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Breaking Through to Teens: A New Psychotherapy for the New Adolescence, Ron Taffel, Copyright © 2005

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CONTEXT

The New Adolescence and a New Treatment Paradigm

Wazzup?

Johnny says I'm a faggot. I'll rip his arms out—then we'll see who's gay! Bitch! ***How did Jenny get that tattoo? I'm going to throw up.*** Just do it! ***A lot of kids are going to crash that party***. Parents, the antidrug. ***Mom will kill me—wait, I'm at Dad's this week***. Get the stuff! ***I want Game Boy, I want PlayStation 2. . . .*** You've got mail! ***Wazzup! Hey, everybody does NOT think I'm bipolar!*** New standardized tests. . . . ***Shit, I don't get this math. The test's tomorrow, but first I have to check my e-mails and then listen to the CD I just burned and. . . .*** Twelve more killed in. . . . ***I'm so tired, but what's that noise outside?*** Order in the next 30 minutes and. . . . ***Mom, I am NOT too young for a thong!*** New unemployment figures. . . . ***Valerie's father died and Betsy's parents just split up and Bobby's family is moving away***. You're a teenager now, deal! ***I just can't take it anymore!***

Get into the private thoughts and experience of enough kids today and it often sounds like they're coming apart at the seams. Teens and preteens pulsate in a pressure cooker youth culture and an explosive world, ever at the edge. Not that you'd notice this chaotic stream of consciousness when you first meet them.

Kids don't usually come in with raging guilt, repression, or conflict—the traditional, "gold-standard" symptoms of neurosis. They rarely present with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as their main complaint and, in fact, seem quite removed from the world-worries that media, parents, and trauma experts seem to focus on. Indeed, today's children and adolescents often present so convincingly they hide an entire world from adult eyes.

Lauren's mother, Margaret, loathed her 14-year-old daughter's weird new look—hair dyed bright orange, pierced eyebrow, Dracula makeup. But though Lauren looked bizarre and tended to stay out too late, she hadn't ever gotten into any real trouble. She was doing fine in school and seemed pleasant enough at home. Remembering the awful, screaming fights with her own parents as a teen during the '60s, Margaret tried hard not to antagonize Lauren and to be understanding.

Her determined empathy seemed to be working. When she asked Lauren in a carefully neutral tone why she wanted to look that way, her daughter good-naturedly tried to explain. Lauren described boys she thought were "hot" and even brought kids home to eat and watch TV. In turn, Margaret told Lauren about her own adolescence, and how she had yearned for freedom from rigidly moralistic parents, who were suspicious of her every move. Mom was still a little worried about Lauren's dramatic appearance and her late hours. But she was also proud of being the kind of with-it mother a girl could really talk to about what it was like to be young and busily exploring life. She thought that as long as the two of them could have such warm, open dialogue, nothing very bad could happen to Lauren. Margaret's dreamy vision of mutual trust exploded the day she came home to find her daughter in the bathtub having sex with two boys. Shrieking, she got the boys dressed and out of the house. Then, she confronted her daughter.

Lauren protested that the whole incident had been entirely innocent. "You must have been imagining we were having sex because *your* parents were so strict and you were wild as a kid," she said. "Besides, there were bubbles in the tub—how could you know what was really going on?"

For a brief moment, Margaret nearly fell for it—was it possible she had gotten it wrong? Then, furious anew, she asked, "What do

you think I am—a damn fool?" "Yes," Lauren said flatly. Shocked and frightened, Margaret called the same day to arrange a therapy appointment for her daughter.

During the first few sessions, I learned several things about Lauren's life her mother did not know. She told me, for example, that she and her friends often smoked pot together, some of her buddies were heavy drinkers, and all engaged actively in sex—mostly oral or anal sex, which kept them, technically, "virgins." Not only did Lauren live much of her life in a world beyond her mother's view, she lied about it with virtuosity and shamelessness. When I asked Lauren why she couldn't talk to her mother about her life, she sighed and said Margaret became mysteriously unhinged when she heard "about this stuff," particularly anything to do with her sex life. "My mom freaks out over anybody even thinking about oral sex—I don't know why," Lauren said to me, in a genuinely puzzled tone of voice.

Lauren's story is not unusual. In my own practice and workshops I present at around the country, I hear scores of similar stories about presumably "nice" kids and their responsible, hard-working parents—who seem to live in different solar systems. Experienced counselors and teachers feel stunned and paralyzed, unprepared by their training to deal with what looks like a completely new brand of adolescent. Like me, they have met children who have vandalized buildings without experiencing any guilt; talked with young teens who have sex in school bathrooms, not caring who walks in on them; and heard about adolescents who break into abandoned warehouses to hold "X-treme" wrestling matches that continue until one of the participants is left unconscious.

