

Understanding Teen Behavior: Maturation of the Brain's Prefrontal Cortex

| Jan 22, 2016 |

By Cynthia Klein

The prefrontal cortex, the part of the frontal lobes lying just behind the forehead, is often referred to as the “CEO of the brain.” This brain region is responsible for cognitive analysis and abstract thought, and the moderation of “correct” behavior in social situations. The prefrontal cortex takes in information from all of the senses and orchestrates thoughts and actions to achieve specific goals.^{1,2}

The prefrontal cortex is one of the last regions of the brain to reach maturation. This delay may help to explain why some adolescents act the way they do. The so-called “executive functions” of the human prefrontal cortex include:

- Focusing attention
- Organizing thoughts and problem solving
- Foreseeing and weighing possible consequences of behavior
- Considering the future and making predictions
- Forming strategies and planning
- Ability to balance short-term rewards with long term goals
- Shifting/adjusting behavior when situations change
- Impulse control and delaying gratification
- Modulation of intense emotions
- Inhibiting inappropriate behavior and initiating appropriate behavior
- This brain region gives an individual the capacity to exercise “good judgment” when presented with difficult life situations.

Brain research indicating that brain development is not complete until near the age of 25, refers specifically to the development of the prefrontal cortex.³ MRI studies of the brain show that developmental processes tend to occur in the brain in a back to front pattern, explaining why the prefrontal cortex develops last.

This body of brain research data has led to the idea of “frontalization,” whereby the prefrontal cortex gradually becomes able to oversee and regulate the behavioral responses initiated by the more primitive limbic structures. During adolescence, white matter increases in the corpus callosum, the bundle of nerve fibers connecting the right and left hemispheres of the brain. This allows for enhanced communication between the hemispheres and enables a full array of analytic and creative strategies to be brought to bear in responding to the complex dilemmas that may arise in a young person’s life.

Once again the role of experience is critical in developing the neural connectivity that allows for conscious cognitive control of the emotions and passions of adolescence. Teens who take risks in relatively safe situations exercise the circuitry and develop the skills to “put on the brakes” in more dangerous situations.⁵

With an immature prefrontal cortex, even if teens understand that something is dangerous, they may still go ahead and engage in the risky behavior. Recognizing the asynchrony of development of the regions of the brain helps us to see adolescent risk-taking in a whole new light.

1. Casey BJ, Jones RM, Hare TA. The Adolescent Brain. *Ann NY Acad Sci* 1124: 111–126. 2008. [↑](#)
2. Walsh D. Why do they act that way? A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen. New York: Free Press. 2004. [↑](#)
3. Walsh D. Why do they act that way? A survival guide to the adolescent brain for you and your teen. New York: Free Press. 2004. [↑](#)
4. Giedd JN. Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Adolescent Brain. *Ann NY Acad Sci*. 1021:77–85. 2004. [↑](#)
5. Giedd JN. Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging of the Adolescent Brain. *Ann NY Acad Sci*. 1021:77–85. 2004. [↑](#)

INSIDE THE TEENAGE BRAIN
Adolescents are prone to high-risk behaviour

Prefrontal Cortex
Its functions include planning and reasoning, grows till 25 years
Status: Fully developed
Teens: Immature, prone to high-risk behaviour

Amygdala
Emotional core for passion, impulse, fear, aggression.
Adolescents: Rely less on this, use prefrontal cortex more
Teens: More impulsive

Parietal Lobe
Responsible for touch, sight, language; grows till early 20s
Status: Fully developed
Teens: Do not process information effectively

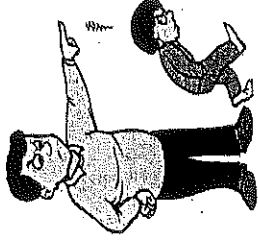
Ventral Striatum
Reward centre, not fully developed in teens
Status: Fully developed
Teens: Are more excited by reward than consequence

Hippocampus
Hub of memory and learning; grows in teens
Status: Fully functional
Teens: Loses neurons with age
Teens: Tremendous learning curve

Parenting Styles

“Behavior moves toward a goal of belonging and significance that is influenced by each individual’s decisions about themselves, others, and the world.”

