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Back in the days of authoritarian parenting in the '50s, obedience and propriety were high values. Digressions from good manners, respect and good behavior were often met with punishment. But then in the '60s and '70s, things changed. Parents wanted higher self-esteem for their kids and closer relationships with them. Fear-based, power-coercive relationships went the way of the rod in classrooms.

So it's no wonder that today's teens feel much more free to act out than their predecessors ever hoped. And they do. Just ask any parent of a teenager, who will likely complain about rudeness, ill manners, constant criticism and even being yelled at by their teenager.

But over the past decade, researchers have found it's not just a case of raging hormones. Teens may actually not be able to help engaging in questionable behavior. And their reactions may be, in large part, due to dramatic changes in their rapidly developing brains.

A Game Plan For Parents

Fighting with your son over car privileges? Can't get your daughter to log off Facebook and finish her algebra homework? Laura Kastner, clinical psychologist at the University of Washington, talks us through two common scenarios that parents with adolescents face.

Patti Neighmond: Tori Guettler says she knows she spoiled her 15-year-old son Alex when he was younger. Tori says she didn't expect that the dozens of Thomas the Tank Engine toys she bought Alex when he was little would lead to demands for \$600 snowboards and \$300 cell phones. What does she do now to undo what she knows she and her husband did?

Laura Kastner: You have to say, "I know I've given you the idea that you get privileges around here, and I apologize for that. But things are going to change now. There are things you must do every week to earn the right to the car keys on Saturday night."

You have to basically accept that *he* may not accept it. But you have a policy that's easy to enforce: If the chores are done, you hand over car keys. If the chores aren't done -- it's his choice.

Neighmond: Ann Doss Hardy is the mother of 16-year-old Emma. Hardy says she is concerned about Emma getting homework done. When Emma says she's doing her homework, sometimes she's actually on Facebook. What does Ann do?

Kastner: It's more likely than not that teenagers are going to go to this low-level lying just to get out of trouble. But we have to remember that low-level lying, like what you're describing, is very normal.

Research has shown that whether it is children with low achievement or high achievement, academics are the biggest area of fighting in families. Most teenagers are going to flip back and forth to Facebook while doing their homework, unless parents enforce an electronic-free policy -- as in, no phones, no TV, no social networking. Teenagers have a tough time -- just like adults -- fighting some of their temptations.

If the child is doing well academically, then leave it alone. It might take that child five hours to finish her homework rather than two. But she might say, "This is the way I want to do it because I can tolerate homework if I'm chatting with my friends online."

If there's an academic problem, I really recommend making electronic-free homework time. The child will say, "I really need to go online for my homework." You say, "Fine, we'll have 90 minutes of electronic-free time." Then you know you have a chance at some high-quality concentration.

Edited for length

Taryn Cregon And Zoe

Take the relationship between Taryn Cregon, a single parent who lives in Mays Landing, N.J., and her 13-year-old daughter, Zoe.

"I still have, on some days, a wonderful relationship with my daughter," Cregon says. "But it goes from this really back-and-forth, loving relationship to almost seeming like that person looks at you like you're enemy No. 1. All the time. You know, it's really tough."

It's particularly poignant, Cregon says, since she and Zoe used to be so close, enjoying camping together and going to theaters and museums. Now, Zoe wants to be with her friends all the time, complains about family outings, and often starts arguments in the mornings before camp or school.

"She's really a beautiful person," says Cregon. "I see her with small children at camp and her little cousins and stuff, and she's fabulous. And she's really sweet with her uncle, her aunt, my mom. It's just *me!*"

In one incident, Cregon was getting ready for work and Zoe was getting ready for camp when, suddenly, Cregon heard hair-spraying in the living room. She'd recently bought a new couch and feared Zoe had spritzed it with hair chemicals. An argument ensued, and Cregon was left dumbfounded, wondering how her daughter could be so irresponsible and thoughtless — and then argue when called on it.

The dilemma is pretty typical, according to psychologist Laura Kastner, who along with Jennifer Wyatt wrote a recent book, *Getting to Calm: Cool-headed Strategies for Parenting Tweens and Teens*. For more than 30 years, Kastner has helped parents and

children work toward greater calm in the home. In the hair-spray incident, both mother and daughter got tangled up in what Kastner describes as emotional flooding.

"When we flood, we are having neurons fire in this emotional part of the brain," says Kastner.

It's the fright-flight-freeze cycle. Heart rates increase, cognition gets distorted and people often think in simple black-and-white terms.

"I'm good. You're bad," says Kastner. "And they're both doing that at the same time." Kastner describes it as the worst time in any intimate relationship.

It's All In The Brain

Over the past decade, researchers have found it's not just a case of raging hormones. Teens may actually not be able to help their reactions due to dramatic changes in their rapidly developing brains.

James Chattra — a pediatrician practicing in Redmond, Wash. — says that at about age 12, the brain begins a massive shift in the prefrontal cortex, or the "thinking" part of the brain.

