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Helping Kids Survive When Home and Work Collide

Ages 13-18 ...Thursday April 23/20

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Introduction

This is the second in a series of presentations about how to help children survive when parents are spending even more time during Covid-19.

In the first presentation we discussed how to strengthen relationships with younger children by helping them to manage strong feelings. The text for that presentation is available on my website, [“Helping Kids Survive When Home and Work Collide 3-12.”](#) I stressed that being a “good enough parent” is very helpful to our children. If we can be OK with our inevitable mistakes, we can accept theirs. It is important for parents to realize how much they do to help their children in ways they may not have recognized. There is so much value in just “being there” in the relationship. To demonstrate this I asked whether anyone could remember being scared as a child and feeling better just because your dad was near? Or running to find your mom if you got worried? Or maybe going to your parent’s bed in the night? Your parents may not have been aware just how much ‘being there’ made you feel safer, but it did. The same principle holds true in adolescence except “being there” becomes much more difficult for parents as teens are pushing away. Today we are talking about the 13-18 year old age group. What I will say may be helpful for teens as well and offer hope for both generations.

Adolescence is an intense stage of development and under the stress of COVID the pressures become even more intense. I’m going to talk about some of the almost impossible hurdles you and your teens are navigating. No wonder there is often conflict!

Now - some basic ideas about the struggles of adolescence.

Several years ago, a mother of a 15-year-old daughter called me. She was very upset, as her daughter was extremely rebellious. Her 21-year-old boyfriend was a known drug user, and it was rumoured that his parents permitted teenagers to ‘smoke-up’ at home and that the parents often joined them (before the legalization of marijuana). The daughter continued to drive with this boyfriend against her parents’ wishes. She went out with him whenever she wanted and didn’t observe her curfew. The mother told

me the family sought professional help and the counsellor urged them to set strong limits. This meant insisting their daughter leave home and go to a foster home if she continued to disregard their rules.

The mother didn't like this suggestion but assumed that the professional knew better than she did. After all, if she knew how to control her daughter, she wouldn't be talking to a professional in the first place. Her husband agreed with the counsellor and felt they should follow his advice. When the distraught mother called me, I suggested that perhaps the counsellor did not fully understand the issues that they were facing as a family. During the throes of adolescence, difficult teenagers need parents who will not give up on them when they exhibit chaotic and unstable behaviour.

The mother wanted to come to talk further with me, but she couldn't convince her husband to consider a second opinion. I suspect he felt inadequate, overwhelmed, and angry and thus he wanted to follow the counsellor's advice. Likely the father was also feeling powerless in the face of his daughter's disobedience and wanted to show he was in control. They were probably engaged in a tug of war, where unconscious forces were at work. Without understanding what was happening, I think this father "got caught up" in his own and his daughter's powerful feelings and then didn't know how to resolve the difficult, explosive situation.

I felt I could help this family and was sad that we did not have a chance to work together. I did not hear anything more of this family for a long time. I'll share the rest of the story later.

I use this example, even though extreme, as I feel most parents have at times felt discouraged and helpless and caught up in strong feeling in dealing with adolescent children. It shows how difficult this stage is for both parents and teenagers.

I referenced "unconscious forces" at work. Understanding more about these forces may help both parents and teenagers through these conflicts. I will explain more about the unconscious as we go.

Today, I will focus on three areas that hopefully can help you and your teen make sense out of the most perplexing teenager behaviour and facilitate strong *independent* relationships. The close ties that parents have worked so hard to build must now be loosened. If successful, parents and their children will still feel close and connected but independent and separate people by the time children reach adulthood.