(Alfred Adler)



High Firm/Low Kind (Strict, Military)

- Excessive Control
- No choices
- Focus on punishment
- Rules - responsibility stays with the parent, no input from children
- Stresses perfection and reliance on the judgement of others which often invites rebellion and sneakiness.
- Typically only works when the authority figure is present.
- Teaches compliance based on fear rather, than values.
- “It’s my way or the highway.”

➤ High Kind/Low Firm (Permissive)

- No limits
- Freedom without order
- Unlimited choices
- “You can do anything you want”
- “Let me do this for you” (since you’re too busy, can’t do it, etc)
- Rules/consequences???
- Authority figure is slave to the child
- Makes excuses for child
- Blames others for child’s mistakes
- Denial - “Not my child!”
- Robs child of self-respect and dignity by doing things for the child they can do for themselves.
- Kids fail to learn social competencies
- Kids have difficult time holding jobs and maintaining relationships.



➤ Equally Firm and Kind at the same time. (Respectful and empowering)



- Helps children feel a sense of connection (significance and belonging)
- Teaches values
- Focus on solutions
- Clear and realistic expectations
- Two-way communication
- Develops consistent discipline
- "You can choose within limits which show respect for all"
- Conveys and teaches mutual respect
- Teaches valuable social and life skills for good character (respect, concern for others, problem solving, cooperation)
- Is effective long-term (punishment works short term, but has negative long-term consequences)
- Encourages the constructive use of personal power and autonomy.
- "Together we will decide rules for our mutual benefit. We will also together decide solutions that will be helpful to all concerned when we have problems. When I must use my judgement without your input, I will use firmness with dignity and respect."

- What is kind and firm response
- Mistakes are opportunity to learn

The "old" questions (work short-term)

1. How do I make my teen mind me?
2. How do I make my teen understand "no"?
3. How do I get my teen to cooperate and do what I say?
4. How do I make this problem go away?
5. What is the punishment/consequence for this situation?

The new questions (work long-term)

1. How do I help my teen become capable?
2. How do I get into my teen's world and support his/her development?
3. How do I help my teen feel belonging and significance?
4. How do I help my teen learn social skills and life skills, such as problem solving and the ability to identify feelings and communicate those feelings in words (also known as developing a feeling vocabulary)?
5. How can my teen and I use this problem as an opportunity to learn from our mistakes?
How can we learn to try again instead of giving up when we make mistakes?

Helpful Hints for Empowering vs. Enabling

(Lynn Lott and Jane Nelson)

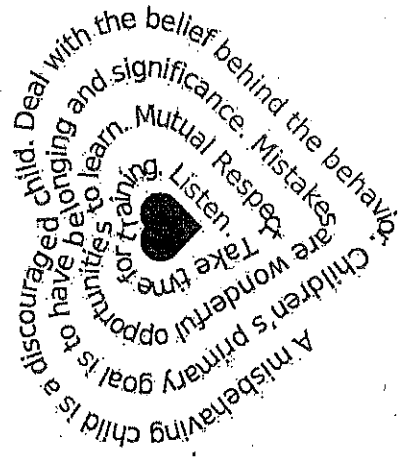
In Positive Discipline, the definition of *enabling* is: "Getting between young people and life experiences to minimize the consequences of their choices." Enabling responses include:

