Building Resilience in Teenagers

Lisa Medoff, Ph.D.
lisamedoff@stanfordalumni.org
Changes During Adolescence

- Profound changes in short time
  - Biological
  - Cognitive
    - Two brain networks
    - Hypothetical thinking and arguing
  - Social/family
  - Intra-psychic
  - *Asynchronous*: Doesn’t all happen at the same time & doesn’t happen for good
What are the Developmental Tasks of Adolescence?

Build on & are related to each other

• **Identity**
  – Who am I? What I am good at? What am I good for?

• **Autonomy**
  – From parents, not peers
  – Emotional, behavioral, attitudinal
What are the Developmental Tasks of Adolescence?

- **Achievement**
  - What path do I take? How hard do I work and why? What do I want to do with my life?

- **Sexuality**
  - Who am I attracted to? What are these physical feelings & how do I interpret them? Who am I as a sexual being? How do I act in a sexual manner?

- **Negotiating problem behavior**
Is Adolescence A Time of Emotional Turmoil?
Is Adolescence A Time of Emotional Turmoil?

- Not a constant state of “storm and stress”
- Emotional highs and lows do increase in early adolescence
  - Hormonal fluctuations AND changes in environment
    - Social factors account for 2-4 times as much variance as hormonal factors
  - Not knowing how to adequately express feelings
  - Personal fable
  - Still developing PFC regulates mood, so more reliance on amygdala
- Adolescents report more extreme emotions and more fleeting emotions than their parents do
  - More likely to report “very happy” and “very sad”
  - From 5th to 9th grade, 50% decrease in being “very happy”
Reading Emotions

- Teens not always able to correctly read emotion in adult face
  - See anger, sadness, shock when not present, which influences behavior
  - Rely more on amygdala (adults more on PFC) when interpreting emotions on faces in pictures
  - Decrease in ability to identify emotions by 20% from childhood; do not recover until 18

- Pubertal status predicts emotion recognition (not age)
  - Greatest improvements over time seen in fear, disgust
  - More amygdalar activation to fear than adults
  - Also drop in facial recognition from 10-12, then recovery from 14-16
Factors Precipitating Changing Parent-Teen Relations

- Change from uni-directional caretaker relationship to more mutuality
- Physical development
- Cognitive changes
  - Reasoning about rights
  - Personal fable
  - Compare to ideal & become critical
Factors Precipitating Changing Parent-Teen Relations

- **Sexuality:**
  - Discomfort
  - Competition issues

- **Identity issues:**
  - Magnify differences between self/parents to differentiate
  - Use parents as negative role models
  - More focus on peers
Parental Factors Influencing Changing Parent-Teen Relations

- Physical changes:
  - Teen entering attractive stage, parents losing youthfulness
  - Parental changes & influence on mood, patience
- Sexuality: Changes due to age; same partner for 20 yrs
- Identity/accomplishments: Parent, worker
  - Have I fulfilled dreams of my youth? Were trade-off & compromises worth it? Have I produced the child of my dreams?
How Families Change over Time

- Engagement: Less time spent with parents (different definitions for being together)
- Communication: 5th-6th grade parents high in initiating conversations, then teen initiated
- Acceptance, cohesion
  - Peer preference seen as rejection by parents
- Power
- Conflict: Less value of parent opinion, especially with appearance, recreational activities
Conflict Resolution Styles (CRS) More Important Than Presence of Conflict

• Kinds of CRS
  – Compromise
    • Room for teen to express own views, promotes growth
  – Attack
    • Most problematic: Sarcasm, threats, put-downs; associated with delinquency, acting out
  – Withdrawal
    • Associated w/depression, anxiety
School and Success

- What does success mean to you?
- What do you want for your child when s/he is 18? 25? 35? 55?
What is Success?

- Happiness
  - With career, social/family life, choices
- Social/emotional skills
  - Compassion, empathy, generosity, etc.
  - Collaboration
  - Ability to take constructive criticism
  - Have fun
- Hard-working, ability to persevere
- Creativity, critical thinking skills
- Resilience
Resilience

- Ability to bounce back
- Cope with stressors
- Able to heal self and others
- Able to hear and incorporate feedback
  - The problem with praise

“Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”
- Albert Einstein,
Primary Protective Factors

• The presence of a caring, connected relationship with an adult

• The presence of the highest possible realistic expectations

• Opportunities to make meaningful contributions
Problems

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Eating Disorders
- Self-harm behaviors
- Substance Use/Abuse
- Excessively Risky Behaviors
- Perfectionism
Perfectionism can be enemy of resilience

- Cannot be terrified of a “bad” grade ~ no risk taking or creativity
- Everyone is lopsided – especially successful people
- Myth that tells kids they have to excel at everything undermines many aspects of development
“Lack of Motivation”