"It's going through this amazing pruning and rewiring and shift. But because of that, sometimes the prefrontal cortex that allows us to take a break, stop and think, is not working as well," Chattra says.

About half of the "thinking" neurons in certain regions of the brain, Chattra says, are literally "wiped out."

So in light of this biological reality, what can parents do? Laura Kastner has some answers: For starters, parents have to understand the massive brain change that's occurring with their teenager — even in situations more dire and dangerous than hair spray.

Staying Cool

Here's a typical scenario, Kastner says: Your child goes to a sleepover. The kids sneak out, go to someone's house, and spray shaving cream all over the house and cars. The police come, give them a tongue lashing and send them back to the host family, who promptly delivers them home to you in the middle of the night.



Courtesy of Taryn Oregon

When Zoe was 10, she and her mother enjoyed going on outings together. Now that Zoe is 13, they fight a lot more than they used to.

"Sometimes, parents say, 'What were you thinking?' " says Kastner. "And the joke's on us. They weren't thinking. They were running like wildebeests in the canyon. Just go, go, go. You know, they were flooded and excited and not really thinking through the consequences of their actions."

In situations like this, Kastner says the first line of defense for parents is to stay calm. Tell the teen to just go to bed and that you will deal with consequences tomorrow. Ask them to write a note of self-reflection — about their regrets, why they went off track, what they would do differently if given another chance, and what skills they might need to avoid the situation in the first place.

Kastner suggests even writing a letter of apology to the host family, the family that got shaving-creamed, and maybe even the police officer who wasted his time responding to the incident. Based on the quality of this self-critique, Kastner says, parents can then determine discipline or consequences.

"It will be small, medium or large, based on the quality" of the self-critique and how much the parents believe their children learned from the mistake, she says. Parents might even have the teenager suggest their own discipline. And there's an added

benefit to the teens' writing. It engages the "thinking" part of the brain, and gets the teenager away from the emotional frenzy of the night.

Emotional Regulation And Parents

Steering clear of emotions is difficult, even for adults. But Kastner says it's something parents just have to learn how to do. There are some obvious tools: Step outside for a moment. Take a breath. Think mindfulness or Zen.

Pediatrician James Chattra says Kastner's advice is right on target.

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"She incorporates this mountain of good research and says, practically, this is how you can apply this. This is how it translates when you're trying to think about your conversations with your kids," he says. "So the key to her is that she brings good science, good research to the old art of parenting."

And forget having the last word, she says.

"Let *them* have the last word," Kastner says about the kids.

A lot of parents may feel they don't want their kids to think they can get away with something. Parents might be right, she says. But is that strategy effective?

"A lot of extended arguments that happen with children are happening because we take the bait," Kastner says.

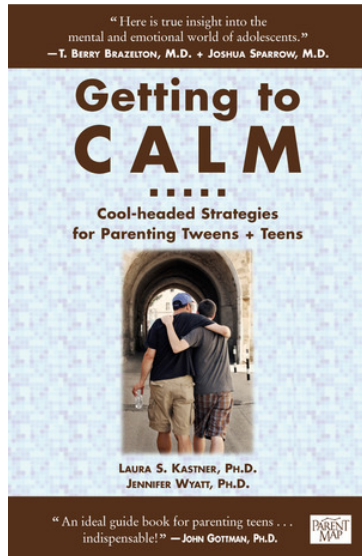
Parents respond to attacks, get angry when called names and end up co-miserable with their kids who are already generally irritated that their parents are the boss anyway.

"We need to let that riffraff go," she says, "and cease-and-desist because it's going nowhere."

Kastner likens such a cease-and-desist reaction to the protocol exercised by police, firefighters and pilots: Don't think. Just follow protocol, which is — first and foremost — cool down. She says, "We don't want to drive under the influence of alcohol, and we don't want to talk to our loved ones under the influence of extreme emotion."

Excerpt: Getting To Calm: Cool-Headed Strategies For Parenting Tweens And Teens

by Laura Kastner and Jennifer Wyatt



Getting To Calm: Cool-Headed Strategies For Parenting Tweens And Teens
By Laura Kastner and Jennifer Wyatt
Trade Paper, 288 pages
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CHAPTER 7

When They're Screaming at You—or Not Talking at All

Teens are prickly for various reasons, but a good parent-child relationship reduces the odds against any number of big-ticket problems such as mental-health issues, extreme risk taking, and school failure. Having a good relationship means keeping lines of communication open, listening well, staying positive, using authority wisely, and picking your battles. Being aware of what we "should" do to keep a positive connection is one thing, but the reality of pulling it off is another. Let's take the mother-daughter duo first.

Mothers and daughters struggle in ways that differ from mother-son conflicts or father-son conflicts, which have their own masculine mystery. Mothers and daughters fight more than any other parent-child pair, quarreling twice as much as mothers and sons. One study documented the staying power of mother-daughter sparring: Compared to mother-son arguments, which tend to last about six minutes, mothers and daughters stay engaged for about 15 minutes.

