

**RAISING TEENS WITH
LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE
(Despite How Impossible
They Can Be)**



Dr. Brad Sachs, Ph.D

www.bradsachs.com

Healthy Outcomes Partnership

Thursday, May 13, 2010

How To Have an Imperfect Family and Be Perfectly Satisfied....

- We're all flying by the seat of our pants-the only predictable and explicable aspects of raising teens are how unpredictable and inexplicable they can be
- Your teen is not *your* teen
- What you see is what you are likely to get
- *All* parental emotions are normal and acceptable
- Teens need us the most when they are the least pleasant to be with

(How to Have...)

- Adolescence can be a nightmare, but almost everyone wakes up from it
- As long as you do a good deal more positive parenting than negative parenting, things are likely to turn out fine
- Nothing important comes easy—pain, discomfort, and disruption are necessary counterparts to growth and change
- Adolescence should be a preparation for adulthood, not a performance for adults
- The person *of* the parent must come before the person *as* a parent

(How to Have...)

- The parent's *nurture* must conform to the teen's *nature*
- We need to spend *less time* naming problems, and *more time* looking at the climate that creates and maintains problems
- We must convey that it's not what you have and what you do, but who you are and how you love that matters

Every Teen Experiences Three Births...



THE FANTASY TEEN

THE ACTUAL TEEN

THE GOOD ENOUGH TEEN

THE GOOD ENOUGH TEEN



FIVE STEPS TOWARDS EMBRACING

THE GOOD ENOUGH Teen

- UNCOVERING
- ACKNOWLEDGING
- UNDERSTANDING
- FORGIVING
- CHANGING

Oft-Ignored Aspects of Adolescent Development

- Every adolescent is in mourning, needing to say goodbye to her childhood in order to prepare for welcoming her adulthood

“I’m a loser”

Adolescent Grieving...

- To create a *future*, the teen must grieve for the *past*, which means she must:
 - a. Forgive her parents for being less powerful and protective
 - b. Recognize the irreversible nature of growth and its attendant loss
 - c. Acknowledge that she may be unique, but she will also be ordinary
 - d. Come to terms with the existential reality of aloneness
 - e. Relinquish fantasies of invulnerability, immortality, omnipotence and being the center of the universe

A NOTE OF GRIEF...



This note should be pretty easy to understand...I haven't felt the excitement of creating music along with reading and writing for too many years now. I feel guilty beyond words about these things...I'm too sensitive..I need to be slightly numb in order to regain the enthusiasm I once had as a child...I have a daughter who reminds me of who I used to be...it makes me feel too fucking sad...

OFT-IGNORED ASPECTS

(cont.)...



- Adolescence happens not only to the adolescent, but to the entire family
- Of all the influences on the teen, the family has by far the most effect
- Adolescents must paradoxically grow up and away while simultaneously strengthening the connections that keep them close—discovering an “I” while maintaining a “We”

(Oft-ignored...)

- Adolescent problems and challenges heat up what the *family* needs to be working on and grieving for, making patterns and problems more visible and available for change
- Adolescents need to say “No” to significant adults in order to know more about who they are, and who they aren’t—they *defy* in order to *define*
- Parent-Teen battles are a necessary way to acknowledge attachment to each other and come to understand each other—the *worst* fights are usually created by the family’s effort to *avoid* fights

(Oft-ignored...)

- Teens tend to assign blame rather than assume accountability not because of their *lack* of responsibility, but because of their unfamiliarity and discomfort with assuming it
- The more that teens doubt themselves, the more insistent and persuasive they may become (“*Often wrong, never uncertain*”)
- Teens elicit in and project onto adults all of the discomfiting emotions that *they* are feeling (*Psycho-Dialysis*), preferring to fight with *others* than with themselves

(Oft-ignored...)

- Teens may refuse to ask for help, or may reject help that is offered, because help reminds them of their own remaining vulnerability and dependence
- Adolescents manage their impending fear of leaving home and its resultant grief either by acting like they've already left, by never leaving, or by forcing themselves to leave on questionable or dangerous ("death-defying") terms which may actually ensure their return
- The adolescent's (and parents') ultimate goal should be healthy separation- "walking away from home" (rather than "running away from home" or "staying home") towards self-sufficiency, without anyone being alienated or devalued

(Oft-ignored...)