"I feel shell-shocked," says Alice, who has spent 20 years as a school counselor in Ohio. "Just about every Monday, kids come in showing off their tattoos. They tell me about gang bangs, binge drinking, raves, group sex in every possible permutation. And these aren't high school seniors, either. I'm talking about 13-, 14-, and 15-year-olds—and the most frightening part is that their parents haven't got a clue."

Researchers aren't terribly surprised, given upward trends in middle school and the first years of college, the lessening gap between girl and boy high-risk activities, the increased use of mari-

juana, the debate on what kids now mean by the term "abstinence," as well as the normalization of binge drinking. This is not to say that every teenager is hawking drugs, engaging in group sex, or exploring new forms of violent behavior. In fact the latest research on some benchmark high-risk behaviors—drinking, sexual intercourse, and teen pregnancy—seems to reveal downward trends over the past decade ("2003 Youth High Risk Behavior Survey," Grunbaum, Kann, Kinchen, et al.). Nevertheless, you can virtually guarantee that every teen who hasn't been home-schooled since kindergarten or living in a house without electricity or e-mail knows somebody who does engage in these behaviors. It is also sure as taxes that a teen is not revealing a tenth of what he or she sees or experiences.

So What's New about This?

One response might be, so, what else is new? Since when, during the last 40 years, have American teenagers *not* evaded the gaze of adults, incensed their elders, and inspired media melodrama about juvenile outrages? Isn't "bad" behavior the birthright of adolescents?

I would like to turn this question upside down: *How could it be that everything in our culture has changed so dramatically, yet somehow, adolescence has not changed, that there's nothing new under the sun since the time we grew up?* Does this seem even remotely possible?

The New Anxiety

Spend time with teens and you gradually become aware that beneath the jaded precocity and fearless acting out is a fretful undercurrent of worry and fear, unimaginable for 11- or 15-year-olds just a decade ago. Get into their daily lives and you will find thoughts racing, like overheated jet engines, from one source of stress to another—the next make-or-break standardized test, the next totally unsupervised after-school bash, the next late-night, midweek concert they "have to be at." Explore a little further and

you'll hear a palpable dread about going online with kids who regularly torment them. You'll feel their agitation about whether they should have sex after school. You'll catch the gnawing concern that their parents may break up, like so many others, or suddenly move the family halfway across the country.

* * *

Over the last decade or so, I've talked to thousands of parents, kids, and professionals across practically all regions and socioeconomic groups. To gain insight into this phenomenon, I began an informal research project. I interviewed more than 250 kids, pre-K through high school. I also met with kids and their friends in therapy and spoke to thousands of parents, counselors, and teachers. I spent hundreds of hours with young clients listening to their favorite music, reading e-mails together, and leafing through teen magazines, comic books, video game manuals, and student-run newspapers. From all these sources, I've gotten the same message: *Kids everywhere are overwhelmed by a tidal wave of culturally induced anxiety*. There's not a town or city—unless it's completely free of rapidly morphing family configurations; frenetic overscheduling; 24-hour, 500-channel TV access; and unlimited cell phone and Internet connections—that doesn't exhibit signs of epidemic anxiety among its youngsters.

What we used to refer to as the "presenting" problem, which presumably masked the real, underlying issue, has become something that requires less clinical detective work: *Often the real problem is handling the stress of normal, everyday teen life*. Fifteen-year-old John has been drinking too much and ends up in my office. Yes, his drinking is a troubling concern, but not compared to the viselike grip he feels about 30 hours of homework a week, four hours of basketball practice every afternoon, three hours a week of community service, and, of course, two parties a weekend. What about Julia, who's in therapy because of her almost-failing grades? Sure, she's worried about school. But what really preoccupies her is the phenomenon *The New York Times* recently called the "whore wars" (Guy Trebay, 2003). She's caught in a bind. She feels she must show as much skin as possible, but

how can she do this when she's obsessed by the fact that so many parts of her body are "absolutely grotesque?" Of course, girls have lived with impossible standards of physical perfection for decades, but now it's happening at younger and younger ages—Julia is 11. And her friend Ethan, also a preteen, is one of the growing numbers of young boys I know who are obsessed about their bodies, too—not buff enough, too skinny, too small. "Might as well be dead."

Thirteen-year-old Peter is in my office because he's isolated and he turns people off. What's really going on beneath his haughty presentation, though, is that he's been typed as gay. Why? He once put his arm around another boy in a moment of friendship, and, since then, he's been accused of being "ass hungry." Mona's got it all—the perfect look, the perfect body and she's supersmart. So, what keeps Mona so fearful? Precisely because of her magnetism, she's the object of anonymous Internet insults, online come-ons, and, lately, direct threats on her life. What keeps Michael up at night is that he can't turn himself off after an ordinary evening. What's ordinary? Being online with six people at once while talking on the phone with two friends via call waiting, burning a CD for a pal, doing his homework with a friend, and listening to the TV in the background—just "to keep him company."