Even calm, cool, and collected moms will occasionally lose it and get into skirmishes with their frenzied daughters. Despite how irrational they may seem, conflicts between mothers and

daughters aren't struggles over nonsense. Very often, low-boil squabbling serves an important function. Going after Mom is a girl's bid to individuate and gain recognition as a different, competent, and unique person. Through bickering, girls can affirm that they are separate selves, and the more exaggerated the conflict, the greater the assurance that "I'm not anything like my mom."

Fighting is not necessarily a measure of a bad relationship between a mom and daughter. Moms can be very hurt by what comes across as a form of rejection, but when surveyed later, many girls who quarreled regularly with their moms say they have a close, supportive, and valued relationship. In other words, daughters are spoiling for a fight in order to separate, but they still want the connection.

Family Story: A Savvy Mom Avoids a Mother-Daughter Tornado

Arguments between mothers and teenage daughters may be as regular as rain, but when the twosome is a high-strung, reactive mother and a high-strung, pubescent daughter, it can look so crazy that dads are mystified by the emotional downpour. Because mothers, more so than fathers, tend to listen to their daughters' problems and complaints, they're more easily swept into the turmoil. Dads may be sympathetic, but they usually have a lower tolerance for emotionality.

Why are some moms and daughters able to contain their quarrels, while others routinely get drawn into big fights that spin out of control? Various factors come into play to determine the intensity of the quarreling. Mother-daughter duos with the very lowest risk for big tussles have this set of characteristics:

- Both mother and daughter have calm temperaments.
- There are no social stressors, such as boyfriend blues, financial problems, marital strains, or parent illness.
- Both mother and daughter have hormones in balance and are in good health.
- Good social support is available.
- Boundaries are firm.
- Mom has no significant family-of-origin issues (early loss of a parent, a wayward sibling, for example) to trigger high emotions.

Problems with any of these variables can spark big fights. Take, for instance, a mom who had a difficult, conflict-filled, highly reactive relationship with her own mom (her "family of origin"). Put her together with a daughter who is PMS-ing at the same time as the mom, and it's a powder keg waiting to blow.

In the following tussle between 16-year-old Sheri and her mother, Louise, the salient factor is the daughter's tightly wound temperament. The upside of her temperament is that she sets

rigorous standards for herself, excelling in school and sports, and presenting an impressive face to the world. At home, however, she is a highly emotional teen, easily agitated and easily upset. Over the years, Louise has learned how readily things can escalate with her daughter unless she keeps her composure.

Louise has just arrived home. In hand is a sweater from the dry cleaner's that she and Sheri previously discussed as a good choice for school pictures. As undesirable and difficult as this mother-daughter exchange is, it shows a mom doing her best in a tough situation.

What Sheri and her mom say:

Mom (Louise): Here's the blue sweater you wanted for picture day tomorrow.

Sheri: I'm not wearing that! I said "maybe." I don't know what I'm going to wear! I don't have anything good.

Mom: What do you mean? We talked about how nice you look in it. It'll look great!

Sheri (pitch rising): I don't want to wear it. Why are you shoving it at me like that?

I never said I'd wear it! None of my clothes look right.

Mom: I'm not shoving it at you, honey. It's just that I really think it will look lovely on you. Last year you were so upset about the plaid shirt clashing with your braces—that's why we talked about it last week.

Sheri (whining): M-ooooom! Take me to Allison's. Pl-ease. I talked to her today at school, and she said she has a great idea for something I could borrow.

Mom: I'm sorry, Sheri. I am not going to drive you over to Allison's tonight. She's not at all your size, and the fit won't be right. But I don't expect you to accept my reasoning. I need to just have faith that you can figure out an alternative.

Sheri (starting to sound panicky): Another ugly picture! You just want me to wear the sweater because you don't want to take me to Allison's! You don't even care.

What each thinks:

Last year was such a scene when she got her pictures back. I really didn't have time to go to the cleaners, but I was glad to do it because she is so self-conscious about her looks and body.

I'll feel like a stuffed pig in that sweater! I don't know what to wear. I'm so frustrated. I want my pictures to look really good this year.

Oh, no . . . she is backing out on what I thought was settled. It's aggravating when she acts like she owns nothing "good" when she has a closet full of cute clothes.

I'm going to look bad no matter what! I hate everything I own. Allison has everything she wants. Her pictures always turn out great. She's thin and beautiful. I hate the way I look. I hate my

haircut. If I smile with my mouth closed, my lips pooch over my braces. If I smile big, my braces take over the whole picture.

I can see that Sheri is about to lose it here. No matter how much I reassure her, her emotions are making her feel like this is a monumental disaster. I probably need to just extract myself the best I can so she can settle down.

Why won't she help me out here? I'm desperate. I don't know what to wear. I hate that stupid sweater. Does she understand how important this is?

I need to be ready for one of Sheri's tizzies and know that I can't help solve her problem this minute. Just standing here invites a tirade because I'm seen as the problem now.

I can't stand how she won't listen. She thinks this is some stupid, petty thing. What do I have to do to show her how awful I feel? I just hate her.