- **Doing too much for them, doing things for kids that they can do for themselves** (such as doing their laundry, waking them up in the morning, making their lunches, etc.)
- **Giving them too much. Buying everything they want** (Such as cell phones, clothes you can't afford, etc.)
- **Bribing:** "You can have a new car, allowance if you _____"
- **Hovering/Overprotecting** – Picking their friends, extreme fear of danger, etc.
- **Lying for them:** Making excuses to the teacher, writing notes when they just slept in, etc.
- **Punishing/Controlling:** Grounding, taking away privileges, creating your own agenda for them.
- **Lectures:** Telling them what happened, what caused it to happen, how they should feel, and what they should do about it? (i.e. "You should feel ashamed of yourself. You'd better shape up or you'll be shipping out to live on the street like a bum.")
- **How, what, and why can't you lectures:** "How many times have I told you to...? Why can't you be more like your brother? What will become of you?"
- **Blaming and shaming** – "How could you ever do such a thing? How come you always for get? I can't believe you would be so lazy."
- **Living in denial:** "My child could never do such a thing", etc.
- **Rescuing/fixing:** Buying new things to replace what a child loses, hiring lawyers, staying up late to help with (or doing) child's homework, etc.



The word *empowering* means giving a person the means to take more control of their lives and become stronger and more independent. The following are empowering responses:

- **Encourage learning from mistakes:** "I can see that you feel bad about _____ . I have faith in you to learn from this."
- **Show faith:** "I have faith in you that you can do this."
- **Express your limits:** Share what you think, how you feel, and what you want without lecturing, moralizing, insisting on agreement, or demanding (i.e. "I'm not willing to go to the store at 10:00 to get school supplies. If you need something, you need to let me know by _____. (A *respectful tone and attitude is essential.*)
- **Listen without fixing, discounting, or judging:** "I would like to hear what this means for you."
- **Control your own behavior/ decide what you will do with dignity and respect.** (i.e. "I'm willing to take you to the library when we agree in advance about a convenient time, but I'm not willing to get involved at the last minute.")
- **Follow through with kindness and firmness:** What is a kind and firm solution to this challenge? What is a kind and firm response?
- **Separate what they *DID* from who they *ARE*.** Address the **behavior**, while at the same time respect the child as a human being
- **Love and encourage:** "I love you just the way you are, and I know you will figure it out. If you need my help, I am here."
- **Ask for their help:** "I need your help. Can you explain to me why _____?"
- **Share your feelings:** Share your truth. (e.g. "I am worried about your use of drugs and I wish we could find a healthier way to cope with your anxiety/ wanting to have friends/etc.)
- **Joint problem solving:** "What is your picture of what is going on regarding _____? Would you be willing to hear my concerns? Could we brainstorm together on some possible solutions?"



Brené Brown PhD LMSW

- I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection. I don't believe shame is helpful or productive.

Guilt vs. Shame

Guilt = I did something bad Shame = I *AM* bad.

Shame is highly correlated with addiction. When we feel shame, our prefrontal cortex shuts down and the limbic system is in control. The pain of shame is enough to trigger the survival part of the brain that runs, hides, or comes out swinging.

The most powerful need for numbing comes from
the combination of:

shame + anxiety + disconnection/isolation



BARRIERS TO LISTENING:

1. Stepping in to fix or rescue so you can be a good parent, rather than listening as your teen tries to figure things out for themselves.
2. Trying to talk teens out of their feelings or perceptions so they'll have the "right" perceptions and feelings.
3. Giving defensive explanations about your point of view.
4. Interrupting to teach lessons on morality or values.
5. Taking what teens say personally, and letting your own unresolved issues get in the way.
6. Using what your teens say against them to punish, criticize, call names or lecture.



TEENS ADVICE TO PARENTS ON HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION:

- ❖ No lectures
- ❖ Make it short and sweet
- ❖ Talk everything out honestly
- ❖ Compromise
- ❖ Don't talk down to us
- ❖ Don't repeat yourself
- ❖ Listen to us, don't talk over us
- ❖ If we have the guts to tell you what we did wrong, don't be mad or over react.
- ❖ Don't pry or give us the 3rd degree
- ❖ Skip the 20 questions
- ❖ Don't yell from a different room and expect us to come running
- ❖ Don't try to make us feel guilty by saying things like "I did it because you couldn't find the time"
- ❖ Don't make promises you can't keep
- ❖ Don't compare us with siblings or friends
- ❖ Don't talk to our friends about us

Try active listening...