The three main topics are:

- 1. Powerful Emotions / Body Feelings**
- 2. Breaking Away**
- 3. The Importance of Processing Feelings**

1. Powerful Emotions / Body Feeling.

"There are few situations in life more difficult to cope with than an adolescent son or daughter trying to liberate themselves". (Anna Freud)

- a) Instability/Rapid Development/Emotional Upheaval

In adolescence, family life is not stable. The stage between 6 and 12 is known as “the latency stage” and is generally a more settled time in a child’s development. Then comes adolescence! Teens are developing rapidly, and this leads to emotional upheaval. During puberty, new sexual feelings and stronger aggressive impulses become harder to manage. They want and don’t want their parents all at the same time. A good book for parents of adolescents explaining these conflicts is “*Get out of my life - But first can you drive me and Cheryl to the mall*”?¹ Teens often behave like they did in childhood. They have *no idea* what forces are influencing them as their instinctual urges increase in strength. In fact, they sometimes fear they are going crazy, unable to understand their own erratic behaviour and conflicting urges. Teenagers often act like they did at age two when things didn’t go their way. Their demands become strong, they *want* things badly and are quite unable (at times) to consider the wants and needs of other family members.

With this instability during adolescence, emotional conflicts become stronger for every family member. You will be the exception if you haven’t become immersed in some ridiculous power struggle with your teenager about something and found yourself behaving like a two-year-old as well. When teens get stirred up in adolescence – everyone gets stirred up. Families experience a new level of turmoil. The book, “*Now I Know Why Tigers Eat Their Young - Surviving a New Generation of Teenagers*”² explains this well.

b) Id, Ego and Superego

Let’s look at the mind from Freud’s perspective. The **id** is the largest part of the mind. It is unconscious and where the instinctual urges, our forbidden sexual ideas/fantasies, our hateful revenge fantasies, our painful trauma, our humiliating experiences reside. Holding all of this in takes energy. Sometimes we get *really* tired at family gatherings. Unbeknownst to us, likely we are managing repressed hostility towards family members! Of course we must hold these thoughts in - we’ll ruin the event if we don’t - but it can be exhausting. Did you ever come home from a family gathering with a headache? If so, I bet something happened that upset you that you didn’t let yourself recognize.

The **superego** (aka “the conscience”) is “our finger shaking parent” that we always have with us. Inner thoughts or statements like, “you shouldn’t do this or that; you should do the other thing. You are a “f-up” - how could you be so stupid. You are some excuse for a person, how can you be so mean. Don’t you have any regard for other people, how can you be so selfish? And you’re greedy too”. The superego keeps us in line, keeps us from punching our neighbour in the nose when they park too close to the edge of the driveway and drive over our flowers, and helps us be good people. It sure can go overboard though, and in some of us, constantly “beats us up”. It makes us feel guilty and we often are not sure why. When you wake up in the morning, feeling miserable about something you did the day before, your superego is active. Sometimes we are unaware of guilt. It can be unconscious and, being unaware, we punish ourselves and have no idea why we feel so “bad”. Severe depression is often a superego problem; the bad feelings don’t let up. We’ve all known someone who goes from one failure to another, in business or life. Very likely this person is unaware of a harsh, punitive part that will not allow success. The “beating up” can be severe in some and lasts throughout life.

¹ [Get Out of My Life - But First Can You Drive me and Cheryl to the Mall? Anthony Wolfe](#)

² [Now I Know Why Tigers Eat Their Young: Surviving a New Generation of Teenagers by Peter Marshall](#)

Now the ego - this is the part that mediates the id and the superego. The ego helps us think and organize ourselves. These days we sometimes talk about “executive functions”. That’s the ego. When we are feeling “OK” and having a good day, the ego is working well. We want to help our teens (and younger kids) develop a strong ego as this is what helps them feel “ok” and settled.

c) Sexual, restless feelings

New feelings in the genitals are extremely difficult to manage. I have a 13-year-old male patient who leaves my home office out the sliding door into my yard regularly and walks around outside during sessions. He simply cannot be still. In cold weather, he paces around my office. Often he wants to write or draw and there is almost always sexual innuendo in his sketches His sexual energy is palpable. This new level of sexual energy is what all young teens are contending with. Both boys and girls experience a new level of genital sensation and agitation. These urges bring new mental activity - and these sexual thoughts/fantasies make them feel guilty. While coping with this increased surge of sexual tension and energy, they have the ego tasks of trying to make new friends, learn at school and get along with siblings and parents. And then the superego who is shaking the proverbial finger of what he “should” and “should not” be doing and reminding them their parents would be horrified to know they are thinking – like what if they want to get into “porn hub”? Sometimes it is more than they can manage, and leads to irritability.