Adolescents manage their impending fear of leaving home and its resultant grief either by:

- acting like they've already left
- never leaving,
- forcing themselves to leave on questionable or dangerous (“death-defying”) terms which may actually ensure their return

(Oft-ignored...)

- The adolescent's (and parents') ultimate goal should be healthy separation-
“walking away from home” (rather than
“running away from home” or “staying
home”) towards self-sufficiency, without
anyone being alienated or devalued

Why Contemporary Parents Have a Difficult Time Seeing Teens as Good Enough

- 1) Smaller families
- 2) Bearing children later in life
- 3) Effort involved in starting a family
- 4) Experience in the world of work outside the home
- 5) Economic gap between the “have’s” and the “have-nots”
- 6) A yearning for reward, a validation of our choices
- 7) An overall Mid-life assessment/report card
- 8) The parenting industry
- 9) The pharmaceutical industry
- 10) The teen’s need to differentiate, spurn, and repudiate

STAGE ONE:
Expectations... Conscious and
Subconscious

Conscious

- They had better do what *we* wished we had done
- They had better do what our *parents* wished we had done
- They had better do what our parents made *us* do
- They had better *not* make the mistakes we made
- They had better make the same good choices we made

(STAGE ONE)

UNCONSCIOUS

- They must heal our relationship with our parents
- They must replace a lost or loved one
- They must erase our flaws and failures
- They must reflect well on us
- They must make good on our broken promises
- They must heal our marriage
- They must carry away our unsavory qualities
- They must make us immortal

STAGE TWO: ACKNOWLEDGING...

**SOME SELF-DEFEATING REACTIONS TO A
DISAPPOINTING OR DISILLUSIONING TEEN:**

- Hyper-parenting
- Hyper-criticalness
- Over-anxious
- Self-Blame
- Blaming Others
- Blaming the Teen
- Angry Withdrawal

STAGE THREE: UNDERSTANDING

How Our Teens' Problems Are Actually *Solutions* to their Problems

Physiologically-based problems

Socially-based problems

Emotionally-based problems

Family-based problems

Identity-based problems

Power-based problems

Separation-based problems

Teens sometimes solve *problems* in *problematic* ways, guided by philosophical platforms like...

It's important for me to be seen as helpless so not too much is expected of me

I can't stop acting angry or everybody will think I've forgotten all the terrible things that have happened to me

I cannot do exactly what is being asked of me because I won't feel or appear like I'm my own person

I will no longer recognize myself if I'm robbed of or give up this aspect of myself, maladaptive or unpleasant as it may be to maintain

(Solving *Problems...*)



If I can't solve a problem on my own, it doesn't count

I'll feel humiliated if I decide to change, and everybody thinks that I've finally come around and tells me, "I told you so."

Doing things differently means admitting that the adults were right and I was wrong

If I become too successful, my parents will think that they're no longer necessary

I'm still too angry at my parents to make them proud of me and give them a chance to brag

PROBLEM-SOLVING PROBLEMS



When a problem is not being solved well, this represents a failure of the *imagination*, not a failure of the teen, the parent, or anyone else...no one is to blame, but *everyone* is responsible for approaching the stuckpoint more creatively

STAGE FOUR: FORGIVING

Forgiving your teen is not the same as, nor should it lead to...

- *Acquiescence-a failure to assert your authority*
- *Passivity, resignation and hopelessness*
- *Dread of being disliked or unpopular*
- *Allowing yourself to be manipulated or exploited*


(STAGE FOUR)

Forgiving parents...

- Release their teens from the expectation that they will make all parental dreams come true
- Free their teens from emotional debt
- Liberate themselves from chronic feelings of guilt, resentment and disappointment

STAGE FIVE:

The Realities of Family Growth and Change



- True change only occurs in a loving relationship
- **Teens won't change unless parents/families change first**
- Sometimes, you have to change the reason for changing if change is going to come about
- **Change is difficult and always presents risk**
- Things can always change from bad to worse
- **Behaviors may change before attitudes do**

(*STAGE FIVE*)



- Not every step is a step forward, but there is no way for change to take place without steps
- **Change is not always visible**
- Talking about change is not the same as changing
- **Predicting change increases the chances of change**
- Overplaying the *necessity* of change actually undermines the possibility of change

GOOD ENOUGH PARENTS...