- What about kids that “aren’t motivated” or “lazy”?
- Are the expectations realistic?
- Have they stopped playing a game they can’t or don’t want to win?
- Change the question – not, “What can I do to get my child into a top tier school?” but “What can I do to ensure that my child is successful (full definition of success) at 30, 40, beyond?”
Emotions and Learning: The Brain in Distress
Why Pressuring Kids Can Backfire

- Less able to index, store, and access information when stressed
- Becomes more automatic and limited in its responses
- Less able to perceive relationships and patterns
- Less working memory, long-term memory capacity
  - Hippocampus: Consolidation of LTM; many stress hormone receptors
- Tends to overreact to stimuli in fear-based way
- Emotion processing areas of the brain receive more blood flow under stressful circumstances, while the areas used for critical thinking, judgment, and creativity receive less.
Remember the Needs of Teenagers

- Autonomy
- Belonging
- Competence
Recommendations

- Shift role to consultant:
  - Ask questions
  - I’m wondering, I’m curious…

- Build self-esteem by letting them accomplish tasks on their own
  - Watch overt vs. covert messages that damage self-concept/self-esteem
  - Help them own their problems and solutions
  - You both gain control through choices: Would you rather…now or later?
Recommendations

- Be prepared ~ plan ahead, know what to expect
  - Educate yourself about development
- Understand what is going on for you as a parent and how that affects your child/relationship/reactions.
  - Don’t disengage even if they seem to shut you out
  - Try not to take it personally
  - Be positive/optimistic
  - Get support
Recommendations

– Set clear, reasoned limits
  • Know when to be flexible and when to stand firm
  • Grant freedom in stages; tie privileges to responsibilities
  • Stand back and let them make their own mistakes when safety is not an issue

– Be firm and fair
  • Don’t overreact – what is really going on?
  • Penalty should fit the crime – what are you trying to teach?
  • Be consistent
    – With your child
    – With your partner
    – When pressured by your child
Recommendations

- **Build a loving, trusting relationship**
  - Spend time (alone) together ~ have fun, no criticism
  - Share your own feelings/concerns
  - Treat your child with respect
  - Use humor (wisely)

- **Empathy**
  - Deliver consequences with empathy in mind
    - Consequences don’t have to be immediate: okay to both do some thinking and talk later
  - Try to understand what is going on for them
    - Developmentally, socially
    - How the world is different from your experience
Recommendations

- Communication
  - Accept child as individual who can make own choices
  - Don’t criticize or ridicule
  - Don’t give too many orders/lectures,
  - Don’t treat their problems lightly

- Reflective listening
“Nobody ever listens to me!”
- How most conversations tend to go
- Why we repeat ourselves

Communicating so that the speaker feels heard and understood

Involves monitoring your own emotions and how they are expressed
- Mantra: “This is not about me.”
- Understand what is going on for you and how it affects your interactions with others

Also involves monitoring nonverbal communication, validating, paraphrasing, asking clarifying questions
Reflective Listening

- Give full attention
- Acknowledge, do not deny, feelings
  - All feelings are accepted
  - Feelings cannot be controlled; behaviors can
  - Name feelings, but double-check
    - “You seem angry – is that right?”
- Do not give advice
- Other person should be doing most of the talking
Empathy

- Truly understand where other person is coming from and feel what s/he is feeling
  - Need to understand influences at all levels
  - Including past experience, outside stressors, abilities, what is important to them, values, etc.
Empathy

- Questions to ask to stimulate empathy in yourself:
  - If I were this person, how would I feel?
  - Am I truly willing to listen and be open to considering the situation from another perspective?
  - Can I come up with another way to see this situation?
  - What might have happened in the past to cause her to feel/act this way?
  - What is it that he needs that he is not getting?
  - Am I feeling frustrated/angry/annoyed? How is my communication of my feelings influencing the other person?
  - Who or what does this situation/person remind me of? Am I reacting to something from my own life, and not this particular situation/person?
  - Are my expectations realistic? How do I feel when others place unrealistic expectations on me?
Questions?

"Mr. Osborne, may I be excused? My brain is full."
Recommended Reading

- *Parenting Teens with Love and Logic* by Foster Cline and Jim Fay
- *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen and Listen So Teens Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *Inside the Teenage Brain: Parenting a Work in Progress* by Sheryl Feinstein
- *Letting Go with Love and Confidence: Raising Responsible, Resilient, Self-Sufficient Teens in the 21st Century* by Kenneth Ginsburg and Susan FitzGerald
- *Getting to Calm: Cool-headed Strategies for Parenting Teens and Tweens* by Laura Kastner and Jennifer Wyatt
- *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee/B Minus* by Wendy Mogel
- *Grow The Tree You Got & 99 Other Ideas for Raising Amazing Adolescents and Teenagers* by Tom Sturges