

Letting Go of Your Tween or Teen

By Katherine Reynolds Lewis

Michael J. Bradley is a practicing adolescent psychologist and award-winning author of *Yes, Your Teen is Crazy!* who will be speaking in the Washington D.C. area in November. He spoke with Katherine Reynolds Lewis about how parents can cope with the tumultuous experience of raising an adolescent.

Q: What are the biggest challenges you hear from parents of tweens and teens?

A: Usually people are driven to my office by crises. You could say the unifying part of all those crises is parental grief. Adolescence is a time of losing one's child. A lot of parents feel that but they aren't aware. That rocks that relationship just as they're dealing with some crisis. The crises are usually the risk behaviors of drugs, sex, and violence of some kind: verbal violence, bullying, self-violence, injury.

When the parents are talking, they have a hard time coming up with the emotion but as they talk it through, they realize they lost that 11-year old and they don't want to and they're trying to hold on. We try to help parents reframe it that they're not slipping away, they're morphing into an adult creature. In the end, they come back, and the relationship is actually better as a young adult.

Q: What are the steps to overcoming that grief?

A: The first step is simply to acknowledge the grief and allow yourself time to be sad. If we don't allow that, the grief unexpressed becomes anger. Our child feels our anger. It feels terrible unfair to them because they're just growing up and changing. They can feel a resentment from the parent that they're not so pleasant any more, they have their own opinions about things, they will question your values and it feels insulting.

Parents talk about something called teen rebellion. Most of us believe there's no such thing, any more than there is neighbor rebellion. Your next door neighbor may disagree with you about politics and house color and music. I don't think you say they're being disrespectful. We're different but we can live together. That's the new configuration.

As parents of young children we have this fantasy – that often we don't realize – that our kid is going to do everything we say and will be just like us: like our music, dress like us, and share our values.

The second step in the grief process is to welcome the dissonance, as saying, "This is the fire in the belly that will help this child separate from me, to live on her own, to find her way in the world." That separation process is very much like childbirth. It's

not a sweet romantic adventure; there's pain involved. It's the greatest miracle of life, but it ain't easy.

Q: What does that reframing look like in a typical day or week?

A: A teenager is better viewed as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the two-brained system. That makes parents crazy. In the morning things can be fine and laid back and close and in the afternoon they walk in the door and stare at you like you're from ISIS. They can't believe how horrible you are.

About once a week I get a parent calling, [saying] that their child is bipolar because of these mood swings. After the exam I say, "Your child doesn't have bipolar disorder, she has adolescence."

Adolescent brains are works in progress. The last part that gets wired in is the most difficult part – judgment, mediating emotion, good long-term decisions. They wire all the passion stuff first – the sex, popularity, instant gratification – and the last thing that gets wired in is the brakes. It's a really scary ride for a period of time.

Q: How do you survive the ride?

A: That part of the brain that gets wired in last is the prefrontal cortex, what some call the seat of civilization. Parents have to become that function for their kids. To the 13-year-old, there's absolutely nothing wrong with going to the park and drinking beer if all his friends are doing it. The adult has to be prepared to say, "No, that's not okay," not in an angry way, but in a way that helps teach.

Parents have to make a decision early on about what their mission is. Most parents decide their mission is to control their child. We advocate that your real mission should be to teach your child to control himself. It involves using respect-based techniques where you try to help your child think through things and learn, so the child can one day sort those things out on her own.

Wherever possible, you step back and allow the child to make the decision as well as suffer the consequences. When my son was 13, he decided social studies was irrelevant to his life style. He said it was a mind control conspiracy by the government. We did all the things parents usually do, said "You have to do your homework." Finally we said, "If that's your decision, fine, whatever happens is up to you." When he got the F in social studies, he was furious. We said, "Remember our conversation?"

If it's not going to kill them, play out the line and let them make the decision so they learn. That means you don't bail them out, as well.

In general we say it's a good idea to use consequences, a pre-agreed-upon result, not punishment. Punishment is when we make up something to hurt the kid after they've done something.