Don't reflexively blame their mothers or fathers. Most of these kids have reasonably responsive, competent parents, who feel as helpless as their kids about how to lessen the grip of this half-crazed pressure. After all, they live their own version of the same bind, stretched to the breaking point by their impossible work schedules and gut-wrenching economic worries. Parents feel hard-pressed to soothe themselves, much less their kids, from external pressures that have essentially colonized the family.

The New Anger

"Express yourself!" "Think it, write it, send it. Now!" "At least my parents aren't involved in a vicious divorce the way yours are!" "You think you're special just because you mother died?" "Don't come to school tomorrow, if

you plan to stay alive." "You're fat, you're bulimic, you're a loser." Mean Girls . . . Bad Boys . . . "Hey, is that any way to talk to your therapist?"

* * *

From playground back talk to schoolyard mean talk to high school rap talk to online death talk, casual communication between kids pulsates with a verbal brutality that makes adults wince. And this carries over into the home, where many parents tolerate enormous abuse from kids because they're frozen in place by 30-year-old pop psychology bugaboos: If kids aren't allowed to freely express themselves, they won't develop proper self-esteem. Kids today are verbally abusive, not so much from deep, festering rage or rebellion, which might once have been the case, but because they genuinely seem oblivious to the impact of their own actions on others. They've never been taught that what they do and say actually matters, that laser-like one-liners can deeply wound people. And when you don't have to face the person whom you insult—cell phone, beeper, e-mail—it's even easier to do. As one 12-year-old told me, "I can say anything I want online because I don't have to see how it makes the other kid feel."

The casual expression of anger starts young. Jessica has just been told by her mother to stop watching TV and clean up the table. "Not now," Jessica says, without bothering to look up. "No, Jessica, I mean this minute," her mother says sharply. "Later," Jessica responds, almost absentmindedly. Mom stiffens and threatens: "Stop it now or there won't be TV tonight." Finally, she's got her daughter's attention. Jessica looks her mother squarely in the face and says, "Fuck you, Mommy." Jessica is eight years old.

Fuck you, Mommy! The exhilarating horror of this phrase. How many adults today can imagine the consequence had they thought, let alone said, such a thing when they were kids? Over the last 10 years, however, as these exchanges are increasingly part of everyday family interaction, it has become apparent to me that a basic shift about acceptable behavior is taking place in parent–child relationships throughout the country. After all, Jessica is not a neglected or abused child in thrall to gang culture. Her parents live in a comfortable suburb. Nor is Jessica "maladjusted" psychologi-

cally; she knows her parents love her, she earns good grades in school and basically gets along well with other children. What's really shocking is that exchanges like this are so ordinary, they are a part of daily family discourse in America, even before adolescence.

A father informs me that his eight-year-old son, when asked for the fourth time to turn off the computer game and straighten his room, snarls," Leave me alone, butthead!" A 10-year-old girl, told by her mother to finish her homework, barely glances up, utters under her breath "What an asshole," and continues to play. I hear the "flailing tantrum" story over and over; a parent directs a child not to chew gum or to stop playing and get ready for bed; the child responds by hurling him-or herself at the parent, flailing away with small fists in a frenzy of anger. One therapist told me that a girl he had been seeing expressed her jealousy of an unborn sibling not by the usual array of anticipatory anxieties, but by smashing a baseball bat into her mother's pregnancy-swollen belly.

It is not just parents who are feeling the brunt of the explosive defiance that seems to be spreading through the ranks of American children. I remember attending a softball game led by an experienced coach, and watched it turn into a free-for-all. One seven-year-old, enraged after he struck out, grabbed home plate and ran off in a howling tantrum; another child, tagged "out," physically attacked the boy who had tagged him; a kindergartner, when she was called out by the umpire, ran up to him, screamed "I hate you," and actually kicked him hard three times in the shin. All this in a friendly neighborhood game for kids and their families.

In interviews with important, nonparental adults in kids' lives—teachers, coaches, principals, community leaders, camp owners—I've heard about the same disturbing pattern of anger and even disdain for adults. One eminent children's theater director says that in 25 years of producing plays, he has seen increasing disrespect for him and his colleagues by his young charges. "I can't describe the enormity of change in the way children behave. I can no longer count on having their respect and attention merely because I am the adult and a teacher—now half the struggle is just to get them to listen to my directions." Even therapists are taken aback by breathtakingly raw affronts to adult authority. Expert cli-

nicians have told me that it is not at all unusual for grade or middle school students to look them dead in the eye, say, "Who do you think *you* are?" and then get up and march out of the session.