What Sheri and her mom say:

Mom: Honey, I'm so sorry that you are unhappy with your options. I can see how important this is to you. School pictures are really, really important to teenagers. I wish there was an easy solution here, but mainly I think we need to cool off so that you can make a new plan. I'll come back in a while. I'm sorry I can't seem to help you.

Sheri (voice high pitched, tears welling up): There is an easy solution, Mom. Just take me to Allison's! Where are you going? Mom, don't walk away. Don't be that way!

What each thinks:

I can't expect her to be anything but angry about my unwillingness to go to Allison's. I know that the best thing I can do at this point is to discontinue talking so that I don't make it worse.

She's not listening. I can't believe she is walking out on me. I feel like I'm going to explode. I'll call Allison and tell her what a bitch my mom is.

Although the situation went sideways in a nanosecond, this mom contained the upset as well as any parent with a cranked-up teen could. Even as Louise arrives home, Sheri is worked up about her pictures, ready to pounce on the first word out of Mom's mouth.

Louise can't help stating the obvious: Sheri isn't Allison's size. But she steers clear of sensitive comparisons about her daughter being "bigger" and avoids making volatile statements that would ratchet up the exchange like "How dare you speak to me like this!" or "Is this the thanks I get for going out of my way to get your sweater?"

The golden moment occurs when Louise realizes that Sheri is spinning out of control and there's little she can do to fix her daughter's upset. Louise has to nip it in the bud before it becomes a tirade, not by trying to solve or soothe, but by simply putting a stop to the conversation, as gracefully and gently as possible. By just standing there, she becomes a

lightning rod for her daughter's anger; no matter what Louise says, she is going to be implicated in the problem.

Why was Louise able to remove herself deftly? Simply put: a healthy boundary. Louise can't put a stopper on her daughter's flooding emotions, but she can contain her own and avoid "co-flooding." Because her boundaries are firm instead of a sieve, Louise keeps Sheri's upset at bay and doesn't let it affect her judgment. A crucial skill of parenting an adolescent successfully is keeping your head when you're under attack. Louise accepts that Sheri may temporarily hate her, distort the situation completely, and set her up unfairly to be the "bad guy," but she realizes that all she can do is put a lid on the fire and exit before an even worse meltdown occurs.

Louise isn't being rigid about not taking Sheri to her friend's house. This isn't an option, since Allison's sweaters will be smaller sizes. It would be a futile effort to forestall an even more tempestuous situation an hour later when they're both more fatigued and the sweaters don't fit. Some situations don't have good options. The best you can do is cut your losses and keep your own part of the exchange clean.

Under the grip of her emotions, Sheri is physiologically aroused, and her heart is racing. If Louise had let the argument spiral, Sheri's heart rate would have continued to elevate, from, for example, 100 beats a minute or so to 130, and it could have become one of those huge rows where a daughter chases her mom down the hall, screaming at her through the locked bathroom door. Moms who react by keeping the fight alive and co-flooding with daughters build up a bad history of hurtful arguing. Once a mother and daughter establish a pattern of engaging together with high emotions, counseling may be the best option for changing habits and repairing the relationship.

Sheri and Louise's fight won't go there. True, they are both left with raw feelings, and Sheri feels like she hates her mom, but by curtailing the fight, Louise is also reining in the ill will. Louise and Sheri still have a good relationship. They'll be able to get back together later, and once Sheri calms down, she might even apologize.

Louise realizes that her daughter came out of the womb tightly wound. Especially during early adolescence, teen spinouts are sometimes hormonal and related to puberty, but Sheri's volatility also arises from her live-wire temperament. Once Sheri is older and has greater self-awareness, she'll be more capable of holding a mirror up to her behavior, critiquing herself, and restraining the emotions bubbling inside of her. For now though, mom has to be the one to show her the way.

Dealing with Emotional Dumping

Fretful, overwrought teens don't want to be alone in their misery and will do everything in their power to pull their parents into their tempests, making parents miserable along with them. Parents rack their brains for a solution to make everything better, but it's important to be realistic. We can't keep our teens from having the misplaced motive of trying to engage us in their upsets. Empathy and support are critical to parenting, but there needs to be a balance: We

don't want to let our teens use us as their emotional waste bin and, conversely, we don't want to leave them high and dry in their distress.

To achieve this delicate balance, there's a step-by-step process to follow whenever teens are cranked up for a fight and dumping for the sake of dumping. For high-strung teens, this can happen at any time, about anything, because the dynamic pertains more to the teen's frustration and anxiety than to any specific issue. Remember: Even if teens instigate an argument, grownups are responsible for bringing it to a halt.

With frantic teens, the tricky part is exiting while still staying positive. Using the CALM technique (Cool down; Assess options; Listen with empathy; Make a plan) and maintaining healthy boundaries can keep us thinking, instead of reacting and engaging in an escalating brouhaha. The process is teen-centric, meaning that we keep our own feelings out of the fray. The focus is on three goals:

- Keep emotions in check.
- Minimize damage to the relationship.
- Extricate ourselves from the eye of the storm.