There is an excessive amount of sexual stimulation in our culture. The temptation to watch pornography may be strong, especially for boys. The pressure to participate in sexual activity “because others are” is also strong. Sex, for some teens, is completely disconnected from any kind of affection or love. It is an empty, unsatisfying act that leaves them feeling guilty and ashamed. Although it doesn’t feel “right”, they may not be able to find a better solution because *not* having empty meaningless sex makes them feel more alone. Teens who are not sexually active sometimes feel “left out”. An adult patient describes losing her virginity to a boy at 14 “because her friend did it” with the same boy and she didn’t want to be excluded. Unfortunately, many parents are unaware of these intense struggles of the teenager, and are upset to find them sexually active, and often harshly judgemental. Several of my patients have talked about being called “whores” by their mothers who discovered their sexual behaviour and one mother called her son “a dog” implying he copulated in the same way.

d) Trying to find the balance

Often without realizing it, teens (and their parents) are constantly trying to find a reasonable balance between the need to satisfy instinctual urges and comply with the demands of the conscience. The surging instincts say one thing and parents and the conscience say something different. In between is the “ego” that is helping the teenager think and work towards life goals.

Here is a quick list of some of the instinctual demands:

- New sexual tension in the body - especially the genitals
- Strong desires for oral gratification - eating, smoking, french kissing,
- Urges to watch pornography
- Extreme restlessness at times
- New aggressive tensions - anger flares quickly

- Poor impulse control due to strong aggression

Demands of the conscience

- Don't watch porn
- Don't masturbate
- Don't try to have sex with that person
- Don't waste your money on 'that'
- Don't eat 'that'
- Don't drink more than you should
- Don't smoke too much pot
- Don't use drugs

Here is a quick list of the ego demands

- Help your parents
- Treat your family and friends respectfully and well
- Figure out what you want to "do" in life
- Figure out what courses to take to lead to a good career, courses are becoming more difficult
- Figure out how to make new friends - especially moving from elementary to high school
- Figure out how to love and be kind to others in the family
- Figure how to grow up to leave home
- Figure out how to get a job
- Figure out how to afford a place to live,
- Figure out how to find somebody to love and who will love in return.

As teens are managing this new surge of instinctual pressure that comes with puberty, it is not uncommon to see the following typical adolescent behaviours:

- Defiance, stubbornness, disobedience, rebelliousness, bullheadedness
- Undo diligence, excessive focus on high marks, being very, very good
- Messiness in dress, schoolwork, looking after room
- Obsessive neatness, politeness, empathy
- Wild mood swings
- Extremes in eating habits - overeating or dieting
- Loudness and boisterousness
- Withdrawn sullenness
- Use of abusive language

Every single day, teenagers are trying to find the balance between all of these conflicting demands - dealing with powerful emotions and body feelings. Psychoanalyst and author Bruno Bettelheim points out that when we tell our children to "act their age" we are actually asking them to act like adults, when they are already acting just as we have defined as adolescence.³

³ A Good Enough Parent by Bruno Bettelheim Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1987. Distributed by Random House Canada.

"The norms of adolescent behaviour include the struggle for independence, the battle against restrictions such as curfews, and the defiance of parental values."⁴

Bettelheim is trying to impress upon us the behaviours we usually view as negative, serve a purpose for the adolescent. Only by responding in their own way to the various impulses will a teen come to know what is unique about themselves. By knowing their uniqueness, the teen is developing an identity. They feel they are a person in their own right. No longer satisfied to think of themselves only as the child of their parent, teenagers seek an inner conviction that they are separate, independent individuals. This is the basis of solid self-esteem that allows teens to move forward and achieve their goals. It is what we all want for our children - to be able to find their way to successful adulthood with meaningful work and meaningful relationships. The struggles, the defiance, the messiness, the pushing away are all important steps in this maturational process.