The New Parenting Confusion

What do fathers and mothers do these days when their young child curses at them or goes into a flailing tantrum or daily beats up a younger sibling? Not very much, as it turns out. Speaking for many, Melanie described her reaction when her six-year-old son, Eric, hit her and screamed at her in the supermarket: "I didn't know whether it was better to smack him on the spot or let him get his feelings off of his chest so they wouldn't fester." Other parents respond with intense rage and unenforceable punishments. In the face of her daughter's "Fuck you," Jessica's mom immediately spanked her and threatened, unconvincingly, to take all TV away for a whole year. Several weeks later, while watching television together, another version of the same incident occurred.

* * *

Parents have become so anxious about doing the *wrong* thing that they often become paralyzed. For example, 10-year-old Mindy had been invited to a party one night, where, she said, the kids would be playing make-out games. "What should I do," Mindy asked her mother, Ann, "when they start kissing?" But Ann was as unsure as her little girl. Finally, after what seemed like endless hesitation, she offered, "In the end, it's whatever makes *you* feel comfortable with who you are," a wishy-washy, unsatisfying answer that left Ann discouraged and Mindy very annoyed. Later, Ann confided to me that she didn't know what would be better, letting the child "harmlessly" explore her emerging sexuality or setting strict limits that she might rebel against—and choose not to confide in her next time.

Bill, the father of depressed, 13-year-old Jason, was in an equally serious quandary. After a couple of lonely years without friends, Jason had finally found a buddy—a classmate he brought home during lunch period. The tentative friendship seemed a real

breakthrough, except for one tiny detail: The two boys spent the lunch hour in Jason's room smoking dope. Should Bill ignore the infraction of school policy, not to mention state and federal drug laws, in relief that his son found a new chum? Or should he crack down on this illegal and dangerous behavior? Which was worse for the boy—being a friendless and possibly scapegoated loner in school or a budding pothead with a pal?

Adults are not only confused, they often seem to have lost their own moral direction. What, for example, happened to Chrissie, who screamed at the umpire and kicked him in the shins at the Little League game? Incredibly, her mother, who was watching, did not reprimand her. The umpire did not kick her out of the game, and a few minutes later, Chrissie got the weekly achievement certificate she'd "earned"—a red ribbon for her participation.

Moral relativism also seems to have become the collective attitude of what I call the "second family"—the kid world of peers and pop culture—that is often more important, and more visible, to children than the " first family" of their parents and siblings. Although the younger children I have interviewed—five to seven years old—strongly believe in right and wrong and are angry when their parents fail to set rules, by fourth or fifth grade they begin talking in ominously relativistic terms about moral issues. Much to the dismay of adults, many children, responding to events like schoolyard murders, make remarks like "I don't think what they did was right, but I don't completely blame them either. They were treated badly, and anybody can crack under certain conditions."

In 1996, the *Rockford Register Star,* an Illinois newspaper, gave us a glimpse into the second family's code. The newspaper polled hundreds of teens in heartland America, asking them what moral guidelines they followed. "There aren't any," these kids answered almost unanimously. "You only need to treat others the same way they treat you." Almost none of the teenagers, boys or girls, were prepared to label any behavior, no matter how noxious, simply right or wrong.

More disquieting, and perhaps more instructive, few of these kids had ever considered that adults might in some way be able to guide them in making decisions about issues of right or wrong.

And why should they? Most of the grown-ups in their lives don't understand the details of second-family living or believe in their own ability to redirect their children—a failure kids pick up on only too well.

The Maze of Modern Childrearing

In truth, the cyclical waves of often contradictory advice thrown at parents over the past 30 years may be part of the confusion. As parents scramble to do what works, they try out the latest one-size-fits-all theory, only to find it superseded by a new popular orthodoxy. Parents get hooked on different childrearing techniques, which tend to swing crazily back and forth between poles of permissiveness and toughness, regardless of whether these off-the-rack approaches are actually appropriate for their individual child.

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Alessandro, for example, had gotten into another bruising battle with his little brother, who screamed in pain. His mother, Hillary, tried an approach based on Thomas Gordon's parent effectiveness training (PET) Using "active listening" techniques, Hillary asked open-ended questions to help her sullen boy express and neutralize his feelings of jealousy. The more she employed this kind of therapy-speak, the more tight-lipped he became. "Oh, forget it," Alessandro finally said in disgust and walked away.

The "tough love" approach, with its emphasis on setting limits and quashing what was felt to be too *much* expressiveness, is where 12-year-old Jenny's parents decided to put their money. Jenny had been drinking and hooking up with lots of boys, staying out way past her curfew, and doing poorly in school. Her father, Bob, already overly rigid, treated Jenny to an ironclad lecture on bottom-line consequences. Days after his fire-and-brimstone sermon, Jenny didn't come home at all, having found a place to crash with some loosely supervised kids in the neighborhood.

