



ADOLESCENCE UNPLUGGED:

The Bumpy Ride from Child to Adult

The metaphor of a bumpy ride is very helpful when exploring adolescence. This allows for the wide variance in the journey that many parents experience when they walk beside their children as they leave childhood behind and head in the direction of adulthood. There is no “one right way” to do adolescence because every child ever born is unique and different. There are no quick fixes either – sorry. All adolescents are “at risk” during adolescence – no-one is immune from potential harm.

Research shows that adolescence is a time of confusion, massive change and serious risk. It is also a time of enormous potential in the development of new skills, knowledge and abilities.

Why are we worried?

- 200/300% morbidity rate increase
- Mental illness has increased among this age group –(26% of people aged between 16 and 24 –about 650,000 people suffered mental illness last year. – 14% year 8’s have self harmed in last year in Aust)
- Huge increase in binge drinking/drug taking
- 26,000 under 18 year olds are homeless each night
- 20,000 adolescents aged between 12-18 are reported missing to police every year
- More 30 year olds still at home than ever before
- Massive increase in violence among the young especially girls
- Abortions for girls aged 14 and under have doubled in last two years

The Millennial Adolescent

Today’s adolescents are experiencing more change, more rapidly than any previous generation. The Millennial Adolescent is potentially living in a more risky, stressful world than ever seen before.

Main drivers in adolescence

- Seeking autonomy.
- Identity searching.
- Needing to belong.
- Immature brain driving a mature looking body.
- Separation from parents.
- Forming relationships.

There has always been a generation gap between parents and their adolescents, however, since the new millennium it has become more of a chasm!

“Expecting the adolescent to forever remain a child sets you up for disappointment, disillusionment and hurt. Accepting the fact that the child-parent relationship is over and embracing the different but potentially wonderful one that lies ahead is a giant leap toward getting along with a teenager.”

S. Feinstein “Parenting the Teenage Brain.”

Consumerism, massive media intrusion in normal everyday life and the disintegration of family and community has created unique and challenging pressures on today's adolescents. Lower social and emotional competencies have impacted on the generation with an increase in illicit drug and alcohol abuse, road rage, intentional delinquent behaviour (that is often repeated), mental illness, eating disorders, obesity, homelessness and premature deaths as a result of poor decision making by young people.

Resilience and why it is important

Resilience refers to the ability of a person to successfully manage their life, and to successfully adapt to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways. It is about survivability and “bounce-back-ability” to life experiences—both the really advantageous ones and the really challenging, traumatic ones.

Seeing resilience for adolescents as a “competence” is a useful perspective, because it is something that can be actively developed, taught, practised, demonstrated and deployed. This means that we can impact young people's lives by providing the right configuration of experiences and learning events.

“Thirty years of research tells us that resilient people are happier, live longer and are more successful in school and jobs, are happier in relationships and are less likely to suffer depression.”

Reivich, K and A. Shatte (2002)

From birth, we are building personal resilience through the acquisition of various life skills. The better the quality of parental care that children experience, the stronger their resilience. This is true if the care has allowed for children to have opportunities to explore the world, make mistakes and learn how to overcome adversity.

Danger signs of teens at risk

- Isolation from family and friends.
- Sudden changes in schoolwork, job performance or athletic activities.
- Drastic mood swings.
- Lack of interest in outside school activities.
- Family conflict.
- Living in a community with high crime and easy availability of alcohol and drugs.
- Delinquent friends.
- Academic failure.
- Change in eating and sleeping habits.
- Cutting or hurting themselves.

Adolescents are still at risk of their immature brain structure until the early 20's. This model clearly focuses on how to support our young people build strengths and competences through the role of “lighthouses”.

What's going on up there in the adolescent brain?

- Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- Pruning – use it or lose it!
- Myelination – the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe – **flight, freeze or fight** responses are more likely.

- Emotional illiteracy is the norm for many, including mood swings and confusion.
- Window of sensitivity.
- Hot cognition

Adolescents need more sleep than pre-pubescents or adults.

- Poor sleep impacts memory solidification
- Increases moods and emotional vulnerability
- Impedes learning capacity for next day
- Increases negative thinking
- Can increase obesity
- Can depress immune system

Parents need to be vigilant for any signs of mental illness.

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the “bumpy yellow brick road” - the journey from childhood to adulthood.

“Lighthouses” are essential for adolescents to make it to the end of the journey- healthy and on track to realise their full potential.

How do “lighthouses” support adolescents on the bumpy ride.

