproduction.

With teenage boys this change is marked by an increase in testosterone levels, resulting in a greater predisposition to frustrations and anger. Testosterone is the hormone of sex and aggression. The teenage male has to accommodate these new emotions while making sense of them and develop appropriate self-controls as demanded by society

For teenage girls, they must not only adjust to physical changes that invariably draw the attention of boys, but they too are undergoing hormonal and



internal physical changes that will lead to the onset of menstrual cycles: a cycle often marked by moodiness and depression.

For the average teen this period of life is generally a time of uncertainty, self-consciousness, moodiness, conflicted emotions, and irrational urges.

0 Transitioning to Adulthood – and that Can Be Frightening

This is a stage in life where the child is moving toward adulthood and an unknown future. While the teen may not be always conscious of this transition phase and may not always be pondering the future, there is nonetheless an ever-present background level of anxiety and doubts about what lies ahead. This too, contributes to a teenager's mood, manifesting at times as wistful day-dreaming, quiet times of withdrawal to ponder the future, or – depending on the child and the home environment – times of anxiety and outright fear. If, as parents, we are always expressing negatives and/or fears and apprehensions about the current state of society, the economy, and such, we will only reinforce the fears that may already be in the emerging young adult. Children and Teenagers take their cues from us.



0 Teens Are Developing a Sense of Self

The teen years are a period of experimentation and exploration during which the teen is attempting to establish a sense of self as distinct from parents, siblings and peers. Despite following fads and going through times where your teen will look and act like his or her friends, it is nonetheless an attempt at finding a unique identity.

This search may, at times, conflict with moral, cultural and disciplinary values of his or her family of origin: a condition that leads to the next annoying and - if pursued to the extreme- can lead to troubling and sometimes dangerous Antisocial behaviors.

0 Important Influences & Experiences

The important influences at the adolescent stage in life, according to Erikson, are teachers, educational choices, parents and various other forms of encouragement in the early stages, while peers, role models, and social pressure become more important by mid to late teens. ¹

(1) The Teenagers World today – and the issues and challenges they face - in some respects is not too different from when you and I were teens. ^{2 3} Yet, in other aspects, it has changed considerably. “Cliques” and “gangs” are an integral part of the modern teen’s life, and acceptance by such groups is critical to self-esteem. Wiseman (2002) writes that teenage girls obsess about their looks and need constant reassurance from their peers that they fit in. Boy cliques control boys just as girl cliques control girls, and a boy’s behavior, choices, and personal boundaries are largely dictated by their definition of masculinity. Moreover, “honor codes” within cliques value loyalty and silence over everything else. Discipline and character are manipulated to suppress emotions. Fairness gets lost in the glory of competition, while any loyalty to what is right loses to the code of silence. ⁴

¹ Lefrançois *The Lifespan* p.36 re. Erikson Stages of Development

² Klaus & Hamilton : *Social Problems and Social Contexts in Adolescence*, p.16

³ The issues typically cited in my family therapy practice are : Curfews, choice of friends, amount of time spend with friends, spending money (allowances), chores in return for spending allowance, dating, academic grades, voice tone toward parents and other general issues of respect.

⁴ Wiseman, Rosalind : *Queen Bees & Wannabes* , New York NY: Three Rivers Press, 2002.

(2) The Importance of Experiences

Canadian psychologist and educator Michael Ungar (2007)⁵ maintains that risky experiences are essential to healthy development, yet a large number of our youth are living a sanitized, prescribed and regimented life that shelters them from growth opportunities (Ungar p.3). Citing the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky (1978), Ungar stresses that learning follows from experience (p.3) and that we develop identity when we perform for others (Ungar p.59). However, in the drive to keep our children safe from harm, we are preventing them from experiencing *rites of passage*, events that are age and experience specific that are milestones in development (example: obtaining a driver's license) prohibiting such children from marking the transition from childhood to adulthood (Ungar p.60.).

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In similar theme, Epstein and Marano (2007), see adolescence as an artificial extension of childhood that has had a negative consequence resulting in a generation of young people who are angry or depressed.⁶ In common with Ungar and Sebald, Epstein and Marano note (p.86) that nonindustrialized societies have less problems with their young people who are integrated into adult society much sooner than in the more developed countries.

⁵ Ungar, Michael. *Too Safe For Their Own Good*. Toronto ON, CA: McClelland & Stewart, 2007

⁶ Epstein, Robert and Hara Marano. "Trashing Teens". *Psychology Today*, March/April 2007 / Volume 40, No.2



0 Testing Limits / Pressing Your Buttons--

As a parent you are likely to have "hot buttons" and your teen is sure to find them.