Under most circumstances, we work to keep our teens sharing their ideas and feelings with us. Shutting them down just because we're weary of a little attitude is an ill-advised, aggressive ploy. But when a teen is emotionally "dys-regulated," experiencing flooding and extreme emotions, being rational isn't possible.

Here are the steps for removing yourself from the presence of a riled-up teen:

1. Listen, empathize, and confirm their feelings. A genuine and sincere tone is critical. If we're hovering or pandering ("I hear your feelings"), it can set the teen off. Instead, try a heartfelt comment like, "Wow, this sounds like a real struggle."
2. Admit you can't solve their problem. When someone is very upset, we're all tempted to try to solve the problem with our good advice. Unfortunately, this can come across as minimizing or patronizing, and can escalate the conflict. Instead, try something that pulls you away from their complaining cycle such as, "I'd love nothing more than to come up with a brilliant solution that satisfies both of us, honey, but I don't seem to be able to find one."
3. Express your faith in their ability to figure it out. Our adolescents look to us as mirrors reflecting our reassurance that they can handle their situation. If we show anxiety, frustration, anger, or resentment, we're not inspiring confidence in their own ability to work through the upset. Depending on the situation, a parent might say, "Look, I know you want me to fix this, but I guess I'll have to let you be mad at me. In the meantime, I really do trust that you can come up with a solution."
4. Move away without being rejecting. In preparation for the exit, make a comment that breaks the spell but still keeps you connected. The phrase "I'll go make some tea for us" is a metaphor

for any nurturing statement that shows support and implies "I'm not abandoning you." It could be something like "I hope you're doing OK with this. Let's talk again in an hour and see where you are."

5. Check back in to prove that you care and are still with them. After some time has passed, we can offer some kind of nurturance such as a back rub or hot chocolate. Nonetheless, don't expect the teen to be happy and completely over it, since resentment and frustration are likely to linger. If the tornado has lost high velocity and dwindled into mere blusters, this, in itself, is a major achievement.

This five-step process pertains to a basic communication guideline: Don't talk to someone who is under the influence of their amygdala, the emotional brain. Once the teen starts expressing extreme thoughts like "I know I'll take the ugliest school picture tomorrow," "Nobody likes me at school," or "I'll flunk the test for sure," you're in the danger zone, and the less said, the better. We nurture our overwrought teens by diffusing their emotions, and we nurture ourselves by exiting before we lose it. If meltdowns are frequent, intense, debilitating, and pervasive, without good times in between, something serious could be at hand, and families should seek a professional consultation.

Family Story: The Burdens of Boyhood

Boys are less inclined than girls to express their woes, but just because boys don't talk about their feelings doesn't mean that they don't have them. By the time they reach middle school, many have internalized the "boy code" (be strong, mask your feelings, never show weakness). Not only do they hide and deny the emotions percolating inside them, they often cover them with anger.

Here's a story about everything that can go wrong in one day in the life of a typical teenage boy, including frustrations, yearnings, pent-up emotions, and an inability to speak up for himself.

A groggy Henry sinks back under his covers, figuring he has plenty of time to throw on his clothes and get ready for school, when he hears his mom screaming up the stairs, "Henry, get up or you'll miss your carpool!"

Henry thinks: That screeching voice. Why did I stay up so late last night?

"HENRY! I'M WARNING YOU!"

Crap, I've got a math test first period. There's always stuff on it that's not in the book, and we're supposed to figure out. This sucks—Eric borrowed my calculator.

Shuffling into the hallway, Henry yells, "I'm up, Ma. I'm waiting for the bathroom."

That brat Ellie is still in the bathroom.

Henry bangs on the door, after waiting outside the door for many minutes. Ellie, his older sister, shouts that he will just have to wait until she's finished. As they argue, Mom hurries by, reminding Henry he should have gotten himself out of bed earlier.

Everybody is against me around here. How does Ellie manage to get Mom on her side every time?

Once in the bathroom, Henry tries to deal with newly erupting pimples, but his face becomes a patchwork of swollen blotches. With a wet washcloth, he tries to flatten his hair, which is sticking out like a bristle brush. Time passing, Mom yells up the stairs, "Get down here!"

Lunging down the stairs, he discovers his carpool has left without him. Ellie, however, made the ride.

She could have asked them to wait 30 seconds. So now I have to "suffer the natural consequences" of not being ready on time and ride my bike. Spare me that line. I'm going to flunk the math test for sure.

Henry pedals furiously to school, locks his bike, and sprints to class, arriving late, out of breath, and gasping for air. The math teacher hands him the test and a detention slip. Struggling, he's stuck on the part that requires a calculator. "That's unfortunate for you," the teacher says. "You need to come prepared for class." Later, in the corridor while changing classes, Henry sees Brandeth.

I feel like crap. I know I blew that test, and now Mom and Dad will be on me even more. God, there's Brandeth. She's looking at me. Maybe she's not. She's trying to look like she's not looking at me. I don't know whether that note was for real and if Brandeth really thinks I'm cute. If that note was a set-up, I'll look really lame if I start paying attention and talking to her. Whoa, what's that?