2. Breaking Away

Support the move to independence by *helping teens love parents less*. The intense ties from early childhood *must* be loosened if children are to reach adulthood ready to form their own loving relationships with another and create their own families.

a. Lonely Depression

One major psychological task of adolescence is to loosen the ties that were the source of security in infancy and childhood. The adolescent can no longer gain security from cuddling up beside mom or dad when feeling upset. On the rare occasions that teens are so upset they turn to the parents, they lose some self-esteem and feel that they have not coped well.

With this loss of childhood security, often comes tremendous jealousy of younger siblings, who still enjoy loving support from parents. "You really spoil him!" says the teenager who longs for, but can no longer accept the same affection from parents.

The teenager experiences a deep sense of loss when giving up this love and support and this loss leads to anger and unpredictable moods. Teenagers often hate their parents – for being good and loving parents. Teens hate because they can't let themselves have the parental love they long for but must give up.

There is deep loneliness when teens separate from parents, and have not yet formed their own loving adult relationships.

b. Fragile Egos

The pulling away from parental support leaves adolescents feeling exceptionally vulnerable. They are in the process of giving up the only support system they have known - and trying to "go it alone". With their sense of self very shaky, they venture out to try and discover whether they can be loved beyond the family. Much like the vulnerable toddler venturing beyond the mother, and often as irritable, they

⁴ A Good Enough Parent by Bruno Bettelheim Published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1987. Distributed by Random House Canada.

are unable to acknowledge their inner feeling of weakness. Instead, they are pretending to be strong. How else can they manage? This is one reason some teens do not do well in treatment. They cannot admit how vulnerable they are. The bravado can be irritating, and parents may feel like “knocking the kid down a peg or two” but if you can see it like the vulnerability of a toddler, you might find more patience.

This moving away is equally difficult for parents.

An Example: One mother describes how rejected she felt upon finding her 13-year-old daughter talking on the phone late one evening, with tears streaming down her face. It was obvious there were “boyfriend” problems and the mother felt a deep empathy for her daughter who was hurting. The mother came over to her daughter to wait until the call was over to offer her some sympathy, but the daughter got off the phone, ran out of the room and closed herself in her own room. When her mother followed, the daughter pleaded, “Please, just leave me alone.”

Generally, this mother and daughter were able to talk things through and the mother usually felt that she was helpful to her daughter. This rejection was very hurtful to the mother. What she may not have known is that the daughter would have also felt torn. Along with her need to handle the phone call in her own way would have been her guilt for rejecting her mother, the despair of wishing to collapse in tears in the mother's arms, and the conflicting need to handle her problem alone.

c. Close ties are harder to break

An Example: A mother and daughter who had experienced an exceptionally close relationship in early years got into a very tense standoff and were constantly at odds with each other in the daughter's early adolescence. The mother felt that the daughter was getting out of control, possibly drinking and getting in with an older group of kids. She also noticed how unhappy and withdrawn her daughter had become. The mother worried whether the daughter could be sexually active and trying to understand the severe mood swings and even asked her if she could be pregnant. The 13-year-old had a 17-year-old boyfriend.

As the mother tried harder to keep control over her daughter, the daughter seemed to become more frantic. The mother tried to put clearer limits on her daughter and insist on a reasonable bedtime and curfew. Finally, after a difficult confrontation between mother and daughter over bedtime, the mother found the following note in her daughter's room the next day. Her daughter had run away. The note read:

Hi Family, It's me, Lisa. I'm really sorry about this but I really, really have to go. You really don't understand Mom. You seem to think my whole reaction last night was about my bedtime, but I'm afraid it's not. It's hard to explain when I can't figure it out for myself. That's why I need time alone. I'm not pregnant Mom, and I'll try not to do anything not in my best interest.

I really love you all and I'll get in touch with you later. I'll most likely call Darryl (boyfriend) but since he respects all of you so much, I'm going to lie to him about where I am, because I'm quite sure he'll tell you and I won't be ready for that. I do love you and I will get in touch later. Love Lisa

The mother was frantic, heartbroken, worried and angry. It was a day and a half before she found out where her daughter was. The daughter came home several days later, and mother and daughter continued trying to find their way, through frequent bouts of turmoil.

It would have been helpful for both this mother and daughter to know that loosening the ties between mothers and daughters does not come easily. For the process to occur, both mothers and children must give up something valued in the relationship.

