



# Riegler, Shienvold & Associates

## Mental Health Quick Notes

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Vol. 4, Issue 1  
December 2008

## Adolescence

### Staying Connected to Your Teen

Many parents talk amongst themselves about their adolescent's behavior. They ask each other questions like: "Does your son no longer want to recognize you in public?" "Does your son spend his whole evening in his room?" or "Does your daughter ever tell you that she hates you and wishes she could move out?"

Many parents are so disturbed by the changes in their adolescent children and ask "Why has this happened?" "Is this normal or do we have a problem?" "Will I ever be close with my teenager again?"

Parents may find it helpful to know that families go through stages in a life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980, 1999). Families with adolescents face a unique transition when their children move from childhood to adolescence. Families must increase the flexibility of their boundaries, as well as the closeness and distance in the family to permit the adolescent more independence. Finding that right amount of distance and closeness allows the adolescent to move in and out of the family with more ease and frequency than when they were younger children. This change in the adolescent's status is threatening to many families and can cause intense arguments between parent and child, feelings of emotional disconnection within the family, as well as conflicts between parents.

The research states clearly that a family's ability to reasonably navigate this transition is imperative to the adolescent's emotional development. Letting go of an adolescent in an appropriate way requires a strong relationship between the parent and child that can survive disagreements and mistakes. A strong relationship between parent and child has been linked to lower amounts of depression in adolescents (Kandel and Davies, 1982), less involvement with troubled adolescents (Brown, Mounts, Lamborn & Steinburg, 1993), later onset of sexual activity (Inazu & Fox, 1980) and school success (DeBaryshe, Patterson, & Capaldi, 1993).

Below are some reasons that adolescents start to act differently in this stage of the family and some ways to stay close to your adolescent as they age and enter adulthood.

Developmentally, there are clear behaviors to expect of adolescents based on their cognitive ability in the teen years. For example, adolescents and preadolescents between the ages of 11-15 years become more capable of logical thinking (Piaget, 1972). They are beginning to consider multiple solutions for problems and are not tied to the way they used to think about things. Most parents would say that on its surface that is a very good thing. However, when parents are dealing with increased argumentativeness, disorganization and challenge from their child about things that they used to just accept as the rule, they may find themselves frustrated and sometimes even arguing back with their teen. If the parent and child can not adapt to the adolescent's new found abilities, a pattern of negative interchanges can occur.

Likewise, from ages 15-19 most adolescents are capable of even greater logical thinking. They can look at multiple reasons for an event, understand consequences for their actions, use deductive and inductive logic, and their memory and organizational skills also improve. Many parents start to feel like they have raised a "know it all" and they, the parents, are relegated to an inferior status of being outdated and out of touch. Again, if the parent doesn't appreciate the normal shift that the teen is experiencing, the parent could take the transition very personally and pout through an important time of their child's development. This may lead to the adolescent reaching away from the family for emotional support.

During adolescence, parents need to perfect their image of themselves as a teacher and less as a buddy or friend. Parents have the job of being clear in their expectations and rules at home. This is not to say that parents should be robotic and not care about their adolescent's feelings or have no concern over how they are being perceived by the teen. Empathy is really critical for the parents to strive for in trying to make a connection with a teen.

How do parents convey to their teens that they are really listening to their feelings and want to be connected? In Faber and Mazlish's book, *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk* (2005), the author subscribes to several different ways to enable your teen to feel heard. Initially, parents should guard against dismissing their teen's feelings or giving advice. An adolescent goes to a parent and reports "I flunked my algebra test today", it is not a good time to say "Well, no wonder, you were on the telephone all night last night". This response leads to frustration and defensiveness that doesn't allow the teen to come to a realization about their behavior and make changes. It also makes the teen not want to tell the parent any future details about school. A response that may encourage responsibility for their performance might be just to listen and note "You must be feeling disappointed about the test." This keeps communication flowing and allows the teen to make his or her own conclusions about their behavior. This is not to say that failing an algebra test goes unaddressed, but in Faber and Mazlish's book much is written about how to discipline without punishment. Alternatives to punishment are actions such as stating your feelings, stating your expectations, showing the teen how to make amends, offering a choice, and taking action. Therefore, in the example of the failed Algebra exam after the parent has inquired about the adolescent's disappointment with himself the parent might add "I know you realize you didn't study enough. So what is your plan for the next test?"

Besides taking into consideration the adolescent's cognitive development and the parents consistency with providing a space for the adolescent to express themselves, parents also may need to look at their own adolescence to understand how to stay close to their teen. For example, if a parent had very little structure from their parents growing up, they may react dramatically to a teen's request for autonomy by becoming overly protective. If the parent's teen years were dominated by an overly protective parent, the parent may be emotionally distant in the family and with the adolescent in an effort not to recreate that same scenario in their family. If parents have a consistently exaggerated overreaction or under reaction to dilemmas of the teen this can cause emotional distance between the teen and the parent and lead to a number of problems. Anecdotally, many parents report that their child's adolescence has made them question themselves more than any other developmental stage of families. Adolescence can be a time of great change for adolescents, as well as the parent.