Active listening is a skill that takes practice and is highly effective. Here some examples of how you can exercise active listening with your teen.

1. **Try asking open-ended questions.**

These are questions that elicit more than just a "yes" or "no response from your teen.

Try: "Tell me more about..."

2. **Be positive.**

Find the positive, no matter how hard it seems.

Try: "Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate it."

3. **Let your teen know you hear him/her.**

Reflect back what you are hearing from your teen - either verbatim, or just the sentiment.

Try: "I'm hearing that you feel overwhelmed with school, is that right?"

4. **Sum up and ask questions.**

Show that you are listening the entire time and ask for input.

Try: "After you summarize what you heard... "Did I get everything? Do you have anything more to add?"

5. **Ask permission.**

Ask your teen if it's ok to speak with him/her about their concerns, and whether it's ok that you offer some feedback.

Try: "Are you ok with me asking you this? Do you mind if I offer you some advice? OR "Are you ok talking about this right now?"

6. **Offer empathy and compassion.**

Insert understanding and show your teen you get it.

Try: "I'm hearing that school is really stressful for you. I'm sorry you are feeling so anxious, I know that is a really difficult feeling. Can we think of some activities that can help you relax?"

Do you need me to be a tutor, a boy or a cheerleader

Open-ended questions...

An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings.

- These are questions that elicit more than just a "yes" or a "no."
- Open-ended questions begin with the following words: **why, how, what, describe, tell me about..., or what do you think about...**
- They are sometimes phrased as a statement which requires a response. Although "tell me about" does not begin a question, the result is the same as asking an open-ended question.

A few examples of "Curiosity Questions" (aka: open-ended questions)

1. What kind of challenges are you facing?
 2. What are your thoughts about...?
 3. Can you help me understand that a little better?
 4. What is your picture of what is going on regarding (ditching school, math class, etc.)?
 5. What is your plan for (getting your homework done, your education, doing the chores, etc.)?
 6. What do think would be some benefits for you if you (do your homework, stopped smoking marijuana, etc.)?
 7. What do you see as some problems for you if you don't (do your homework, stop smoking, marijuana, etc.)?
 8. What do you see as some solutions to this problem that would be respectful to all concerned?
 9. Tell me something about yourself that you feel no one understands, but that is causing you pain?...
- ... then just listen for the answer. The only follow up response may be something like "Tell me more about that."

For further info...

- Positive Discipline for Teenagers: Empowering Your Teens and Yourself Through Kind and Firm Parenting By Jane Nelson and Lynn Lott
- Center for Parent and Teen Communication: Strengthening Family Connections <https://parentandteen.com>
- Brene Brown, PHD - Several books, TED Talk
- www.heysigmund.com - great parenting website out of Australia