- Remember that their main job is to be left
- Act as Beacon and Mirror
- Know that it's usually not firm action, but the *lack* of it, that pushes teens to extremes—their job is to *lead* not to be *liked*
- Embrace their own, and their teens', mixed emotions about family life
- Set limits, establish rules, impose positive and negative consequences

(Good Enough Parents...)

- Assign age-appropriate responsibilities (become consultant, not subcontractor)
- Allow teens opportunities to succeed and fail without rescuing them (You can't plant without digging a hole)
- Work in partnership with their teens, gradually sharing power and granting autonomy in workable doses
- Have compassion for their passions
- Are honest and empathic about the difficulty and unfairness of change
- Help them prepare for “bad/difficult experiences” with “good/positive experiences”

(Good Enough Parents...)

- Understand that not every family problem has an ideal solution
- Acknowledge that no lesson of enduring significance can ever really be taught
- Recognize that you can't motivate somebody else
- Become increasingly comfortable with disappointing their teen (and being disappointed by them)
- Focus more on modeling than instructing, less on “kneading” than on “rising”
- LISTEN!
- Are “good enough” at being Good Enough

The Compassionate Dialogue

Attracting the Teen's Curiosity regarding his/her behavior:

- Not a debate
- No rigidly anticipated conclusion
- Induces further thought/reflection
- Leads Teen to converse with him/herself, asking/answering questions...

The Compassionate Dialogue



Who was I, who am I, and who am I becoming?

Why do I do what I do, and how might I do what I do differently?

The Compassionate Dialogue



Attracting the Teen's Curiosity regarding his/her behavior:

- **Yields relational closeness (Bonus!)**

The Compassionate Dialogue



- What were you trying to accomplish when you acted as you did?
- What alternatives presented themselves?
- How did you decide which alternative to pursue?
- How do you feel about your choice, and how did it work out?
- What would you do differently next time?

Cellphone Dialogue



I got a call from your guidance counselor today about the cellphone that you took from another student...would you like to tell me what happened?

Nothing happened...

Well, something happened...she said that you took another student's cellphone and were texting messages to her friends from it...

Cellphone Dialogue



Well, now you know

But I'd like to know more

There's nothing else to know

Sure there is...it's unlike you to do something like this, so it made me wonder what was up.

Nothing's up...I took Marissa's cellphone, that's all...

Cellphone Dialogue

Your counselor said that you were texting messages to Marissa's friends saying mean things and telling them that she didn't like them

Silence

I would imagine that things must have gotten pretty complicated for you and Marissa if you took her cellphone and did that...

Cellphone Dialogue



Marissa's such a poser...

Not your favorite person right now, huh?

You can say that again...every time I get a friend she comes in and takes her away from me...I'm sick of it...

That can get old pretty quickly, I'll bet

And then she's like all nice and acts like she's not even doing anything...

Cellphone Dialogue



So how have you been handling this?

I tried to talk to her, but why bother? She's such a bitch...

Sometimes when we're not getting through to someone, we get pretty fed up

Silence

Cellphone Dialogue

And sometimes when we get fed up, we do things that kind of create more problems than they solve

You mean like taking her cellphone?

Well, I was kind of wondering what was behind that...

I'm really in trouble now, aren't I?

Cellphone Dialogue

Well, you are...and we're going to have to deal with that. Marissa's parents are pretty angry, and so are the friends that you were texting.

How am I ever going to get out of this?

I guess the first thing is doing what we're doing right now...talking it over and trying to figure out how it happened...

Cellphone Dialogue



Like that's going to help...

It's not going to take away everyone's anger right away...but it can be a start. And, believe me, you're not the only 15 year old who's done something goofy and wishes she could turn back the clock...at some point, I can tell you about the many times that's happened to me, if you'd like

Cellphone Dialogue



So what do we do now?

What do you think would be best?

I don't know...just tell me what to do and I'll do it...

Well, I'd like you to give that a little bit of thought. I have the sense that you'll know what to do if you give yourself a chance to come up with something...

Cellphone Dialogue



Why am I so stupid?

I don't think it's a matter of being stupid...I think it's a matter of being hurt and angry and not knowing what to do...so you made a mistake...that happens to all of us, certainly at your age...but I'm here to help you learn from that mistake and not be likely to repeat it...