As knowledge of widespread family abuse and incest surfaced during the late '70s and early '80s, the pendulum in childrearing advice swung back toward empowering children. The "self-esteem

movement" was born, encouraging both parents and children to believe that every child was special for just being a person.

Part political, part reaction to inexorable increases in childhood disorders and acting out, the self-esteem surge was soon overtaken by an even bigger wave, emphasizing "family values." During this period, parents were advised that if they taught their kids morality, psychology would take care of itself.

During the early and mid-'90s, neurobiological discoveries caused the tides to shift once more in favor of the biological underpinnings of various childhood difficulties. And, most recently, in reaction to this biological trend, regarded in some circles as a flimsy mechanism for providing alibis to undisciplined kids, authoritarianism is making a comeback. "Children should be punished for every act of disobedience, no matter how small," intones John Rosemond, a main spokesman for the new movement. Spanking is highly recommended by the tremendously popular conservative psychologist, James Dobson. Is it any wonder parents and professionals are confused?

The New Anonymity

"Sometimes," says one of the preteens in my study, "I get the feeling my parents don't know me." "Mine, too," yells an irate classmate from across the room. "We don't spend time together—we're always so busy in my house." Just about every child nods enthusiastically.

* * *

It is logical that many parents buy great quantities of off-the-rack advice, because, stretched to the limits as we are, we do not always know the children we have. We cannot always tell the ways in which our kids are uniquely different because we just do not spend enough direct, one-on-one time with them. The hard truth is that most parents deeply love their children, but they don't protect enough time to pay attention to them. They do not really hear them. They do not really see them.

This sounds harsh, and it is a bitter pill for overworked moth-

ers and fathers to swallow, particularly those who feel their lives are already intensely child-centered. Indeed, there is research from the Kaiser Family Foundation indicating that parents today spend the same, if not more, time with their families than June and Ward Cleaver ever did. But when Kaiser examined the kind of time families spend with one another ("Kids and Media at the New Millennium," Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999), we get a troubling picture of what so-called family togetherness actually looks like these days. Family members may be spending time *near* each other, in the same house, but are engaged in parallel yet separate activities, and not even remotely doing things together. Indeed, a long-distance phone conversation can provide a much closer and more intimate experience of connection than a typical evening in the bosom of a modern American family. Mother, for example, may be supervising her five-year-old in the bath while calling work to arrange a meeting for the next day; Sister is e-mailing several buddies and talking with yet another friend on the phone; Dad (if he lives at home, or if it's his weekend with the kids) is busy doing a report or watching TV, looking up every 10 minutes or so to announce "It's nearly bedtime" to whatever child might actually be listening.

What happens to children when they do not get the kind of direct, undivided, personal attention they need from their own parents? When they lack confidence in the capacity of their own parents to guide them? Where do they look to find something that promises to assuage their yearnings for attention? Nature abhors a vacuum, and for American children, the great, roaring hurricane of the mass media culture—particularly the culture of celebrity—rushes in to fill the psychic void that family used to fill.

The Culture of Celebrity

"What do I wish for? That I could visit Shaquille O'Neal or that he could come to my house." Twenty years ago, I rarely heard about celebrity fantasies in my work with kids; now, I rarely don't. Increasingly, children answer my questions about what they would like most by stating that their greatest wish is to be near a celebrity.

* * *

This is sad, but less ominous than the hunger within many kids to achieve celebrity status themselves, as if this were the one best bet for achieving the attention and sense of being known that seems to elude them. For too many of the kids I interviewed, the lesson of a tragic schoolyard shooting is the celebrity given the shooters. Highly visible events are ultimately successful, say many children, because dramatic acts make one instantly famous. Perhaps in a celebrity-drenched culture, most of us occasionally want to be famous, but for children who are furious because they cannot always get the personal attention of the people they love the most, the desire to be seen can become an all-encompassing and toxic need. In a medium of fragmented families whose members live parallel lives, in which children often feel more catered to than truly known, where off-the-rack childrearing techniques complicate more than they resolve and moral relativism is the norm, the culture of celebrity is a potentially inflammable ingredient.

Kids who commit public violence or wild acting out have found a metaphor that describes the pain of, as well as the solution, for their invisibility. They engage in such behavior precisely because it makes an unknown child uniquely recognizable. In a vulnerable child's mind, violence or outrageous behavior appears to be the perfect antidote to the anonymity of his or her life.

The New Wall of Silence

Even more striking than dramatic adolescent behavior is this: The silence kids always tried, with limited success, to maintain in the face of adult prying has become a reality—a great wall they have actually built between themselves and adults.