They will:

1. Have knowledge and understanding of adolescence.
2. Have the courage to care.
3. Be trustworthy and respectful.
4. Give hope and encouragement.
5. Build connectedness through genuine acceptance.
6. Encourage mastery and teach life skills.
7. Help adolescents manage “big, ugly emotional states”.
8. Practice caring, empowering communication.
9. Give guidance when asked.
10. Strengthen the spirit – including laughter and lightness.

They shine a light on the invisible sign around an adolescent’s neck that says
“Make me feel I matter”

Adolescence is the best time to tap into a person’s potential.

Parents can support adolescents by using caring, empowering communication

1. Words of suggestion
2. Avoiding shame based language
3. Encourage thinking and making choices
4. Lighten up!
5. Remember they are temporarily brain impaired
6. Choose time and use door openers
7. Avoid using don’t - try “next time”
8. Ensure they are listening
9. Never argue with an adolescent

What doesn't work with adolescent communication.

1. Lecturing.
2. Nagging.
3. Timing.
4. Arguing (say your piece, turn, leave and ignore any last words thrown at you).
5. Unkindness.
6. Criticism.
7. Guilt games and/or abuse.
8. Ignoring them or freezing them out.
9. Using "always", "never", "it's easy!", or "it's going to be hard," as a predictor

What works with adolescent communication.

Adolescents often misunderstand body language and the spoken word. They need to have their feelings validated in some way.

1. Conversation.
2. Be a source of support.
3. Encourage autonomy.
4. Trust.
5. Monitoring.
6. Rules and consequences.
7. Coping skills.
8. School involvement.

Reducing stress levels in adolescents' lives brings enormous benefits.

Parenting styles greatly influence the developing adolescent.

The three main parenting styles are:

1. Authoritative. This is a democratic style of parenting. Authoritative parents actually listen to their teens when making rules and decisions. Kids raised in these homes are encouraged to make their own decisions, to take responsibility and to become autonomous -- with age appropriate discretion. The most frequent form of discipline used in these homes is talking about the problem. Adolescents who experience an authoritative style of parenting benefit with more social competence, and fewer psychological and behavioural problems.

2. Authoritarian. This is the "my way or the highway" style. This relationship is based on control, control, control! Adolescents raised in these homes lack confidence, have more social problems and have difficulty getting along with their peers and teachers which stems from their sense of insecurity¹.

This confrontational style of parenting has no feeling of warmth or acceptance in the house, just rigid adherence to house rules, often quite irrationally. This type of parenting creates a combination of rebellion and dependency in the teenager. The weaker adolescents remain co-dependent and the strong ones rebel.

3. Permissive. This form of parenting comes in two forms – indulgent and neglectful. Overindulgent parents express their love by giving into their kid's every demand. These parents often want friendship from their teens and act more like peers than parents. Neglectful are largely absent and show little interest or care.

The art of letting go.

Many adults find letting go very difficult. The bumpy yellow brick road is the journey that involves the ending of the parent/child relationship in order for a new relationship to happen sometime in the future, where they meet again as adults. This will be a completely different relationship if the adolescent has been allowed to let go when they were ready.

Strengthen the spirit

The Millennial Adolescent struggles with a disconnection from this indefinable source of sustenance. The consumer pressures, the messages that promote image over character and the massive speed of their lives causes many adolescents to become disillusioned with life. And yet they are trapped! The human spirit gets crushed from such a chaotic and troubled individualistic world.

Seven gateways to the soul of education.

1. The yearning for deep connection.
2. The longing for silence and solitude.
3. The search for meaning and purpose.
4. The hunger for joy and delight.
5. The creative drive.
6. The urge for transcendence.
7. The need for initiation.

Nothing works as powerfully as kindness, genuine concern and showing care. They yearn to feel that someone cares and that they matter.

Other area that parents can help adolescents with:

- Building life skills at home to prepare them for life away from home!
(for full list of life skills to print off and place in full view go to www.maggiedent.com/KeyLifeSkills.pdf)

Parents can see that they may have a young person going through a volatile, temporary phase in their home for a few years, and aim to be more understanding and empathetic when the teen angst rears its ugly head. We should think of a parent who has lost an adolescent to a poor decision (made by the adolescent or maybe one of their friends) and be grateful that ours is still at home – no matter how bad their bedroom looks or smells!

An adolescent's ability to build protective factors and life skills is dependent on those they live with, and those they meet on their journey down the bumpy road from child to adult.

“People who have had a strong connection with a strong positive role model during adolescence are much more resilient throughout their life.”

The Millennial Adolescent 2007

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Invisible sign: "Make me feel I matter..."