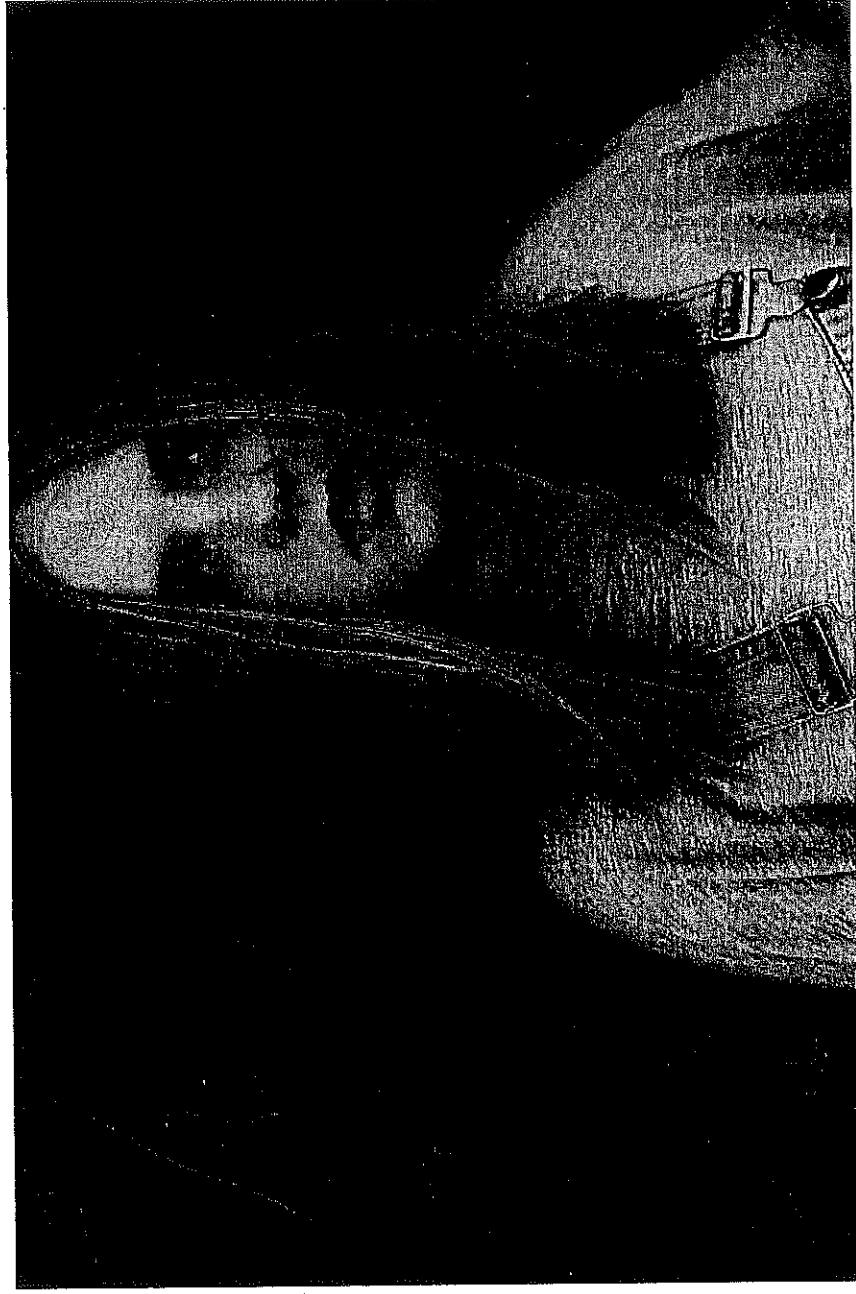
• My contact info... jillop@juvenile.maricopa.gov

You and Your Teen – The Words That Can Strengthen Your Influence and Connection

[S heysigmund.com/you-and-your-teen-acknowledge/](https://www.heysigmund.com/you-and-your-teen-acknowledge/)

Posted by Karen Young

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As parents of teens, there is an awareness that grows as our teens do. The awareness will be delicious and exciting and frightening all at once and it's this: their job as teens is to let us go, and our job is to let them. This isn't easy, which is why adolescence will often come with conflict and confusion for everyone.

The world is opening up to them with newness, opportunities and experiences they haven't known before. We want to keep protecting them from the sharp edges of the world, but they need the space and permission to fall, and to discover the world and their place in it. No wonder adolescence can be a struggle!

We want them to explore and experiment – but if only they could do it 'our way', adolescence would be so much easier for everyone! Easier maybe, but not as rich, and not as able to grow them into the wonderful, healthy, independent adult humans they are all capable of being.