* * *

While kids have always lied to adults, never before have they lied with such ease, confidence, and lack of fear or remorse. Because of the distance between themselves and adults, they can afford to lie without qualms because they realize they are unlikely to

get caught. Unsupervised by overworked and overstressed parents, living in communities where neighbors are strangers to one another, attending large, impersonal schools where teachers may not even know their names, they "get" that adults are hardly aware of their existence, let alone what they are doing. How could this be, when today's parents seem so committed to proactive child-rearing?

Today, the diminishing gravitational pull of the first family (the nuclear and extended family at home), for decades apparent in urban populations, has finally become palpable at all socioeconomic levels. Trends begun in the '70s have dissipated the power of the first family. As we all recognize by now, divorce (50% of marriages), mobility (about 15% of the population moves every year), and economic pressures that generally require both spouses to work ever-longer hours have undermined the old stability of the family. The "traditional" configuration of male breadwinner and wife at home fits only a tiny fraction of today's households. Time-squeezed parents even in intact, dual-earning families have few moments to spend with their children. Though his figures are open to debate, MIT economics professor Lester C. Thurow wrote in *USA Today* ("Changes in Capitalism Render One-Earner Families Obsolete," January 28, 1997) that parents now spend 40% less time with their children than they did 30 years ago, and two million children younger than 13 have no adult supervision either before or after school—a figure which has recently moved even higher.

Furthermore, the family's informal support systems—the extended kin networks, church and community organizations, PTAs, and neighborhood ties—that buttressed family life have gradually disintegrated. For example, PTA membership since 1964 has fallen. And while Main Street, with its network of well-known shopkeepers and familiar customers greeting one another every day is too often deserted and half boarded up, huge, impersonal malls on the fringes of town are the real center of urban and suburban life in the United States.

Into the void left by the withering of adult community life has rushed what I call "the second family," the vast wave of adolescent peer groups and pop culture "out there." Their influence has been

hugely expanded and energized by a technological explosion that has proven its power to blast into every home. Two-year-old children, without developed language ability, can recite the McDonald's jingle; indeed, researchers have found that 18-month-old kids are already capable of brand-name recognition. Despite what your friends may admit, the average high school graduate has spent 15,000 hours of his or her life in front of the TV, compared with only 11,000 hours spent in school.

Perhaps nothing reflects the profound changes in teens today, or demonstrates distance between the generations, as much as the online invasion. Never before have so many kids spent so much time directly in touch through electronically mediated worlds uncontrolled by their parents. Online, as so many kids have told me, they can assume different identities, personalities, genders, ages, become anyone they like, and interact with hundreds of chameleons doing the same mental shape-shifting—and they can do it all without parents being any the wiser.

One mother said about her 14-year-old daughter, "She's online every day with friends whom I've never met and never will meet. Five years ago, I might have at least spoken to some of them on the phone when they called, but now, I don't know who they are, or what they talk about or where she goes with them. Unless I literally sit down with her every single time she goes online, I have no idea what a very large chunk of her life is like, or even who she is." This vast, unsupervised world of the Internet *is* something new under the sun, and it is not only transforming the way kids live their lives, but also the way parents experience kids—or fail to experience them.

The most significant relationships many of them have is with one another—and with the vast corporations that sell them $160 billion worth of music, clothes, electronics, and sporting goods every year. As Deborah Meier, education reformer and MacArthur Fellowship winner, writes, "Who besides the people who organize the marketplace for our young . . . is keeping company with our kids? Who else is observing them closely?"

Parents are further distanced because they have bought in to the implicit ideology of the youth culture: Kids are a world apart,

with rights to complete freedom and independence from adults. There is a scene in Philip Roth's 1972 novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*, in which the beleaguered protagonist, talking to his analyst about his mother, says there wasn't a crevice in the whole house she didn't know about, including every crevice of his own body. How times have changed! Today, many adolescents assume a natural entitlement to privacy: The "adults, keep out!" signs of a former era have been replaced by a padlock on their doors to do whatever they want within the confines of their own sanctum. No wonder kids feel confident they can live and lie behind an almost seamless wall of silence.

The New Compassion

When I get to really know kids, though, I discover they still need what young people have always needed: nurture, appreciation, clarity in expectations, and a sense of belonging. The tragedy of our times is that most adolescents do not get these basic needs met by adults and do not feel truly "at home" within their own families. If we are alarmed by the state of adolescence today—and I believe we should be—it is not because kids are lost souls, but because the kids we see have drifted out to the second family to find what is missing in their lives.