*Submitted by Tracy M. Richards, MSW*

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### Teen Substance Abuse

In the book, *Recovery Options*, there are two stories of teen substance abuse. "James Nelson came home from work and detected a familiar sweet scent wafting from his sixteen year old son Brandon's bedroom. It took him back to his own teenage years – but then he panicked, "My God! It's my kid. Today's pot is stronger. What do I do?" He pounded on the door and while Brandon managed to hide the evidence, his dad could see from his spacey stare and red eyes that he was indeed stoned."

"Susan Gardner's son Sean came home in a police car, looking fearfully and seeming incredibly young as the burly police officer brought him to the door. We found him drinking with some kids in the park," the officer said. Next time, we'll have to arrest him." She had feared far worse, but screamed at her seventeen year old, "You're grounded for life."

These incidents repeat themselves countless times in homes all across America. According to a report from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), on an average day in 2006, about 1.2 million adolescents age 12 to 17 smoked cigarettes, 631,000 drank alcohol and 586,000 used marijuana. In addition, about 49,000 used inhalants, 27,000 used hallucinogens (i.e. Ecstasy and other club drugs) 13,000 used cocaine, and 3,800 used Heroin.

Most parents can not believe it is happening to them. What could I have possibly done or not done that would make my kid chose to use alcohol or other drugs? Research indicates that addiction is a chronic, but treatable, brain disorder. People who are addicted cannot control their need for alcohol or other drugs, even in the face of negative health, social or legal consequences. This **lack of control** is the result of alcohol- or drug-induced changes in the brain. Those changes, in turn, cause behavior changes,

The key to adolescent addiction is the adolescent brain. It was generally believed by scientists that the brain fully developed during puberty. But presently the research indicates that the brain does not develop fully until 24 or 25 years of age. It is very important for parents to understand the development of the brain during adolescence. "The brain's 'front end,' the part above the eyes, exists to slow us down or stop our impulsive behavior, explains Dr. Thomas Crowley, a physician who studies substance abuse and behavior disorders among teens. It considers the risks and benefits of our actions, and it helps us "hit the brakes" when we consider doing things too risky. The front part of the brain is still developing connections to the rest of the brain until adulthood, so adolescents' brains lack some of the wiring that carries 'brake' or 'stop' messages to the rest of the brain."

"If you look at it from a kid's perspective," says Dr. Michael Dennis, senior research psychologist at the Illinois based Chestnut Health Systems, "there are a lot of good reasons to use [drugs]. They're exploring. They're learning to try different things. They have impulse control problems with their brain where they don't have very good judgment about how risky something is."

The younger a person starts drinking or using drugs, the more likely they are to go past occasional illicit experimentation into frequent abuse and then addiction. For example, kids who use before the age of fifteen are five times more likely to become addicted than if they wait until they're 21, the SAMHSA reported in 2004.

Parents often ask, "What can I do to prevent my teenager's drug use or what do I do now that I've found that my child is using alcohol or other

drugs? The most important thing for parents to do is to stay involved. A 2006 survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found a significant disparity between what parents believed was going on with their kids and what was actually going on. "Eighty percent of the parents believed neither alcohol nor marijuana is available at the parties their kids attend, fifty percent of the kids reported attending parties where alcohol and other drugs are available." It is very important for parents to be able to recognize signs and symptoms of substance abuse, which include: physical fatigue, repeated health complaints, red and glazed eyes, and a persistent cough, emotional (personality changes, mood swings, irritability, irresponsible behavior, low self esteem, or poor judgment), family (parent child relational problems, breaking rules, being argumentative, or withdrawing from family activities), school (decreased interest, negative attitude, drop in grades, many absences, and disruptive behavior), and social problems (new friends who are less interested in normal home and school activities, and who have problems with the law).

Parents involvement also means to talk, talk, and talk with your kids. A study by the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University indicates that teens that have five or more family dinners with their families are less likely to try marijuana, smoke cigarettes, or drink alcohol.

When you suspect your teen might have a problem, don't panic. Talk with your kids honestly. If this conversation becomes argumentative, it is important that you as the adult, remain in charge and this means no yelling. It is important to stay calm and focused. If you become angry, take a break, come back, and start over again.

The Center for Adolescent Substance Abuse has a system for setting up the conversation with your teen regarding substance abuse entitled CRAFTT.

**C** Have you ever ridden in a CAR driven by someone (including yourself) who was high or had been using alcohol or other drugs?

**R** Do you ever use alcohol or drugs to RELAX, feel better about yourself, or fit in?

**A** Do you ever use alcohol or other drugs while you are ALONE?

**F** Do your family or FRIENDS ever tell you that you should cut down on your drinking or drug use?

**F** Do you ever FORGET things while you are using alcohol or other drugs?

**T** Have you ever gotten in TROUBLE while you were using alcohol or drugs?

If you hear two or more yes answers, there may be a significant problem.

If after a conversation with your teen you conclude that he may have a problem, remember you're not the first parent to deal with a teen who is using alcohol or drugs. The first step for parent's is to have their child evaluated by a qualified substance abuse professional. This evaluation helps to identify if the teen has a problem and assists with finding appropriate treatment resources for your child.

Submitted by John Sivley, MSW, CAC

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