When our teens reach adolescence, the push against us can feel like a tidal wave. This is normal and healthy, and it's how it's meant to happen. One of the most important developmental goals of adolescence is the move towards independence. Letting this happen, while at the same time preserving our relationship with them will be one of the most important things we do for them and for us. It requires a depth of love and selflessness that parents are so capable of, but which can be

Keeping the connection with our teens is key. It's everything. During adolescence they'll need our guidance more than ever, but we can't influence them if we aren't connected to them. Our words become like a little bit of magic. The capacity to connect through conversation is in all of us, but sometimes knowing what to say, and having the emotional presence to say it can feel as easy as growing feathers.

As parents the temptation to fix their hurts, and stand between them and the world can be wildly intense. Sometimes this is important. Sometimes we need to be their voice and to fight for them, even if just so they can see how it's done when the time is right for them to fight for themselves. Sometimes though, we need to let go of fixing or controlling or understanding, and instead be a gentle witness to their experiences.

We can do this by acknowledging. It's as simple and as challenging as that. We do it by resisting the urge to fix, chastise, redirect, punish, fight for or fight with. Instead, when we acknowledge what we see – their feelings, their needs, their wants – we give them the gentle space to discover their own answers. We spark their capacity to tap into their own resourcefulness, courage and resilience. It is so profoundly simple, yet so powerful in its impact.

But sometimes their behaviour is so – how to put it nicely – APPALLING – won't acknowledging them seem like a green light?

Acknowledging doesn't mean condoning, and it doesn't mean letting our boundaries melt away. It means validating the feelings that are driving our teens' behaviour, in a reflective, present, non-judgemental way. All feelings are valid and it's okay for them to be there. What isn't okay is the behaviour that's driven by those feelings.

If we want to influence our teens and connect with them, we first have to find the space in them that is open to us. It won't be in the yelling, defiance or stony silence, which is why engaging with that behaviour won't work. It will be in the need or the feeling that is driving the behaviour. Whatever it is, it will be valid, important and deserving of our attention, however wild the behaviour it's driving seems to be. This is where acknowledgement can be powerful. Some examples ...

- Anger means there's something in the way of something I want. (*Try, 'You seem angry that it hasn't worked out the way you thought. I get that.'*)
- Sadness means I've lost something important to me. (*Try, 'I understand how much [it] meant to you. It's okay for you to be upset.'*)
- Jealousy means I want something somebody else has. (This isn't always material. It might seem like it is, but there will be a need underlying that. Most likely a need for love, praise, attention, status, recognition – something that feels important for them. (*Try, 'It can be hard when other people get something we've really been wanting can't it.'*)
- Anxiety means I might be in danger. (This doesn't always mean physical danger – it could mean the threat of humiliation, embarrassment, loss. *Try, 'You seem worried that ... Is there anything you'd like from me?'*)

The goal isn't to fix anything, but to make the way safe and open enough for your teen to explore their own experience. Whether this happens with you or without you is up to them. The most important thing is that they know you're there. All teens have a wonderfully rich capacity to be their

own heroes. Our role as parents is to step aside enough to give them the space and security to discover this for themselves.

Why acknowledgement is like a little bit of magic.

Emotions happen for a very good reason – to evoke a response that will move towards meeting a need. The need is always valid, but sometimes the way it is expressed makes it seem otherwise. Let me explain ... When your teen says, 'I NEED to go to the party,' the need isn't the party. The party is the behaviour that will meet the need, but it's not the need. The need is pushing somewhere from the shadows. It will likely be something along the lines of, 'I need to feel connected with my friends,' or 'I need to feel included,' or perhaps, 'I need you to see that I'm capable of making my own decisions.'

'If you can name it, you can tame it.' This has become a mantra in modern psychology. Naming an emotion calms the nervous system. When we acknowledge their experience, the emotion that's driving the behaviour can start to ease. It's done its job. We've heard them and understood them. The more we fight whatever it is our teens are feeling, or deny it, minimise it, or act like it doesn't matter, the harder that emotion will work to do its job – which is to evoke a response – from them, from us.

'Acknowledging' speaks to the feeling behind the response to bring calm: 'I can see how upset you are with me. I understand how much you want to go to the party. It's really important to you to be with your friends, and you feel as though I'm getting in the way of that.'