Henry trips over himself and jerks forward, books falling out of his backpack. Sweat beads break out on his upper lip as Brandeth and the girls in her posse giggle. Two of Henry's friends whack him on the back and tease him all the way to Spanish class.

I can't let them know they're getting to me. I want to go back to yesterday and start over again. I'd get up earlier and hog the bathroom so Ellie would have to go to school with smashed hair. I could kill that test. I'd walk smoothly and coolly by Brandeth. Maybe Willie would bother her, and I'd move in and shove him off. And Brandeth would sorta be crying and look at me gratefully and reach out to me.

Henry notices the Spanish teacher standing over him, "I have told you repeatedly that I will call your parents for a conference if you do not stop daydreaming in class," she says sternly. "Where is your homework? We're waiting for you."

Later, outside at lunch recess, the guys are still razzing him about his smooth move in the hall in front of Brandeth. Although Henry tries to ignore them and shoot some hoops, he is playing poorly. "Glad you're on the other team, man," Willie snarls.

I hate these guys. I'd do anything for a couple of good baskets, but the harder I try, the more I miss, and the more crap they sling me. I'm choking. I've got to get a hold of myself.

Henry body-checks Willie. Willie pushes him, and they start knocking each other around. The track coach breaks up the scuffle, talking to the boys about thinking before acting and devising alternative problem-solving strategies to violence.

What a load of bull. He's getting off on his anti-violence lecture. Willie is doing his suck-up thing with the coach so he'll think I started the whole thing, and now maybe I'll get kicked off the track team. I don't care if I do get blamed. I'm fast. They need me.

Once home, Henry retreats to his room, plugged into his iPod. He worries about what his parents are going to do when they see his math grade. He wonders whether the Spanish teacher or the coach will call his parents. He thinks about ways to find out who sent that note and whether Brandeth thinks he's cute. He fantasizes about sex with Brandeth, about Ellie flunking a class, about Willie getting expelled, and about taking the track team to the state championship. Then, his mom catches him in bed, when he has promised to mow the lawn after school.

"How could you break your promise after what happened this morning! Henry, is there something wrong?"

She is on my case every minute. She's always begging me to talk to her about my feelings, and then I get this creepy feeling all over, like I'm being suffocated. She's looking really sad because I won't talk to her. I feel lousy, but I just want to be left alone, no demands on me.

Teens like Henry can look cold and detached from the outside, yet still be flush with anxiety, yearnings, and hurt feelings, too befuddled to articulate what they're experiencing. As any parent would, Henry's mom responds to the picture in front of her—a son lying face down on his bed, plugged into his music—and can't believe he has forgotten to mow the lawn. Mom wants to figure out what's wrong, but Henry has withdrawn, unreceptive to her bid. What teen wouldn't forget a chore after a day such as his? But Henry can't begin to reach out and tell his mom of his suffering, and his mom can't be compassionate because she doesn't know what has happened.

Ashamed of showing his emotions or any weakness, Henry is unable to talk to his teachers and explain his dilemmas. Among his peers, he has to defend his pride. Boys, in particular, can be "shame phobic," meaning that they're exquisitely attuned to losing face and will do anything to avoid it, often venting their emotions through rage and outbursts. All of Henry's vulnerability comes out as aggression, as he reacts to his classmates' teasing. As much as we deplore the "indirect aggression" of girls' social patterns (gossiping, spreading rumors, excluding others), the

"direct aggression" of boys, who taunt each other mercilessly, is just as harmful, especially since boys are expected to take it and be tough.

Although boys can appear to be loners, they still want relationships with parents, teachers, and friends. They just aren't always comfortable in them, and they often lack the social skills to create desired affiliations.

Henry's list of screw-ups looks dreadful: getting up late, arguing with his sister, missing the carpool, blowing a test, getting in trouble with teachers, fighting with schoolmates, and forgetting a chore. As parents, we need to reckon with our teen's lapses, but we also need to cultivate a second sense for how much is going on in their worlds. This perspective can help us moderate our judgments and focus on helping them learn from their mistakes.

Teens are tender and fragile, and we make many demands on them. When, for example, we burst in with "Good morning" and they don't reciprocate, we're all over them, but our joviality may be too much for them. The average teen is grumpy in the morning, at a low ebb in his biorhythms, and our cheerfulness may be out of sync with his spirit. The anguish that teens can experience at the mere act of getting out of bed and getting ready to face the school day can be excruciating.

Staying Connected When Your Teen Is Shutting You Out

When our teens shut us out, we work to reconnect by appreciating their complicated lives and extending the benefit of the doubt. Much depends on choosing our moments wisely.

The easiest times to be in sync with teens are when they're in bliss, soaring because they've scored a point in a game, aced a test, or feel on top of the world on a sunny day. During these good times, we capitalize on the natural camaraderie. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the hellish moments, when teens are upset or have had a disastrous day. For these darker times, it often comes down to damage control and shrewd choosing so as not to worsen the situation.