When a relationship has been especially close, the pulling away can be especially strong. And it hurts both parties. Lisa and her daughter struggled through inevitable conflicts that eventually loosened their emotional ties.

It is reassuring to know that Lisa, her mother and father survived the stormy days of Lisa's fight for independence. By the end of high school, she graduated with honours and had become exceptionally mature and grounded. The conflicts were mostly over and although Lisa's mother and father had definitely lost their little girl, in her place they found a very nice young (almost) adult.

d. Boys May Be Easier

Sometimes girls are easy as well. And some boys are very difficult. Some boys become aggressive and challenging with problems with impulse control. However, in my work, parents have reported fewer problems with adolescent boys than girls. I'm not sure why this is the case. Here are a couple of examples.

An Example: Jake is 13 years old. He is pretty quiet, doesn't get into much trouble and he loosens the ties with his family by closing himself in his room, and simply withdrawing. He even avoids family meals if he can. He doesn't like to be too close. Jake annoyed his mother by refusing to get out of the car and walk with her into the pizza place to help her carry some pizza and drinks she was picking up for dinner. His mother was truly hurt and insulted.

An Example: Jeffrey treated his mother in a similar way. He was sitting alone watching TV. His mother, thinking that she doesn't make enough effort to give him the time he deserves, set aside what she was doing, and went in. "I feel like we never get a chance to talk these days. I miss you," she said. "Yeah, whatever," he said, as he gathered up his snack dishes, dropped them off in the kitchen and headed to his room. Jeffrey's mother sat alone, rejected by her son.

e. Cold Heartedness of Youth

Jane Swigart, in *"The Myth of the Perfect Mother: Parenting Without Guilt"*⁵ shares some important information that I expect will make most parents of adolescents feel better. She explains why a teenager *must* become insensitive to our needs or they are unable to turn away to struggle for independence.

An Example: Jackie was four years old when her grandpa died. When Jackie's mother spoke of her father's death, tears would often come to her eyes. From out of nowhere, little Jackie seemed to

⁵ [The Myth of the Perfect Mother: Parenting Without Guilt](#)

appear, and would stand quietly close to her mother's knee. Her mother commented on how comforted she was by Jackie's tenderness.

If our children continue to be so deeply sensitive to our emotional needs, how can they possibly turn away? Can any of us turn away when we know someone else has a profound need? The only hope for our children is that they become oblivious to our needs. Otherwise, they would collapse with guilt when they reject us, as they must to separate.

Teenagers, who seem so "selfish" and "demanding" at times, are, in fact, struggling with a very painful process – turning away from the parents they have loved so deeply. Knowing this may help you to not feel as hurt when it happens.

Some teens, especially girls, do not turn cold-hearted. They remain sensitive and considerate of their parents' needs. Ironically, this may not be a good sign, although parents cannot help but enjoy the closeness. These teens have difficulty feeling and expressing anger and there may be other signs of difficulty - for example anorexia, bulimia, irritable bowel issues or anxiety.

3. The Importance of Expressing Feelings

All of us have wishes that are so repugnant to us that we have completely repressed them. Unless you've spent a good long time in therapy, you will be unaware of these feelings.

This is the part of our mind that is unknown is the "unconscious". Some poets and writers understand it. Shakespeare understood, and Freud named it more than 100 years ago. **All of us harbour death wishes towards those we also love.** When we joke, "they all seem to be alive" describing our family during this tense time, it is admitting, through humour, these dark thoughts. Likely you will disagree, and say, "it's only a joke". Freud discovered there is a hidden truth in every joke. My patients also say, "it's only a joke" when I tell them I think they are harbouring death wishes when they say something similar. When slowly they are able to bring their hostile wishes into consciousness however, and recognize where they come from, they experience great relief.

These insights do not come easily. People have spent their whole lives *trying to put these "dreadful thoughts" out of their minds*. Thoughts do NOT make you a bad person (although every person I've ever treated believes they do!). In fact, the greatest irony about this is the more people find out about their dark, "horrible" sinful thoughts, the more "real" they feel and the better they like themselves.