Typical parental hot buttons are:

- > **Home Work** ... *because we know grades are important to earning power and a good future*
- > **Skipping School** ... *because we appreciate and value education*
- > **Too Much Time Spent On The Computer or With Video Games** ... *because we see it as wasted time and an addictive behavior. For the teen it is both entertainment and escapism.*
- > **Household Chores** ... *because it teaches responsibility and discipline as well as imparting good habits and hygiene for when they move out on their own. Plus there comes a time when they must accept that you are not running a hotel.*
- > **Disrespectful Behavior** ... *swearing, making rude gestures, name calling, blatant ignoring you and giving the silent treatment.*
- > **Dishonesty** – *lying, fabrication of stories to cover tracks, outright denial of things you know he or she did.*
- > **Ignoring House Rules** ... *sneaking a smoke in the bathroom, bringing drugs into the home, having opposite sex friends stay over: in their room no less.*
- > **Ignoring Curfews**
- > **Ignoring Simple Requests or not showing simple courtesies...** *Like not informing parents of social plans and school schedules; not taking time to call in and let you know where they are; not acknowledging birthdays; being mean and disrespectful to siblings or other relatives, and friends.*

Important Developmental Steps To Be Accomplished in Adolescence

- (1) Developing a sense of “Self” that is functionally independent and autonomous:
Individuating, detaching from parents. Developing needed social skills and coping skills.
Learning how to have mature relationships with both sexes.
- (2) Developing a set of moral codes to live by; arriving at a personal ethical system to guide behavior. Learning about socially responsible behavior.
- (3) Developing own spiritual and religious views and beliefs
- (4) Developing own views of the world as safe or unsafe place; developing own views on politics and social issues.
- (5) Coming to terms with own sexuality and gender. (Gender role, Gender orientation)
- (6) Coming to terms with academic and non-academic skills, potential and limitations.
Must eventually make decisions regarding post-secondary work, or training, and/ or further schooling that will have life-long implications.
- (7) Developing conceptual and problem solving skills – a process that began at about age 10.
- (8) Achieving emotional independence from parents.





B. COMMON BEHAVIORS

All 'Behavior' has a purpose. Behind any action is a motive.

Typically, we want something: we have a goal and we set out to get it. It is generally one of the following:

- > **Attention**
- > **Love**
- > **Security**
- > **To be recognized as special, of value, and of having a purpose**

1) Attention-Getting ... Attention -getting behavior is an almost universal characteristic of children. When a teenager feels insecure about his or her belongingness there is a greater likelihood of more extreme attention getting mechanisms (AGMs). An increasing sense of discouragement and anger often elicits negatively directed AGM behavior. The message basically: Any attention, even negative attention, is good attention. It is important to understand that the adolescent brain is still developing, and will continue to do so until the early 20s. The prefrontal region that links action to consequences, and regulates our planning and behavioral evaluation abilities is not yet fully formed and is often the reason that teens find themselves in trouble.

2) Seeking Power... Power – seeking behavior is common since a significant aspect of successful adolescent identity formation is experiencing and experimenting the positive aspects of personal decision making, self –control, power and influence as individuals separate from parents.

3) Seeking Arousal ... Arousal –seeking behavior is activity that increases the amount of adrenalin in the blood stream



and makes the teenager feel alive and “pumped” up. It can be a good feeling. Hence it is important to be active in sports and social activities.

4) Seeking Peer Acceptance & Distancing From Parents ... how his or her peers



accept a teenager plays a major role in self-evaluation. Feeling accepted increases self-esteem and self-worth, while feeling rejected destroys self-confidence and results in feelings of low self-worth and poor self-esteem.

It is also an important developmental stage during which the adolescent is establishing his or her own self-identity independent of the family circle. This growth toward independence and interdependence is critical to eventual adjustment to life as a self-sustaining adult.

5) Seeking Superiority... Part of finding one’s own unique identity is to identify with hero images: individuals with power, influence and superior knowledge and / or skills. Usually, this does not include the teenager’s parents. It is during this period that gang affiliation is a risk. The more discouraged – and rejected- a teenager feels, the more he or she may identify with the questionable role models and peers.



C. COMMON EMOTIONS

It is important to understand that swings through a range of emotional extremes is normal and part of what a teenager has to contend with. Emotions, in and of themselves, are morally neutral. They are neither good nor bad. Rather it is how emotions are dealt

with and how the teenager, and those around him or her, respond that determines how healthy or unhealthy, how good or how bad, emotions can be. The teenager has to come to understand that it is **WHAT WE DO** with our emotions that is important. The adolescent should be encouraged to embrace emotions such as sadness and anger, rather than being taught –often in subtle fashion – that such feelings are somehow wrong. Most of us, of course, would be like to be happy all the time and to be surrounded by happy, contented people, but that is unrealistic and builds faulty expectations.