Cellphone Dialogue



Am I ever going to have any friends again?

Cellphone Dialogue

Am I ever going to have any friends again?

Some of that will depend on how you handle this. But people are usually pretty forgiving if you own up to what you've done. And that might remind some of your friends of how neat you really are, and why they became friends with you in the first place

The Compassionate Dialogue

- What were you trying to accomplish when you acted as you did?
- What alternatives presented themselves?
- How did you decide which alternative to pursue?
- How do you feel about your choice, and how did it work out?
- What would you do differently next time?

Cheating Dialogue...

- When did you first consider cheating in any form?
- Where did you get the idea?
- What prompted you to cheat on this particular test?

Cheating Dialogue

- Was there ever any part of you that considered *not* cheating on this test?
- What did you say to that part of you?
- How does it feel to have cheated?
- Is there a possibility that anyone was harmed by your cheating, and if so, who and how?

Cheating Dialogue

- Would it feel any different right now if you hadn't have been caught?
- How would it have felt to *not* have cheated?
- Presented with similar circumstances, how likely is it that you will cheat again?
- Should you choose not to cheat again, what will enable you to resist the impulse?

Cheating Dialogue...

- When did you first consider cheating?

I don't know...

- Where did you get the idea?

I don't know....everybody does it, you know...

- What prompted you to cheat on this particular test?

I hadn't studied...and I knew I was screwed...

Cheating Dialogue



What does “screwed” mean?

What do you think it means? It means I was going to bomb out if I didn't cheat!

And what would have happened if you had bombed out?

What do you think? I fail the test, I probably fail the class, and...

Cheating Dialogue



And then what?

I don't know...

What are you afraid happens if you fail the test?

That you guys will be angry, that's what!

Anything else?

I'll be embarrassed

Cheating Dialogue



What would be embarrassing?

Do you think it's fun getting E's? But I suppose you don't know, you apparently never got any...

You're not sure I understand what you're going through, huh?

How would you? You don't know what kind of pressure I'm under...

Cheating Dialogue



Maybe I don't...but I'd like to...

Really? Then stop bugging me!

You are right...I really don't know the pressure you're under...but there must be a lot of it if you felt that you needed to cheat...

Duh...

Cheating Dialogue



How often are you tempted to cheat?

Every time I don't think I'm going to do well...

How well do you feel like you have to do?

Well enough to get into all of the colleges that you want me to go to

You don't feel like you have any say in this?

Cheating Dialogue



I don't even know...I don't know what I want...

Not a great place to be, huh?

Sucks...really sucks...

This might sound weird, but maybe it's a good thing you got caught

How could that be?

Cheating Dialogue

Well, we probably wouldn't have had this conversation otherwise. And I've learned a little bit about you that I wasn't as aware of as I might have been

So you're saying it's okay that I cheated?

I'm saying maybe you cheated because there were some things you've been wanting to say that you haven't felt able to say.

Cheating Dialogue



I don't know why I do half the things I do,
actually...

Cheating Dialogue



I don't know why I do half the things I do,
actually...

If you want to know the truth, 50%'s not bad,
at your age...I'm not so old that I've
forgotten what a mess we can make of
things...but it's not a bad idea for us to
maybe try to figure it out together...

The Compassionate Dialogue

- What were you trying to accomplish when you acted as you did?
- What alternatives presented themselves?
- How did you decide which alternative to pursue?
- How do you feel about your choice, and how did it work out?
- What would you do differently next time?

Sex Dialogue



I want to talk to you about something that I heard about you...I'm not going to tell you how I heard it, but I think it bears some discussion...

Oh no....

I hope it's not just an "oh-no" conversation, because it's about something important

Sex Dialogue



Oh no...

I've heard that you've begun to be sexually active with your boyfriend...

(Silence)

I want to talk with you about this, but I don't want you to think that it's going to turn into a lecture about "good behavior"

Sex Dialogue



Alright, what do you want to know?

It's really not about what I want to know...it's about having a conversation and getting to know each other better.

So what do you want to know?

I'd like to know anything you'd like to tell me...

Sex Dialogue



Are you going to yell?

I promise that I'm not going to yell.

Are you going to be angry?