Most of us have been told, since very young, that we *are* bad for hating our parents or our siblings. Our parents before us were told the same thing by their parents. The church tells us our thoughts are sinful.

Almost one in five Ontario children between the ages of 4-16 are showing measurable signs of psychological difficulty⁶. It doesn't get any better in adulthood. In any given year, 1 in 5 people in Canada will personally experience a mental health problem or illness.⁷ There are treatment centres

⁶ The Ontario Child Health Study – Dan Offord - 1984

⁷ <https://cmha.ca/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>

around the world⁸ that treat all of these psychological difficulties with talk therapy. Talking strong feelings through in families is extremely valuable.

An Example: A child I treated successfully for Tourette’s Syndrome had the onset of the symptoms when he was being prepared for his First Communion. All the talk about his sins was overwhelming to him and caused facial tics and oppositional behaviour. This child was so upset by his hostile feelings towards his brother and parents, that when I tried to explore these feelings, he would fall sound asleep in therapy sessions - so soundly I was unable to awaken him at the end. His parents had to come into my office and jostle him awake. He simply couldn’t bear to talk about being angry with his family because it made him feel he was “bad”. He may have believed he would go to hell and be separated from his parents. Very slowly, we were able to talk about his anger and his guilt and his tics and oppositional behaviour disappeared and he was able to stay awake during sessions.

This is one clinical example of many I could share about how people were able to overcome serious psychological difficulties once they were able to access their hidden (unconscious) hostility. The power of repressed feeling and the impact on both mental and physical health is astounding and a great deal has been written about it. (See *When the Body Says No – the Cost of Hidden Stress*. Gabor Maté⁹).

Helping your children know of their hostile wishes towards you and their siblings is probably *the* most important thing you can do to help them at this time of increased stress. Knowing of your hostile feelings towards your loved ones is likely the best thing you can do for yourself to relieve your own inner tensions.

Conclusion

Let me stress, I am not encouraging you to ignore or condone your teen’s troublesome behaviour - I’m encouraging you to try and find out what is wrong and talk about it when troubles emerge. It is extremely important to be very clear that nobody can hurt anybody in your family - no matter how upset. If your teen continues to be highly aggressive to you or others, professional help may be warranted. It is very difficult understanding how all these forces interact.

Perhaps you’ve noticed my suggestions have been broad and generalized. I stress the importance of you finding the way to solve the problems that arise, according to your own values in your family.

To finish up, I would like to tell you about a mother who once came to one of my courses. She spoke about her daughter, sharing her strengths and her worries about the girl, who was 16. Although this mother, like many other parents in the class, was worried about certain aspects of their daughter’s behaviour, she had spoken of some strengths, referring particularly to the girl’s work as a candy striper at the hospital.

⁸ Hanna Perkins Center Case Western University Cleveland OH USA
Allen Creek Pre-School – Ann Arbor Michigan. USA
Anna Freud Centre – London, England
Austin Riggs Center – Stockbridge Mass. USA

⁹ [When the Body Says No The Cost of Hidden Stress by Gabor Maté, MD](#)

On our last evening together, I asked parents to give me an update on their teenagers. To this mother I said, "And how is our "Candy Striper"?" The mother replied that things had improved so much over the weeks we had been working together that even her younger sons were commenting on how much nicer their sister was being. The mother was very happy with these changes that had come as a result of her understanding her daughter's need in a new way. She went on

"I don't know if you will remember, but I called you about six months ago. Our counsellor had advised us to put our daughter into foster care because she wasn't listening to us. I'd hate to think where we would be now if we hadn't thought more carefully about what might be leading to the trouble and I hate to think of what is happening in other families who go along with the advice that they should reject teens who won't listen."

This is just one of so many situations that I could share how families have improved relationships with their teenagers by working to understand rather than punish.

In this unprecedented time of COVID 19, when everyone's stress has increased, it is more important than ever that parents "be" there for their teens – even the teens who push them away and reject them, who may show little appreciation for all that parents do.

Your teens will benefit from your unfailing commitment and this support is what sustains them through this turbulent period. Think of it as offering them a life buoy to hold onto in the stormy sea of adolescence.