Common Emotions are:



1) Anger ... This is a common emotion. It is born primarily out of four components:

- > Frustration ... life moving too slow for the teen; goals seem too far into the future; desired freedoms and house-rules seem unfair and constraining
- > Fear ... The Future is an uncertainty; self-confidence and ability to eventually live on one's own may seem taunting.
- > Perceived Injustices and Unfairness ... see frustration.
- > Ego protection ... challenges to self-image and self-esteem.



2) Apathy... Apathy is a way of “giving up” when life is perceived as too painful or too stressful. It is rooted in discouragement. It can be used as a manipulative ploy - an attempt to gain concessions or relaxing of rules. But it can also stem from low self-confidence and low self-esteem, in which case it may become chronic (i.e. of lasting duration), converting into depression.

3) Boredom ...The need for excitement (see Arousal-Seeking above) coupled with a lack of creativity or lack of new things to experience can lead to boredom. The young, still developing mind craves new experiences and is restless.

4) Sadness ...Apathy, boredom, peer-group rejection, and low self-esteem and even loss of friends because of moves or change of schools



can lead to sadness. This is part of the reality of life. The teenager has to be allowed to feel these emotions and helped in acquiring effective coping skills. Denial of such feelings is unhealthy.

5) Guilt ... Teenagers, like adults, are sometimes prone to irrational or false guilt. They may unwittingly feel they are the cause of such things as their parents fighting, a friend's suicide, or other such situations. This is because as an adolescent, they view the world – the universe – from an egocentric perspective. They are at the center of the own little world and all things revolve around them and they feel connected, in some fashion, to all things.



6) Fear –Anxiety ... Both the teenager's existing world and his or her future world can be a fearful place. Life is full of uncertainties. The death of a classmate, being uprooted by a parent's job transfer, facing eventual transition to college or transitioning to the work world all cause anxiety and apprehension. For a teen with low self-confidence, such things can be overwhelming and lead to excessive anxiety, which in turn can cause the individual to be almost dysfunctional. Couple this with academic demands, and the teen may manifest anxiety in the form of test-phobia (freeze in tests and exams) or school-phobia (get physically sick at the thought of school because of nervous fear).

7) Stress ... Stress is the physical and mental “tension” or “pressure” that the individual is under. For teens this can be considerable: peer-pressures, academic pressures, full daily and weekly event schedules, and the constant pressure to “perform”.



8) Joy ... Joy and elation come when we feel we are doing something that makes us happy to be alive. As well as we feel happy and content when we feel good about ourselves. Joy and elation come from those activities and interpersonal relationships that make us feel that satisfied with life. Involvement with sports, community service programs,

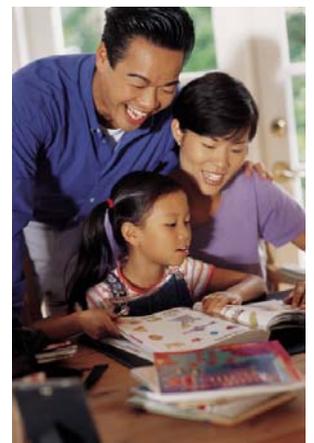
volunteer work and such can make us feel connected to others and receive needed positive feedback.



9) Love, Sex, and All That Stuff ... Having someone special in our life that stirs sexual feelings along with feelings of attachment, perhaps brings the greatest sense of joy and elation. We feel on top of the world when we have a special someone – even a close special friend. Heterosexual relationships provide an opportunity to learn about relating to the opposite sex, to explore our sexual feelings, and an opportunity form opinions about eventual long-term choices about marriage and family.

Same-sex friendships provide a source of comradery, a place to explore one’s gender role, and the means to develop deep life-long friends who can be a sounding board and a source of support throughout one’s entire life.

It is important as a teenager to learn, and understand, that “Love” can encompass a wide range of feelings and emotions – including deep longing, extreme highs and extreme lows, times of anger and doubts, and times of elation and feelings of security. Love also covers a variety of relationships from Best Friend to Significant Other, from parents to extended family and everyone in between. There is Best Friend Love (Team spirit / family feeling of attachment) and Unconditional Love or Love for Humanity (empathy, a non-judgmental love that is accepting of others, an altruistic desire to help those in need), as well as Marital Love that is a mix of sexual passion, comradery and commitment as “ best friends or partners with sexual privileges”.





Sexual feelings and sexual attachments can become confused with “ Real Love” or “True Love” and it is important, as a teen, to discuss these complex feelings, thoughts and emotions with someone older and whom you respect and trust. Many a promising future has been ruined or lost because of an unwanted pregnancy.

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Insights Counseling – May 2006

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