This doesn't mean your teen will instantly calm and see things your way, but when they feel seen, the process towards calm and a rational conversation can begin. As long as there are big feelings swamping your teen (or any of us for that matter), the capacity for to make informed, rational, logical choices will be limited. The part of the brain that is able to receive information and use it in a healthy way gets overwhelmed by big feelings. It's still there and able to function, but it will be stifled until the high emotion has eased back a little.

This also doesn't mean that we have to give in to everything our teens want, but it's important to let them know that we understand what's important to them. We all need to feel heard by the people we care about. Our teens are no different.

They're not always open books. And by 'not always', I mean 'hardly ever'. What if I don't know what's driving their behaviour?

Sometimes the need driving their behaviour won't always be obvious. There will just be big feelings and behaviour that's way down on the 'adorable' scale. If there is confusion about the driving need, explore what will happen if 'what they want' doesn't happen. 'What will it mean to you if you don't go to the party?' Sometimes this will have to wait until things calm down. Otherwise you might get a not-so-insightful response along the lines of, 'it will mean that you hate me' – or something like that.

Why acknowledgement is so much more powerful than criticism.

Criticism rarely feels constructive. It feels like criticism. Too much criticism teaches kids to find fault with themselves and with others. It builds resentment, anger, and a feeling of not being 'enough'. We all make mistakes, and we have a right to make those mistakes. It's how we learn. What our teens need is the direction and safety to explore a better option. When our teens mess up, they generally know they've messed up. This doesn't mean we hand them the keys to the castle and let them get on with it – not at all. By acknowledging rather than criticising, we make it safe for them to explore and to be open to the lessons they need to learn to move forward.

How to use acknowledgement to increase your influence and connection, and as a powerful emotional first aid.

Acknowledging is like emotional first aid for anything teens go through – the big things, the little things, the anything. Here's how it can be used:

- **When they feel wronged.**

There will be times our teens will feel (rightly or wrongly) as though they have been wronged by someone around them – a teacher, a friend, the soccer coach – anyone. The temptation can be to ask them what they might have done to contribute to the problem. Though it's important for them to see their contribution to a problem, there will be time for this later. In the meantime, it's not up to us to look for the motives or reasons other people might do the things they do that have hurt them. Our job as the important adults in our teens' lives is to give them the space and direction to make sense of things themselves, when they're ready – and nobody is ready to see another side when they're hurt or angry.

When your teen feels a little bruised by the world, they need an advocate. This doesn't mean condoning misbehaviour or agreeing with their view of the world. It means creating the space for them to find their own answers and letting them know that we're on their team while they do that. It's important that they don't see us trying to explain somebody else's confusing behaviour, before we try to understand theirs. If it feels important to have them reflect on their own behaviour, wait until things settle down. They'll be much more open to any insights then.

Instead of: *'The teacher must have had a reason for doing that,'* or *'What did you do to make him so upset with you?'*

Try: *'That sounds as though it was really embarrassing for you. I can see how angry you are about what's happened.'*

- **When they need that one person.**

We all need that one person we can fold into when the world feels too big. When something has happened that has pushed against them, acknowledging how they feel can bypass any shame or defensiveness, and speak directly to their heart. There are plenty of people in their lives who can speak to their rational mind, but we all need someone who can see through the mess to speak to the core of us.

Instead of: *'You shouldn't worry about it. What does it matter which team you get into?'*

Try: *'You're really disappointed you didn't make the team aren't you. And you were so ready for it too.'*

This isn't about letting them become self-centred, but about soothing the emotion that might be stifling their ability to think rationally or from another point of view.

- **When the world doesn't live up to their expectations.**

Our teens need to know that the world can be a pity sometimes, but they don't need it pointed out when they're feeling raw. What they need is a soft landing. Hold back on the urge to reason with them and instead, acknowledge what might be going on for them.