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Noticing a group of young, teenage girls walking with their arms entwined or baggy-pants boys skateboarding, most adults can understand that the second family provides nurturance to kids. Kids, despite the rawness of life within the second family, hold each other to surprisingly tough, even harsh, expectations and rules of behavior. Sophisticated topics around manners, morals, and ethics unexplored by teens in earlier times are discussed and debated strenuously: how to initiate and end romances, what friends owe one another, how to regard infidelity in love relationships, and when and whether to share confidences.

Once the code to their behavior is cracked, it becomes clear that they are not all what they seem to their horrified parents.

Once they begin to trust, they reveal themselves in yet another surprising way—*capable of compassionate behavior that we would have found unthinkable during our own youth*. I have witnessed hundreds of teens—considered amoral and contemptuous—be kind, loyal, generous, and, yes, even moral when they are with their peers. Despite media hype, the teens I see exhibit a real capacity for compassion, tolerance of one another's personal foibles, and common sense. Indeed, in some respects, they seem far more advanced in the art of friendship than we were at their age.

Sixteen-year-old Brett, for example, whose mother called her a "selfish, sarcastic bitch," had a reputation for being a wise guardian angel to her friends. She encouraged one friend, whose father was hitting her, to call an abuse hotline and sat encouragingly with the girl while she made the call. She offered the guest room in her house to a boy whose mother was often drunk when he came home. On behalf of a friend who showed signs of bulimia, she organized several other girls to go to a school guidance counselor. Without divulging the girl's identity, they asked what they might do to help "someone who might have an eating disorder."

Brett is not unusual in her demonstration of openness and good sense in her handling of complicated relationship issues. Because they have grown up in a culture suffused with the language of therapy, kids talk to one another with more candor, intimacy, and sophistication about everything—relationships, feelings, sex, psychological problems, moral issues—than we ever dreamed of at their age. Since 14-year-old Tony realized he was gay, he has been enclosed in a cocoon of supportive friends. And, while he endlessly discusses the complexities of gay and straight love relationships with chat room buddies, he may also be helping another online friend with her homework. In the meantime, he is known among his peers as a good mediator, and regularly helps settle fights, such as one between Marcia and her boyfriend, John, after she was caught cheating on her exams. He also recently dressed down a friend for spreading malicious rumors about a classmate, while helping another prepare for an important audition.

Not only are kids more knowledgeable about relationships than we were, they are much more inclined to break down tradi-

tional boundaries between males and females. In spite of the viciously sexist lyrics of some pop songs, close friendships between boys and girls in the second family are far more common than during our adolescence. Both sexes watch the same TV teen psychodramas—and learn the same language of relationship and feelings. While girls are still more emotionally expressive than boys, the gap has narrowed, and kids seem to draw "best friends" almost as much from the opposite gender as from their own.

Consider 13-year-old Tamika. After her parents divorced and her older sister got married, she became increasingly despondent, something she hid from her mother, along with her nightly habit of raiding the liquor cabinet. When Mom brought her in to see me, I asked her who she would most trust if she needed help. To my surprise, she answered, "Tommy and Kirk. They're my closest friends." In fact, it was Tommy and Kirk who broke the wall of silence between adults and teens in Tamika's life, alerting her mother about the seriousness of her situation. "Mrs. Washington," they said to her, "we're scared that Tamika might do something bad to herself."

If peers seem to be providing some sort of reasonable facsimile of family life, why not just let kids raise themselves? Recently, one mother admitted to me that she thought the peer group was practically raising her 16-year-old son. "If I'm honest, I'd have to say that with both his father and me so busy, we really don't have time to give him much guidance—so his friends are doing it. In some ways, I don't think they are doing such a bad job."

But our society has never formally thought children should be left to stumble along to adulthood unaided and unguided by their elders. However sophisticated teens seem, they don't magically become grown-ups at 13. Neuroscientists have now learned that it takes about 20 years for the brain's prefrontal cortex to achieve the physiological maturity that allows for full impulse control. Adolescence is still a time of intense emotions and fluctuating identity, of absolutes and debilitating insecurities. Kids not only need the anchor of reliable relationships with adults in their lives, they secretly yearn for the kind of knowledge that mature people have acquired through years of observation and experience. Unfortunately,

this combination of relational need and need for adult guidance is exactly what they aren't getting from us.

A New Paradigm for the New Teen

Fifteen-year-old Mary says, "I went to the guidance counselor because there are these kids who keep saying horrible things about me and threatening me. I can't avoid them: They're on the school bus, they're in my class, they're online sending me gross messages. I wanted to know what I should do. So what does the guidance counselor say? She says, 'Tell me what you think you ought to do.' Do you believe that? Why the fuck does she think I asked her in the first place? Is this supposed to be helpful? What is it with you people, anyway?"

* * *

Mary's complaint is well founded. Kids may be driven by their own concerns, but they are not stupid. For all their swagger, they know they don't know everything about life or how to grow up. Most teens still hunger (if just faintly) for a powerful relationship with a grown-up that facilitates both a deepening within and direction without.