Falling in between these two opposite states is the majority of time, the messy middle, when teens have a little attitude and want us in their lives, but prefer we stay in the background unless needed. Too many parents have unrealistic expectations, believing that everything should be pleasant and friendly at all times. Hearts set on an enjoyable relationship, they're upset when their teens snub them. A key to staying connected is accepting the messy middle. If we make an overture, but they shrug us off, we need to let it go instead of feeling insulted and subsequently pursuing them. When teens give the cue that they're not in the mood to be chummy, we'd best not get in their face about it. But—a big but!—we still have to persist in giving it a shot. Try again down the road, when they're in a different mood, and you may hit that one in 10 times when they feel like talking.

Often, moms feel responsible for keeping up the connection, but dads shouldn't be let off the hook. Because dads can be less inclined to reach out and express feelings, this different twist

may encourage teens to open up and share their own. Both parents can reap the benefits of interacting with teens through chores, activities, or carpools where talking can unfold naturally or the task itself can provide the connection. And don't forget the magic of touch; back rubs, foot rubs, and shoulder rubs can be ultra-nurturing gestures that build connections.

Keep in mind that "interviewing" is not connecting. Sometimes, we need to trust that our teens absorb warmth from merely being around us in an informal way—they watch TV while we make dinner—instead of quizzing them about their lives. If we discipline ourselves not to riddle them with questions, they may relax enough to speak up.

Without a doubt, it feels like a loss when our teens become less eager to be around us, and we need to be on the lookout for the true isolation and withdrawal that signals a clinical problem. With the majority of teens, though, there will still be moments of closeness. We have to "enter on their opens"—when they signal to us that they want to talk—and this is often at an inconvenient moment, like late in the evening when we're tired. Their "opens" will be less frequent than during early childhood, but if we stay alert to their cues, keeping our prying to a minimum, these moments are as good as gold.

The 'Girl Thing' and the 'Boy Thing'

It doesn't take rocket science to discern that boys and girls are different. Witness the number of gender-related parenting books on today's bookstore shelves to realize how much information is available on the strengths and vulnerabilities of each sex.

Generally speaking, boys come out of the womb given to higher levels of activity, while girls as a group will be more verbally expressive, especially of their feelings. No matter how many gender-neutral toys parents introduce, many boys devise action toys out of their sandwiches, and girls find things to tend and befriend. Experts continue to debate the relative influence of nature and nurture on these gender-typed patterns, but suffice it to say that parents' socializing patterns and expectations play a huge role in what transpires.

Much has been written about girls' "relational identities," meaning that they're extra-sensitive to relationships and how they're seen by others, sometimes to the point of losing the "strong voices" of earlier years during adolescence. If your son doesn't get invited to an overnight by one of his friends, it's not the end of the world for him, but it could feel that way for your daughter.

Boys, on the other hand, value being physically capable and strong, and are ashamed of any sign of emotional dependency or weakness. For some, the sweetness of earlier years dissolves into a façade of bravado during adolescence. If your daughter is small, clumsy, and not good at sports, it's not the end of the world for her, but it could feel that way for your son.

Although broad-stroke gender differences tend to hold up for groups of girls and groups of boys, when it comes to individuals, temperament—their inborn personality—trumps gender. What does this mean? With characteristics such as motivation, cognitive abilities, or sociability, for

example, there are more differences within groups of girls and boys than between girls and boys. We don't want to judge girls who are rowdy or boys who are tender as odd. Plenty of girls are emotional rocks who won't talk, and plenty of boys can be highly expressive and emotional. It all depends on their individual temperaments.

That said, gender stereotyping remains alive and well and thriving in America. Parents need to be acutely sensitive to the specific pressures of growing up male or female. The double bind for girls is that they feel the pressure to conform to the perfect girl prototype—thin, nice, accommodating, always good, and never angry—while at the same time being ambitious, confident, and competitive. Boys experience a double bind because they're supposed to be strong, manly, and stoic, while also being empathetic to others' needs and capable of expressing feelings.

The following grid reviews some of the special pressures that sons and daughters face:

Special pressure:

Girls: Be physically attractive, thin, and nice.

Boys: Be macho and don't show weakness or emotions.

Specific risks:

Girls: More likely to struggle with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders. May put self in subordinate relationship with males.

Boys: More likely to be diagnosed in school as learning disabled, or categorized as having an emotional disorder, ADD, or a conduct disorder. More likely to be a victim or perpetrator of violence to self or others.

Media depiction:

Girls: Emphasis on sexuality and physical appearance.

Boys: Emphasis on hypermasculinity and images of violence.

Although most teens will feel some of these pressures, smart parenting can make all the difference. Don't accept that if your daughter is only pretty, sweet, and popular, she has it all, or if your son is only smart and athletic, he's up and running. Girls need support for developing assertiveness, not just kindness and generosity, while boys need encouragement for developing empathy, not just competitiveness. More and more research has documented that down the line, teens will need a full repertoire of social and emotional skills to be successful in their work roles and marriages, not just qualities associated with their gender.