It depends on what you tell me...I can't predict how I'm going to feel, because I don't yet know what you have to say...but I can promise that I'll try very hard to listen so that I understand you better

Sex Dialogue



Richard and I have started having sex...

Is there more that you'd like to say about that?

What more is there to say? And don't worry, he uses condoms

Well, first of all, I'm glad to hear that part.

Tell me, though, how you decided that it was time for the two of you to become sexually active

Sex Dialogue



I don't know...I mean, we've been seeing each other for a few months, we really care for each other...it just felt like it was time...but he didn't force me to, we decided together

I'm also glad to hear that you feel that it was a mutual decision

Sex Dialogue



So is that it?

Well, not quite...I'd like to hear a little more about what went into your decision...

I already told you...

You told me, but you didn't tell me that much, so I'm still wondering...

Why?

Sex Dialogue



Because it's a very important decision and because you're very important to me...

I don't know how else to explain it.

Well, when you say "it was just time", how did you know it was "time"?

How does anyone know? I just knew...

What about your relationship with him told you it was "time"?

Sex Dialogue



Look, I feel good about this...why are you trying to make me feel bad about this?

That's really not what I was trying to accomplish...

But that's really what you want, isn't it?
You want me to feel bad and stop having sex, right?

Sex Dialogue



I'm sorry that it's coming off that way, it's really not my intent

Sure it is! You want me to feel bad and stop having sex! Why else would we be having this stupid conversation?

It's not really about me telling you what to do...let's face it, I can't follow you around all day and all night...

Sex Dialogue



Thank God for that!

But I'd still like us to be able to talk about important decisions even if you're the one who's ultimately going to make those decisions...

Well, I've made my decision, and that's that

Sex Dialogue



Silence

So are you angry? You're angry, aren't you?

Honestly, I have a mixture of feelings. It's a lot for me to take in, and I'm not sure how to respond. But I don't really think anger is one of them.

That's a relief...

Sex Dialogue



Mostly, I have to say that I'm impressed with both of us that we're able to talk about something this complicated without losing our tempers

Me, too...

I suppose we should pat ourselves on the back...

Sex Dialogue



Silence

What are you thinking?

I'm thinking that things have gotten a little weird with Richard and I'm not sure what to do...

How so?

Sex Dialogue



He's been different this last week... things
are not quite the same...

Sex Dialogue



He's been different this last week... things are not quite the same...

Relationships aren't so easy to figure out...maybe we can continue talking about this, if you'd like...

The Compassionate Crucible



What count the most are not the lessons
we learn by heart but the lessons our
heart will learn

The words that come from the heart are
the words the enter the heart

The Nature of the Journey



Adolescents are preoccupied with questions of purpose...

- To know that their life has meaning
- To connect the meaning of their lives with the meaning of other individuals' lives
- To connect that meaning with the universe as a whole...

The Nature of the Journey



- To make sense of and grow from the pain they have to endure
- To understand and be grateful for the sources of wonder and joy in their lives

Challenges



- Achievement and Accomplishment
- Competition
- Academic supremacy
- Activity-based Virtuosity

Challenges



- Acquisition and Materialism (*having goods vs. being good*)
- Obedience and Uniformity
- Meaninglessness
(*valuing trivia/information over wisdom, valuing entertainment over play*)

What Do High School Students Want to Learn?



- More about people of all cultures
- Social success skills
- Manners
- How to fix things
- How to find a job
- How to protect yourself
- How to care for one another

Knowing Yourself



- Why is there so much suffering?
- Is there a God?
- What happens when we die?
- Do we have free will or are our fates determined?
- What makes me happy and fulfilled?
- Where and when will I find friendship and love?

Challenges to the Journey



“We know immeasurably more about the universe than our ancestors did, and yet it increasingly seems they knew something more essential about it than we do, something that escapes us.”

Vaclav Havel

POWER-GRAM



What decisions does the child have complete power to make?

What decisions do the parents retain complete power to make?

What decision-making do the child and parents share in?

Currently

One year ago

One year from now

RESPONSIBILITY-GRAM



What is the child solely responsible for?

What are the parents solely responsible for?

What responsibilities are shared between child and parents?

Currently

One year ago

One year from now

RELATIONSHIP-GRAM

What is the child entitled to do
on his/her own?

What are the parents entitled to do
on their own?

What are the child are parents
expected to do together?

Currently

One year ago

One year from now