As child professionals, who frequently find ourselves mediating between distressed parents and teenagers, we are better positioned than Mary thinks to offer kids and their parents what they need in this world. But to do so, *I believe we must reinvent the way we work*.

Should this really surprise us? When good kids act "bad," not to rebel, but to be seen; when kids in middle school engage in behavior once reserved for college students; when well-meaning adults feel hopelessly overpowered at home; when teens look great on the surface but suffer with extraordinary stress levels and anger internally; when gender roles shift—with girls as group leaders, boys as nurturers, boys and girls as friends—when new treatment techniques change as routinely as childrearing fads, we must reexamine what we take for granted.

Relational–Behavioral Therapy

Given the distance many 21st-century teens and adults feel from each other, your job is, first and foremost, to make a *relational connection* with the adolescent across from you. This relationship is absolutely essential for you to be felt and heard above the cultural din of teen life. *No traditional approach or narrowly defined, state-of-the-art protocol can substitute for such a connection.* In attempting to do this you may be, transitionally, the only adult in an adolescent's world who can have as much impact as the second family of the peer group and pop culture.

But relationship is not enough—you must use this connection to create true behavioral change in teens: less casual lying, a willingness to take your advice, the courage to try new approaches with peers and high-risk decisions, the understanding to deal with parents and other responsible adults in more empathic, respectful ways. *Your voice and advice become an ongoing presence in a teen's psyche.* "You are on my shoulder," says the adolescent, "I hear you even when you're not with me."

At the same time, the relationship, based on *"flexible confidentiality"* with an adolescent's mother or father, is a bridge to help adults know their child better, to become realists about the "*gray zone*" and therefore more effective. *Your understanding of development and 21st-century teen life allows you to offer specific, behavioral input and state-of the-art childrearing strategies.* Your ability to see kids and parents together, in what I call "*focused family sessions*," and to use the relational traction you've already established, helps shift destructive dances that may have existed for years.

* * *

A *relational–behavioral* approach is a self-reinforcing cycle: You create an evolving connection with a teen and his or her parent(s). From this *relationship* you help move kids and adults toward *behavioral* change; the cumulative success of these changes slowly leads to genuine motivation and a strengthening of your connection. This, in turn, *creates greater openness and willingness to examine the*

high-risk decisions of ordinary life that challenge kids, especially as their presenting problems diminish. Slowly teens and parents find more resources within themselves and are *less dependent on you and the second family* for definition. *Passion and empathy heal the "divided self" of modern adolescence,* allowing for other constructive relationships, un-self-conscious interests, and love to develop. At some moment along the way, almost unnoticeably, *you turn into a person of the past*—a comforting memory and a touchstone of practical wisdom for a young adult to hold onto.

Relational–behavioral therapy with adolescents is a new paradigm, and it requires a significant change of mind-set. The good news is that, much like adolescents themselves, we child professionals secretly do some of what is described in these pages. To do the work, though, we need an organizing paradigm that makes social-contextual sense—one offering new clinical perspectives and techniques that match how 21st-century kids and their parents actually live.

* * *

Ten Treatment Myths

In order to take on a relational–behavioral approach, child professionals must reexamine many traditional assumptions and turn "old-think" ideas on their head:

- The ageist belief that you need to be young, charismatic, and hip to work with adolescents.
- The unrealistic view that anything short of a powerful relationship, one that directly challenges teens to change behavior, will even be registered above the din of the special-effects culture the new adolescent lives in.
- The outdated notion that your role is to help kids separate and individuate from parents, rather than create greater connection between the generations.

- The false hope that as symptoms diminish kids get better, when, in fact, they often become worse, facing even more dangerous issues in the high-risk, "normal" world of the second family.
- The destructive commitment to maintaining an impermeable wall around treatment, rather than learning how to open up the relationship to parents, friends, and the deeply significant superficialities of pop culture.
- The myth that unconditional positive regard for teens can cut through their everyday lying and disconnection.
- The bureaucratic and theoretical belief that rigid rules about confidentiality protect, rather than undermine, the treatment relationship.
- The clinical bugaboo that concrete advice to both kids *and* parents will inhibit self-discovery or the development of genuine selfhood.
- The wrong-headed notion that specialization—working with children alone or just with the family—can heal the fragmentation in our culture.
- The omnipotent belief that seeing more than a few high-risk teens at a time is advisable—given the ongoing dangers of the new adolescence.

* * *

With everything up for grabs, the old model isn't enough. It doesn't work. And it's time to admit it. We need an approach that addresses 21st-century life, one that fits the new adolescents out there, as well as their beleaguered parents at home.

Even the first meeting requires something different than what we're used to.

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