I've read the Bill of Rights and there's nothing in there about a cell phone. It's a privilege. You can earn the privilege by using it wisely and, if not, we will be retiring the phone for a while. Whenever a kid gets a cell phone, we say it's like driving a car, and there's supervision and education.

In the beginning you say, "We'll be checking to see who you're talking to and what you're saying." If they're doing inappropriate things, you shut it down for a week or two. The idea is to always restore the privilege in the future. That's how you teach in the moment so they can learn self-regulation.

You always say to the kid, "It's not personal, it's not that you're a bad person, you're just not ready to solo yet. We'll try it again in a bit." It's holding to the consequence that you lay out in advance. Never cave.

Q: What other advice is helpful to parents?

A: It's important to try to not take their rejection personally. In adolescence they will move away from us, and they're supposed to. Try to remember that, within that angry, perhaps sarcastic teen body is still the little girl. You still have to reassure her, especially when she's being cold, rejecting or sarcastic: "I've got a hug for you."

You have to be the good salesperson. It's very grounding to the child to hear the parent still wants to give a hug. You have to sidestep the arrogance and reach out, look for a way to connect.

The last thing is apology. When your kid is horrible to you and you're horrible in return, apologize to her. If you ever try lecturing your kid about responsibility for her behavior, the defenses go up. If you go in and apologize, they can't help but listen to that. You're teaching those incredible lessons of owning behavior, wrestling with imperfection and striving to be better and you never mention the kid's name. Use your own shortcomings to teach.

Q: What are the other hot buttons for parents?

A: We tend to have these idealized versions of ourselves in our memories, how we were upright and hardworking and we weren't into sex and drugs and violence. When a kid starts to do that stuff it sets off panic that he's going to be just like me. That leads to the control agenda about cracking down and trying to stamp these things out.

Q: What about wanting to be friends and keep that close relationship?

A: Parent first. Friend will come later in life. When they're going through this time they desperately need parents more than ever. Some parents say, "I'll have a beer with my son." That goes on in amazing numbers. One bit of research said drinking is so widespread that 33 percent of kids say they get alcohol voluntarily from parents and 25 percent of kids age 14 to 16 report drinking with parents or friends' parents. That syndrome – I'm a cool parent – that is a disaster, particularly with a drug issue. That's where parents are looking for acceptance, affirmation from a teenager.

A: So how do you connect with your teen children?

Q: It's like trying to hug a porcupine. It's all in the approach. It's trying to see when the needles are down. Timing is everything. If you can't give the hug, offer the connection.

You need to understand that parenting an adolescent is a conflict-based relationship. A lot of parents say, "How do I do this without conflict?" You can't. It's a process of tearing and letting go.

Try to welcome the conflict and frame it as love. Conflict in the proper dose and the proper tone feels like love to the teenager, unlike teenagers who are over-controlled, regimented, or teenagers who are allowed to do whatever they feel like.

The magic is in the middle, where you have non-rage-based, respect-based conflict, saying, "No, I love you too much to let you do that." The kid goes crazy and screams and yells, and you hold fast, not raging in return.

Don't stop laughing with your partner or your support system. You have to be able to laugh. It's the last defense for the soldier in the foxhole or the cop in the squad car in the middle of the night. Remember, this is a temporary phase.

Every day you get through with a teenager is a day closer to the day when her brain wires, and that's a wonderful morning. You have to take it on faith and get through the dark parts.

Michael J. Bradley will give a talk for parents called "How to Love Your Tween and Teen without Losing Your Mind," on Thursday, Nov 19, 7:30-9 p.m. at Landon School, 6101 Wilson Lane in Bethesda. Parent educator Vicki Hoefle will give a talk about raising responsible and resilient kids on Friday, Nov 20, 9:30-11 a.m. at Temple Emanuel, 10101 Connecticut Ave. in Kensington. For registration and information, visit www.PEPparent.org or call 301-929-8824.