What's a parent to do to counteract the traps? Occasional admiration for female beauty and male physical exploits does little harm, but these gender-typed observations need to be balanced with equally positive reactions to women who show strength and men who show

sensitivity. Parents can talk openly about the plentiful stereotypes in culture and media, such as the babes on the beach and studs to the rescue.

More than style and image are at stake: Teens' health and safety ride on the extent to which they buy into sexism. A number of studies have linked "hypermasculinity" in males to tendencies toward sexual coercion and lower sanctions on sexual aggression toward females.

Dangers for girls are equally astounding. Valuing one's self for sexual appeal and behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, is linked to eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression. When girls look outside of themselves for comfort and direction, fixating on their looks and weight, they become targets for the dieting, tobacco, and alcohol industries, which promise them everything. Teen girls spend \$9 billion a year on make-up and skin-care products alone, and are prime customers for liposuction and cosmetic surgery.

Talking to teens goes only so far, since actions speak louder than words. If a mother promotes "speaking up with a strong voice to men" with her daughter, but silences herself with her husband, she's sending a mixed message. The same goes for a father who encourages a son to express feelings, but keeps his own emotions bottled up inside. Fathers need to model the characteristics that they hope to engender in their sons, and mothers need to do the same for their daughters.

Research on resilient children indicates that they need only one secure attachment figure to be successful, and it can be a mother, father, relative, or other caring adult. Fathers who devote themselves to parenting provide teens with some big advantages. Longitudinal studies show that sons with involved and supportive fathers have higher measures of academic and social adjustment than sons without such support.⁵ Daughters who have strong connections with their fathers during adolescence become more self-reliant and academically successful.⁶

Below are tips for parents to bust gender types:

Girls

1. Try to understand fights between mothers and daughters as a teen's attempt to gain validation; realize that behind the protest "I am different from you" is a bid to be seen as unique and competent.
2. Mothers should avoid ruminating with their daughters (i.e., excessive sharing and talking about worries). Although listening and offering support to daughters is important, there should also be a focus on solving problems and coping.
3. Fathers need to be encouraged to find ways to spend positive time with their daughters in spite of awkwardness, reluctance, and either parent's preference to take the path of least resistance, and let the mothers do the parenting.
4. Avoid praising daughters (and females in general) excessively for their appearance; focus instead on other valued traits such as resilience, self-reliance, and confidence.

5. Know that girls need the same opportunities to stretch themselves and build competencies as boys, and avoid sending messages that imply that boys can be more trusted with independence than girls.

Boys

1. Promote, model, and make time to express feelings, thoughts, and values with your sons, and limit screen time and media exposure to images of violence, aggression, and degrading portrayals of women.

2. Don't make fun of sons for crying or being vulnerable; instead, make sure they know that vulnerable feelings are just as valid as assertive, angry, and bold ones.

3. Fathers need to offer nurturing and comfort to sons, not just activity-oriented time, guy talk, or parental guidance.

4. Accept your son for any rambunctious tendencies he might have, but discourage hypermasculine values while encouraging empathy.

5. Provide outlets for your son to let off steam physically and have plenty of arenas for safe risk taking (e.g., athletics, camps, challenging employment, exploring nature, leadership opportunities).

Now more than ever, it takes a village to raise children. Whether it's a coach, teacher, pastor, relative, or neighbor, different elders in teens' lives can serve as diverse role models, promoting teens' development in ways that combine valuable characteristics of both genders.

Increased parent-child conflict is one of the universal hallmarks of adolescence. As much a part of the teen years as growth spurts, voice changes, and new cognitive abilities, quarreling between parents and teens comes with the territory. Whether conflict arises out of a disagreement or a teen's bad day, it can be a vehicle for our teens to separate from us, exaggerate their "differentness," and forge their new and special selves—or it may just be a way to dump the detritus of the day.

Despite the inevitability of some family discord, the frequency, intensity, and general character of the fighting is often within a parent's control. Always keep in mind that because we're the grownups with greater wisdom, maturity, and authority, we're also the referees, responsible for fair play, rational thinking, and calling "time out" when emotions run too hot.

Arguing occurs not only when teens are upset and itching for a battle, but when parents feel as if their teens are withholding and shutting them out of their lives. Both situations require good boundaries. By staying calm, parents can have more clarity about what's going on, contain upset and negative feelings, and choose a deliberate strategy, based on what needs to be accomplished.

Though it will take many years and a lot of parental patience, teens need to learn how to express their positions and feelings as a life skill for the workplace and in relationships. Much depends on how parents conduct themselves in highly charged situations, because we are our teen's emotional role models and coaches for their future.

Difficult moments rattle parents. To steady ourselves through the tough times, we can reflect on all of our child's good qualities and the secure attachment we've forged through thoughtful, consistent, and loving parenting. We shouldn't expect to have great conversations every day to prove our deep bond to our kids. If we're more or less confident about the job we've been doing as parents, who our adolescent is, and the relative safety of his or her situation, then when we do hit a rough patch, we can trust that the connection is still there.

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