Instead of: *'What did you expect? It's the first time you've played soccer since September.'*

Try: *'You really wanted to play on that team didn't you.'*

- **When the problem feels bigger on the inside than it seems on the outside.**

It's probably not the end of the world when they miss out on the part they wanted in the class play, but that's not for us to decide. How they feel is how they feel and whatever it is, it's valid. The only way through a feeling is straight through the middle. The more room we give them to feel, the quicker they'll move through. That doesn't mean we let them 'wallow'. We don't want them to learn that self-pity is a handy go-to, but we do want them to take some time to honour whatever it is that feels important. They'll realise for themselves that it's not the end of the world, when they get to the edge and realise it's not the end.

- **When they are anxious.**

Telling someone who is feeling anxious that there's nothing to worry about can have the effect of feeling the breeze on your skin while you're wearing a wetsuit. Kind of ... a whole lot of nothing. Anxiety comes from a brain that's working hard to keep us safe. The purpose of anxiety is to warn of danger. Whether there is any real threat is irrelevant – it just wants to make sure we're ready to fight or flee any danger that *might* be there. The more we fight that, the harder the brain will work to make us 'get it'. Acknowledging anxiety doesn't make it worse – it gives it permission to ease. It's like saying to that overprotective brain, 'It's okay – I hear you. And I've got this. You can relax now.'

Instead of: *'There's nothing to worry about. You'll have a great time.'*

Try: *'You seem nervous about going. I really understand that. It can be difficult walking into somewhere when you don't know what to expect.'*

Remember, you don't need to fix anything. Your teen has everything he or she needs to deal with the tough stuff. When you tell them not to worry, the pressure is on them to feel 'okay'. If only 'not worrying' was as easy as following an instruction! The important thing isn't 'not worrying', but not letting the worrying hold them back.

- **When we want them to see things from our side.**

The more we let them know that we understand what it's like for them in their world, the more we expand their willingness to listen to what it's like in ours.

'You didn't tell me where you were going because you were worried I would stop you. I understand that. I know how important it is for you to be able to do things with your friends. You want to be able to make decisions for yourself. I get that. You're growing up and you should be able to make your own decisions about certain things. What I need is to know that you're going to be safe, and I

can't know that if I don't know where you are. You need freedom – and I want you to have that – but in return I need to know that you're safe. We need to work together on this. The more I can trust that you're safe and being honest with me, the more freedom you'll start to have.'

- **When we want to know more.**

Sometimes we aren't sure of what they're feeling. They might not be so sure themselves. They might be withdrawn into themselves, they might erupt unexpectedly or out of proportion to the situation. Acknowledging let's them know that it's safe, and that whatever they are feeling, even they think it's ridiculous, self-centred, confusing, big, or trivial – it okay.

Try: *'I've noticed you didn't really talk much at dinner. You seem distracted/ upset/ angry. I'm wondering if you'd like to talk. And it's completely okay if you don't want to.'*

This gives them a safe opening to speak, without feeling as though they have to.

- **When they need encouragement to keep going.**

Being a teen can be tough work. There will be plenty of times they just need something, without knowing what. Something they'll always want is our approval (even if they don't always show it!) Let them know that you notice their efforts,

Try: *'I know you really wanted to go to the beach today. It couldn't have been easy to stay home and study instead. I can see how hard you're working.'*

And finally ...

Teens have everything inside them they need to meet their challenges. They are resourceful, resilient and they have wonderfully creative minds. They are powerful, wise and brave and they have the answers they need inside them – but sometimes they'll need our guidance. When we acknowledge them – their feelings, needs, experiences – we expand their openness to us and give them the space for them to explore their own truths. We can't love the lessons into them, but we can lovingly lay the ground for them to discover the lessons themselves.

Acknowledgement gives teens the message that we see them, and that we're safe for them to 'be' in front of, whatever might be going on inside them. They need our guidance, we need their trust. When we acknowledge, we nurture our connection with them and increase our influence in a way that is gentle, powerful and important.

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